

Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz Study Guide

**Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz by Olga
Lengyel**

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Plot Summary

Olga and Miklos Lengyel are living and working in Cluj, the capital city of Transylvania, in 1944. They have heard reports of the atrocities being carried out by the Germans; Olga says that she doesn't really believe it. She says that there are many clues that the stories are true - including the fact that a German military official who is billeted in their home tells them. This German says that his own family is angry at him because he doesn't send as much loot home as others. Olga says that it's simply impossible to believe all the stories.

Miklos, who is sometimes critical of the Germans, is arrested. When Olga goes in search of him, she discovers that he's about to be deported and that she is welcome to go with him. She agrees, believing that her family can withstand anything as long as they remain together. Her parents and two young sons go along on the horrendous trip and eventually arrive at their destination - Auschwitz. They all survive the trip but Olga, believing she's saving her young son the hardships of manual labor, insists that both her sons are younger than twelve and both boys along with Olga's mother are taken away. She later learns that the chimneys, which she is told are bakeries, are crematories and that her mother and sons were killed soon after their arrival.

Olga is subjected to many hardships but comes to realize that she must survive in order to tell the world about the atrocities suffered at the hands of the Germans. Those selected for extermination are picked seemingly at random by several of the German officials. Olga works as a health official and is sometimes working for an underground resistance movement. Eventually, the movement secures enough explosives to blow up one of the crematories through the help of people like Olga.

Olga eventually learns that her husband is at another camp and she manages to travel there as a nurse. He offers her encouragement and reminds her that they must survive in order to tell the world what happened to the victims. She later learns that he was killed during the evacuation of the camp.

Olga and others are forced by the Germans to evacuate the camp and to march for days. One morning, she and two friends manage to slip away, evading the Germans who chase them. Olga is captured again, briefly, and kills a Nazi as she escapes again. She has to swim a brutally cold river to make her final escape into the path of the advancing Russian army.

Olga completes her story by recounting an event in December of 1944 when the Germans, deciding there were too many children in the camp who had been forcibly removed from their homes, plans a mass extermination of these youngsters. Lacking gasoline to burn them or ammunition to shoot them, the youngsters are "bathed" in icy water and most die of exposure.



Chapters I through IV

Chapters I through IV Summary and Analysis

Olga and Miklos Lengyel are living and working in Cluj, the capital city of Transylvania, in 1944. They have heard reports of the atrocities being carried out by the Germans; Olga says that she doesn't really believe it. She says that there are many clues that the stories are true - including the fact that a German military official who is billeted in their home tells them. This German says that his own family is angry at him because he doesn't send as much loot home as others. Olga says that it's simply impossible to believe all the stories.

Olga and Miklos run a sanatorium named for her husband, who speaks out against the Germans, though he does so very carefully. Despite the care, he's eventually questioned. One day, Miklos is arrested and when Olga searches for him, she finds that he's about to be deported. She tracks him down and finds that she can accompany him, but must leave within the hour. She decides to do that, believing that the family can survive anything as long as they are together. She says she knows she must take their children along. Her parents, who also live in the house with her, decide to go as well.

At the train station, it's immediately apparent that something isn't right. There are armed guards preventing anyone from changing their minds, and ninety-six men, women and children are crammed into a rail car intended for eight horses. Olga soon finds herself one of those chosen to try to maintain some sort of order. A corner is curtained off and the chamber pots brought by a couple of foresighted mothers put into use with the refuse thrown out a window. There's no water to drink, let alone for washing hands. Soon many are ill and the old and weak begin to die. Despite the fact that they stop several times and are forced to pay "taxes" in the form of briefcases, fountain pens and jewels, they are not allowed to unload the corpses and the flies become a problem as well.

Olga says that her friend Olly tries to commit suicide on the rail car and that her family begs Miklos to save the young woman. Olga's father had recently undergone a surgery and has an apparatus with him used for urination. The tube is used to flush the young woman's stomach and she survives. Olga notes that Olly is led directly to her death the following day.

Upon arrival at the concentration camp, Olga's mother says that she may die but that Olga has much to give and must live. Olga hugs her parents and when they are separated they never see each other again. Olga notes that there are ambulances waiting to receive the sick and it's generally believed that this means they will be cared for but that they are actually headed directly to the gas chambers. Olga's father and husband are separated immediately. Children and the elderly are "selected" for death. Only those young and strong enough to work are spared, along with a few who have some skill. When Olga's family are at the front of the line, her younger son, Thomas, is



immediately sent away. Olga is asked about the age of Arvard, her older son. He is not quite twelve and Olga insists that he is not yet twelve. She believes that those sent with the able-bodied adults will be forced to work and that the younger children will be cared for by the elderly who are sent away with them. When Olga's mother is ordered to go with Olga, Olga interrupts, saying that her mother wants to go with the children. The request is granted. Olga's insistence that Arvard is not yet twelve and that her mother wants to go with the children condemns both to an instant death. Olga says she later discovers that the able-bodied people who could work are sent to Auschwitz, a slave camp that is much better than Birkenau.

On the way to the barn where she will live, she asks about the huge, smoking chimneys and is told that they are bakeries. Olga is housed in a horse barn known as Barrack 26. For the first month, the new arrivals have no blankets. They've been clothed in ridiculous, ill-fitting rags and are assigned twenty to a small enclosure. After a month they are given two blankets to share. The enclosures, called koias, are stacked three high and sometimes fall from the weight of the occupants, crushing those below. There are frequent injuries and punishment for making the koias fall is common. The roof leaks and those on the ground sleep in mud.

There are some 1,400 women in the barracks and they are given twenty bowls to share. Several of the women commandeer the bowls for chamber pots at night because to be caught outside meant death. With little water, the food is poured into the dirty bowls during the day. Olga says any reluctance is soon overcome by sheer hunger. Olga notes that it seems the shortages are the Germans' way of pitting the internees against each other, and that it works.

On her second day in the koias, Olga and the others are fed thin coffee and an equally thin soup that is the normal lunch fare. She says there are "surprises" in the soup, ranging from mice to buttons and sewing kits. Two women are forced to carry the soup and coffee in fifty-quart containers and often spill it on themselves. Olga calls this a "paradox" and says the Germans take pleasure in assigning people jobs for which they are ill suited. Olga says that she sees many intelligent women drinking from filthy puddles - though they know the dangers of drinking there, the thirst is greater than their fear of disease.

Though no one is allowed outside the barracks before dawn, Olga one day slips out and goes in search of Miklos. She tells him that another internee, Irka, had indicated that Olga's children and mother would have been killed upon arrival and tells Miklos that she has nothing more to live for. He urges her to wait and they briefly discuss Olga handing him a portion of her poison because his own was discovered and taken. Later, Olga learns that Thomas was sent to the other side of the tracks, to the "bakery" side, the previous day and Olga hurries to try to find him so that she can have him reassigned to a work detail. She's told before she gets there to forget the quest and barely escapes a beating when a handsome, male criminal prisoner distracts the female SS guard.

Olga's story is similar to many others regarding the horrors being executed on the victims at the hands of the Germans. It seems inconceivable that thousands of people



could be exterminated with no weapons other than ovens and gas chambers. The level of atrocity is simply too much for most people to understand, let alone believe. The story of the thousands who simply walked into the gas chambers without realizing that they were walking to their deaths probably seems incredible to readers of a half century later. Actually, the Germans who were running the camps were professional when it came to appearances and were able to fool those arriving as well as the rest of the world. There are those who still believe the stories are greatly exaggerated and it seems likely that it's mainly because the idea of millions of people being killed and cremated is simply unbelievable. It's pure speculation to wonder what would have been the outcome if the German atrocities had been exposed - and believed - sooner. It's interesting that Olga has a draft of poison with her, though she claims to have not listened to the horror stories being told about the concentration camps. It seems that, at least on some level, she must have believed them. Her husband also has poison, though he says his is commandeered.

Olga notes that she and other internees are given the opportunity to write postcards to others. These are, in fact, one of the ways the Germans kept the camps and exterminations a secret. The postcards were to indicate that the writer was well and from a different location. Olga refuses to write, though many get return correspondence. Olga says that the postcards served to reassure many that making the trip was not dangerous and new internees arrive expecting that they will also be well, as their friends and family have indicated. Another reason for the cards is that it gives the Germans an address for others they are seeking.

Olga meets a big, rude Polish woman named Irka who has been incarcerated four years. Her survival gives Olga hope. Irka says that no one will survive unless the Germans want them to, that all Olga's family is already dead, and that she's foolish for holding onto any hope. Olga will later come to realize that she must survive in order to tell the story to the world. She later meets others who create their own reasons for surviving. One holds to a dream world in which she is daily invited to elegant tea parties and the rags she wears are beautiful clothes. Another thinks of nothing but her sisters who are also interred.



Chapters V through IX

Chapters V through IX Summary and Analysis

Olga and the other detainees endure two harsh roll calls daily, sometimes lasting for hours in all kinds of weather. Despite the fact that there are no comprehensive records, an alarm goes out if a single person from a specific barracks is missing at roll call. This means that even those who are dead must be carried out so that they can be counted, otherwise a search is immediate and the prisoners able to attend roll call catch the brunt of the guards' anger. They either stand or kneel but are not allowed even to shift their weight. Those too ill to stand would lie on the front row, next to the dead. Olga says that the days of rain are uncomfortable, but that they may at least be able to catch a few drops of rain water. Olga says the roll calls are brutal and seemed designed to hurry the process of killing as many as possible.

During roll calls, some are selected for extermination. It seems the process consisted mostly of the whim of the SS officials, often Dr. Mengele and Irma Griesse, the former with a "wild" look about him who never spoke but motioned which were to be taken from the ranks. Irma Griesse was called the "angel" for her blond hair and blue eyes. Olga says that she believed someone as beautiful as Irma Griesse could not be cruel but soon learns differently. Sometimes, the ovens and gas chambers were behind and those selected were held in washrooms or special barracks, sometimes for hours or even days, until their turn came.

Olga writes of the variety of reasons people are interred. One might say that a German was killed in her city and another that they are Jewish, Gypsy or - the most common - that he or she has no idea why they were arrested. There are few youngsters, though Olga calls them fortunate that they managed to escape the immediate extermination of most children.

After roll call, detainees are allowed to go to the washroom. The washrooms have limited space and little water, meaning most cannot even have a turn inside and those who do haven't enough water to wash themselves adequately. The water isn't fit to drink, though many do and pay with illnesses or even death. The bathrooms are no better and are inadequate for the number of people suffering from dysentery. Many use the bathroom outside because they are unable to wait and this makes the situation worse. On those occasions when the washrooms aren't crowded, they become meeting places where news and goods are traded. Another meeting place is near the garbage dumps because of the number of "valuable" items to be found there.

Olga says that this time is relatively free and it's during these breaks that she looks around the camp, noting details about the camp and the people. She describes the area in great detail, including the rows of barracks which were divided by a "street" called the "Lagerstrasse." Olga says that, despite the common misconception, not all the internees were Jews. She says there were many common criminals among the population. Those



who were German criminals were treated somewhat better than the others, and were never selected for the daily exterminations. There were some four hundred assigned to the kitchen staff and these also had some privileges, including a better choice of food. Potatoes became a kind of currency and the kitchen staff were able to use this as a way of "buying" clothing for themselves.

One day Olga meets a man named Tadek who is very positive and tells her that she shouldn't be so down. She seems most amazed that he hasn't given in to the constant degradation. They become friends, with Tadek sometimes giving her food. She tells him that she's lost her family and is hurt when it seems that has made no difference to him because he propositions her, offering food in return for sexual favors. She declines and he chooses someone else, telling her that they'll be friends but he won't share his food with her. Eventually, her gnawing pain sends her to the washroom in search of a man willing to trade food for sex. She finds an old man, fifty-five or more, toothless and pockmarked, who offers her the inside of the potatoes that are too raw for him to eat without teeth. As she's devouring them, Tadek tells her that he has better food. She looks at the package, throws it back in his face and runs away. Olga says that she later trades her own ration of bread for medicine to treat Tadek's girlfriend, Lilli, for syphilis.

As Olga's condition deteriorates, she becomes ill and puts a woolen rag on her back. Another woman, Magda, follows suit but they are caught and their attire is considered an infringement, earning them both the death penalty. Olga tells Magda she is going to try to escape the group headed for the gas chamber, but Magda refuses to go along, saying that anything will be better than where they've been. Olga says she can't imagine why so many people refuse to believe that the "bakery" is nothing more than a crematory for the thousands of victims. But when Olga forms a plan, another of the victims immediately tells on her. She manages to escape. She says that Magda follows and that she gets away with the ploy because she's only one of some forty thousand inmates, by giving Irka her boots. Though the boots were warm and she had only two left shoes to wear, she says it was a good deal.

Olga is among those assigned to the medical staff when an infirmary is formed, though she says there are no medicines and little to do for those who are sick. She's then assigned as liaison between the chief SS doctor - Dr. Klein - and the barrack doctors. There is no way to clean the rooms used as pharmacy, infirmary and hospital, and blood and pus are always in the cracks of the floor. Olga is one of five and they have much more privacy than in the general quarters, sharing two blankets among them. The five become close, sharing laughter and many tears, talking about family and wanting to do something for those who were ill though they had no supplies. Olga says that the sick could easily contract a deadly infection while in the infirmary but the more deadly issue is "selection." One young Greek girl succumbs to madness, spending her time at an imaginary spinning wheel and dying during a night.

The children are forced to grow up quickly. Those who do survive talk about the ever-present happenings. Olga says that children of their age might have been talking of games or their school studies, but that these children talk in a matter-of-fact tone about



the ovens, hangings, and death. She doesn't dwell on her own children, likely because the idea of what happened to them is simply too difficult.

Olga says that there are many ironic situations that arise in the prison camp and describes a hierarchy of sorts that has nothing to do with a person's previous station in life. In one case, a woman is able to "hire" her former mistress as her "maid." She doesn't completely explain these situations, but it seems that some are willing to give up the meager amounts of food they have as "payment" for other things. It seems possible the services may also be traded for protection but the author doesn't indicate that to be the case. She will later describe an event in which she trades food for material for a nurse's blouse and for a seamstress to fashion the garment.

Olga, who is working with Dr. Klein, secretly tells those who are ill that they must not remain in the hospital because to do so meant almost certain death. Olga says that for a period of time, everyone who is ill is taken away to the gas chamber. Then, for a period of time, no one is. She says that she believes there was some method in place, mainly that keeping the internees off balance meant a slimmer chance of revolt. Olga describes one instance in which those with scarlet fever are being killed and a young girl named Eva Weiss is diagnosed. As she and others are being taken away, she continues to reassure them, saying that there's nothing to fear and that they might all find their mothers while in the hospital. Olga cites her courage and wonders what Eva thought as she was taken to her death.



Chapters X through XVI

Chapters X through XVI Summary and Analysis

In the infirmary, Olga meets a Frenchman she calls "L.", who shares information about the war - the only source of information available. L. tells Olga that there's a resistance movement and that she's in a perfect position to help by serving as a "post office" for dropping a delivering messages. She agrees. L. also tells her that it's vital for her to see and remember everything so that she can be one of those who tell the world what really happened. Olga says that from the moment she's a member of the resistance, she has a new reason for living.

Olga has many duties during her incarceration. She says that she sometimes saw the new arrivals, always soothed by the sounds of an orchestra made up of other detainees. Olga writes that the reason for the high level of subterfuge is so that a few guards can maintain order among the many victims. This is carried out to the point that those who are headed into the gas chambers are urged to remember their "hanger number" in order to retrieve their clothing upon their return. Those in the gas chambers are often so tangled that the Germans invent a hook specially designed to retrieve the bodies. Those who are not dead are added to the pile to be cremated anyway.

Olga says that nothing is overlooked in an effort to profit from the entire operation. Everything is collected from the arrivals. Gold teeth, crowns and other "valuable" are collected after the victims are dead. The body fat is made into soap used by the detainees. Olga says that some are "suspicious" about specific sausages fed to the inmates. Those who work at the gas chambers and ovens have the most horrible of the tasks. Some go insane, being forced to burn family members, and most are ready when their turn arrives. When that time comes, the new members of this force are trained by those who will be among their first victims so that there's no lapse in the process.

Olga describes a building known as "Canada," in which detainees work with the possessions of the detainees. Their job is to search for jewels, money and other valuables among the possessions. In some cases, these are hidden in the shoe soles or lining of clothing. Trains regularly leave Auschwitz, headed for Germany with the valuables. Olga notes that there are many baby carriages - a grim reminder of the many babies that had been murdered. Some who work in "Canada" steal and use the possessions to attempt to bribe their way out of the camp. Few succeed, often with the soldiers agreeing, taking the bribe and then shooting the escapee before he can get away. Some of these possessions are used on the prison's thriving black market. Olga says that trading food for goods or services - such as sewing - was common but that the question of whether to have food or clothes was common.

Unlike most areas of the prison, the camp housing the Czechs had better food, clothing and a number of children. The people even set up a schooling system for their youngsters. They sometimes received packages from home and often received wool



which they made into warm clothing to barter. The entire camp was urged to send word asking for more packages from home, and a few hours later were exterminated down to the last person. The camp was soon filled with more Czechs, this time without the privilege of adequate food. As they were warned that they were about to be killed as well, they traded everything for food, apparently deciding that they would at least die with full bellies.

Olga and others who work in the infirmary are forced to carry the cadavers to the morgue where there are piles of rotting flesh. She says this gives her the most nightmares and that she "refuses" to discuss it further. One young Polish girl continually says that her own beloved mother is safely hidden in the mountains, but finds her body one day in the morgue. Olga discovers that the SS mix a mysterious powder into the food served to all detainees and that it apparently makes them lethargic.

Sometimes Olga works at picking up all the litter left by new arrivals. If she is there when new internees arrive, she tries to share information. She urges a mother to say that her son is over twelve, or to say that they are all in good health. She is ignored because the people don't realize the situation they are in. One day Olga sees four Americans who object to their treatment. They are told they'll be taken to the "American Camp," but are taken into the woods and summarily shot. She is later told there is no American Camp.

An "old internee" tells Olga and others that the key to survival is organization. Toward that end, there's a new philosophy that whatever the internees can steal from "Canada" is one less item the Germans can have for their own purposes. That kind of theft is no longer considered theft, but is "solidarity" for the resistance. There is, however, always someone who is so hungry, cold or bitter that they steal from their neighbors. One day, Olga and a friend had planned to trade butter or margarine to an internee named Malika who is called a "policewoman" in exchange for warmer material for a coat. Olga says that when they arrive, Malika is not yet there and her servant is cooking "plazki," a sort of potato cake. The servant offers to trade part of the cake for a couple of aspirins. Olga says that she and her friend have a big problem, because they are hungry and seldom have the opportunity for a potato, but the aspirin are not their personal property. The woman - complaining of nothing more serious than an earache - would likely not be given the aspirin even if she came to the infirmary. They make the trade anyway though they are both ashamed.

Women who give birth are often taken immediately to the gas chamber along with the infant, meaning pregnant women try to hide their condition. The exception seems to be that a woman who gives birth to a stillborn infant is spared. With that in mind, Olga and the others in the infirmary come to a brutal decision and begin suffocating the infants before they have the opportunity to cry out. The child - who was destined for the gas chamber in any case - dies, but the mother is spared.

There are high voltage wires within the prison and Olga notes that couples meet along these wires, though guards sometimes fire into the crowds and kill or maim those who'd wanted a minute to visit. Some internees throw themselves on the wire to end their own



lives. She notes that the numbering system never goes beyond 200,000, but starts over with a new serial letter. Numbers of deceased internees are "available" for reuse. Olga is number 25,403. She says that, contrary to popular belief, most of the detainees are Gentile rather than Jewish because Jews were gassed as quickly as possible. A group of nuns and priests are among the detainees and are subjected to special ridicule, but Olga cites their courage and strength as exemplary. She says they "paid a heavy toll" for their countries' actions.

Olga describes Camp D - home to a group of male children who somehow escaped immediate extermination but were eventually culled so that only those who were a certain height remained. She then describes Camp E, home of the Gypsies who have many amenities until their turn comes and they're summarily exterminated as well. One day, Hungarian police arrive and the Hungarian detainees believe they're being rescued. Instead, the police are part of their country's action which calls for their active aid in Germany's program.

Olga says that, at first, the Germans kill indiscriminately. Later, the ovens are reserved for Jews and Gypsies and the only Aryans who are exterminated are killed accidentally or for major crimes. She describes the four crematory units at Birkenau - each with an oven, gas chamber and hall. She includes some numbers given to her by Dr. Pasche, a French physician with information about the exterminations of May, June and July 1 through 26 of 1944. Over those months, according to Dr. Pasche, 1,314,000 people were exterminated at Auschwitz and Birkenau. According to Olga's numbers, some 17,260 could be exterminated in the ovens daily with another eight hundred a day in the death pits.

One day, Olga and some of those in "Canada" discover a Bing Crosby album in which he croons out the words to "Silent Night" on a record player. Though a guard hears the sound and comes in, smashing the record, Olga and the others are touched by the music. It seems possible that this is a touch of something pure and sweet, unlike the forced concerts performed by the camp orchestra with music designed to soothe those being taken to their deaths. Olga doesn't explain the difference herself, only to say that Cosby had, for a few minutes, helped them forget where they were.

Olga writes a very confusing account of her attempt to save some women who have been tagged for the gas chambers. She says that Irma Giese - the SS official who is blond and is referred to as the "angel" - selects 315 people on a particular June day in 1944. The women are crammed into a washroom and the door, at Irma's command, is nailed shut. These women would traditionally be marched in front of Dr. Klein prior to their deaths. On this particular occasion, three days pass before anything happens with the women. When Dr. Klein comes she pleads with him, calling on him for mercy for those women. She tells him they have nothing and then asks him to think of his own mother and sister, if he has any. She doesn't say, and perhaps doesn't know, what prompts his action, but he orders the door opened and becomes enraged. He screams out that the women are just wanting to go to the "hospital" because they are lazy and drives those still able to walk out of the door. Olga says she catches on to his ploy and



points out another "slacker." Thirty-one are saved because of this deed, though the reason Dr. Klein would simply decide on this day to set some free is never explained.

The SS officers who are choosing those to be exterminated seem to be completely mad. Olga says that Irma Giese is one day holding roll call when Dr. Klein motions for Olga to come to him. She does so and Irma Giese is angry at the intrusion on her power. When Dr. Klein stands up to her, it seems evident that Irma Giese will then take her anger out on Olga. She does, in fact, brutally pistol whip Olga. Later that day, there's another roll call and Olga says she doesn't know why Irma Giese didn't either select her for extermination or simply kill her outright since either would have been well within her right.



Chapters XVII through XXVIII

Chapters XVII through XXVIII Summary and Analysis

Olga says that nothing is more heartwarming than to see prisoners relentlessly trying to clean themselves and their surroundings. Lice and other vermin are a constant problem and one woman goes to the extreme of removing clothing so that the lice have no where to hide and breed. One day a young girl refuses to carry a placard as part of a punishment and enrages the guards so that they beat her, but she calls for the others to exhibit courage as well. Some try to escape and Olga says she and others hope someone can so that they can tell the world about the camps. As the Allied troops advance, other camps are dismantled and abandoned, usually with the soldiers killing as many of the prisoners as possible. The farce that serves to keep the internees confused continues. For example, a train leaves the camp, travels for a day and returns to the same camp, sending the prisoners directly to the gas chambers. Olga says there seems to be no reason for these elaborate ploys, other than to create a worse situation for the internees. As Olga is being taken to another camp, she watches a guard callously shoot an old man who stumbles then force his son to leave the dying man behind.

One who works alongside Olga is Dr. G. She lives in a dream world, making up stories of elegant tea parties. A blonde Yugoslav girl pretends to have medical training and frantically reads, trying to make up for the fact that she has none and lied to save her life. Dr. Rozsa talks of a lover waiting for her return and Olga eventually finds out that the man doesn't even know Dr. Rozsa exists. A girl named Borka works to make their place as cozy as possible and a woman named Dr. O was always pessimistic. Olga cites all these as ways the women found to cope with their situation.

Olga is harassed because her eyebrows, naturally thin, seem to have been plucked. She has trouble making anyone believe she isn't indulging in this. Most women have a "pinkly," a rag used to carry their meager possessions. They aren't allowed to have them and a dropped pinkly during roll call means punishment.

While life goes on, Olga is sometimes the recipient of a small package. Her roommates are jealous and are sometimes angry that she won't share the contents or even tell what's in the packages. She says it's typically explosives and that she doesn't dare tell that she's part of the resistance for fear someone will give her up. Then Olga gets two gifts, a worn toothbrush from L. and a real apple from the underground.

Olga has limited contact with Joseph Kramer, later known as the "Beast of Auschwitz and Belsen." She recalls one incident in 1944 in which they were called to roll call, assembled in a central location and allowed to listen to the camp orchestra while planes flew overhead and Kramer walked among them. She says she later realized that they were being filmed for one of the German's many propaganda films. Another encounter with Kramer involved Olga and others stripped their fellow detainees who were bound



for the gas chambers. Olga says the accusation that they'd joined the Germans in tormenting the women was correct, though they were forced to do so. When Kramer and the other Germans leave the hospital after taking the hundreds of sick away to be exterminated, only blood and confusion remain. Then Olga and the other health workers believe it to be their turn, but they are moved instead to another camp. Olga says that one day she sees a revolver in Mengele's briefcase and that she could have grabbed it. She says she wasn't afraid for herself but feared the massive reprisals that always followed any form of revolt. Olga describes his actions as mad, saying that he would require mass vaccinations or special care for a mother giving birth, then send them all to the gas chambers.

Dr. Klein is from Transylvania, as is Olga. He one day asks if she knows a brilliant doctor there, which angers her. She denies it, though she is that doctor's wife. Olga notes that Klein is sometimes compassionate, but puts that down to his farsighted idea that Germany will lose the war and he'll someday be on trial. She says that when Klein offers to take a message to her family, she also declines, and manages not to ask about her husband. She fears that giving him a message for some family member would merely land that person in prison as well.

Olga includes a passage from the official declaration of an American, Dr. Albert Wenger, who had been arrested in Vienna for sheltering a Jewess. His statement verifies Olga's words, outlining methods of torture and killings that include several Americans.

Olga next talks of the "scientific" experiments, most of which have no real reason and prove nothing. Sterilization is among the experiments and an Aryan German inmate explains that the idea is that the "inferiors" will not be able to procreate but will be able to continue to do the work that the Germans will need performed after their victorious war. The inferior race will then die off, naturally, as the German race expands.

Olga discovers that Miklos is working at a surgeon at another camp, Buna, and manages an assignment to accompany a group of insane prisoners to that facility. Olga and Miklos have a few minutes together and he urges her to remain strong because there must be survivors to tell the story of what happened to the rest. Days later, Buna is evacuated and Miklos is killed for stooping to help a fellow prisoner.

On January 17, 1945, prisoners are told to bring all paperwork to the main building where it is burned. They are then told to dress warmly and prepare to evacuate. Olga is torn, debating whether to try to hide with the hope that the liberating armies would soon arrive or go with the Germans and attempt an escape en route. As they prepare to leave, Olga cries out that they need bread and spurs the other to help break into a German building for bread. She is elated with their success and more so as they leave and hear the approaching canons of the Russians. Olga and the others are forced to march quickly and all who lag are simply killed outright. One morning, Olga and two other women rise early and in the predawn slip away and manage to evade their pursuers, first by hiding in the loft of a barn and later in the house of some sympathizers. Olga is discovered at one point and a German soldier favors her with attention, not realizing where she's from. As the German army is forced to fully flee the



advancing Russians, Olga is among a group of women captured and forced to march again with the Germans. On the third night, the Germans are drinking heavily and Olga gnaws her ropes in two but is forced to kill her guard with a bottle before making her escape. She has to swim an icy river to get away and remains in a little village as the Russians arrive.

Olga completes the story by saying that she wants the world to never forget what happened to her, though she herself wishes she could remember only peace and happiness. She includes one final story. On December 31, 1944, S.S. officials call for a head count of children, saying that too many who had been torn from their families remain and must not be found. Gas is in short supply as is ammunition. It's decided that the children will be killed by exposure. They are "bathed" in freezing water and forced to stand outside for hours after. Thomas Gaston is among them. In the throes of death, he calls out for his mother. He's been beaten repeatedly and the child dies on the way back to the barracks. Olga notes that on New Year's Eve, others around the world are enjoying the holiday and Thomas's body lies on the ground, being eaten by rats.

The psychological punishment is harsh. Prisoners are forced to move piles of rocks from one location to another and back, to move the contents of a latrine to another location, to move quantities of mud, and a woman one day is punished for remaining alive for six months when a "correct" prisoner would have died by now. At the end of a work day, the dead must be hauled in for roll call and the march, which Olga calls a "funeral march," is done while the camp orchestra plays.

Olga becomes an active member of the underground resistance and finds here a reason to live. She notes that a person cannot be overtly resistant because the entire camp will suffer, but that there are little ways of resisting, such as deferring some items from "Canada" to the prisoners, slowing slightly at work, and - as is the case with Olga - helping smuggle in explosives and information. At one point there is a working radio in the camp and news from the war is shared by word of mouth, but the method becomes very effective.

There are few instances of organized resistance but a young man named David, who works in the crematory and knows that his life will be very short anyway, manages to plant explosives and blow up one of the four buildings. When the S.S. rush the ruins, David is fatally wounded. There's a mass reprisal with hundreds forced to wait on their hands and knees and then being shot in the neck. Anyone who looks up is whipped, then shot. Though reprisals seem to be normal, this level seems extreme and is probably a sign that the Germans also know the end of the war is nearing.

After the liberation of Paris in 1944, prisoners are told that anyone with a relative in America will be exchanged for German prisoners of war. Everyone who can readily provide the necessary information and leave on cattle cars, fully clothed with coats, shoes and gloves. Olga says everyone left behind is sad not to be on that train, but they later learn that the evacuees were all exterminated. It seems an incredibly complex ploy in order to move a relatively small number of internees to another camp but is likely

another example of the extremes to which the Germans go in order to have their victims go readily to their deaths.



Characters

Olga Lengyel

The author of "Five Chimneys." Olga is the wife of a successful doctor who owns and operates a sanatorium in the Transylvanian village of Cluj. When her husband is arrested, Olga quickly decides that she will volunteer for deportation because she believes that her family can survive anything as long as they remain together. After a horrible trip, they arrive at Auschwitz and Olga insists that her oldest son is not yet twelve, thinking that she is sparing him from hard labor. She also insists that her mother wants to remain with the two children. She later learns that she's hastened their deaths and that fact is the opening of her book. The placement of that seems to indicate that she is horrified at her role though she doesn't dwell on that point - or any other.

Olga says that she is ready to give up her life soon after realizing the fate of her mother and children, the likelihood that her father has also been killed and the separation from her husband. She has hidden within her boot a capsule of poison and seems to have plans to use it on herself but heeds her husband's words that she must live so that she can tell the story of those who were slaughtered at the hands of the Germans. She clings to that thought, using it when she might otherwise have given up hope altogether.

Olga seems, in some ways, an idealist though she says that most of those who arrive at Auschwitz cannot believe that the Germans have such a hideous plan in place. Even after those in the camps see that thousands taken away to "hospitals" never return, they continue to disbelieve. Olga says that she finds a woman who has been imprisoned for four years and takes that as a sign of hope that she herself will survive, but the woman tells her that no one will escape alive unless the Germans decree it. Olga's will continues to be strong, even when faced with overwhelming odds and the opportunity to do what many others do - simply give up and die.

Miklos Lengyel

Husband of the author. Miklos was the first of the family to be arrested and it was Olga's choice to go with him. When they first encounter each other in the prison camp, Miklos tells Olga that the guards had found his poison and asks for half of hers, but reconsiders and tells her that she should keep it because he, as a man, likely has more options for committing suicide than she.

Olga finally manages to see Miklos, who is serving as a surgeon at a camp known as Buna by accompanying a group of insane prisoners who are to be the subjects of experiments at Buna. There, Miklos tells her briefly of his life, encouraging her to remain strong. Miklos says what many others say - that there must be survivors who can tell the world what happened to those at the camps. Olga says that her final look at Miklos occurs as she is forced to return to her own camp with the insane prisoners. She says



she later learns that he and the others of Buna were being moved and that Miklos stoops to help a fellow prisoner who had fallen. Both are shot.

The Unnamed German Major

A German official who is billeted in the home of Olga and Miklos and their family. This official tells them of the atrocities occurring at the hands of the Germans against their victims, but Olga refuses to believe it. She says that she puts it down to his consumption of alcohol but says she knows that he isn't really drunk.

Olly

The young woman who is a friend of Olga. Olly tries to commit suicide on the rail car as they are being taken to the concentration camp. Miklos uses a rubber tube that is part of a urine apparatus used by Olga's father to flush the woman's stomach. Olly survives that suicide attempt but Olga notes that she is marched off to her death the following day.

Irka

A Polish woman who has been at Auschwitz for four years when Olga arrives. Irka is the barrack chief, big and rude. She chooses only the biggest, meanest inmates as her assistants. Olga uses her as a role model, expecting that she, too, can survive the horrors of the camp. Irka tells Olga that she's ignoring the facts, that they are all going to die with only a few exceptions, and that Olga's family are dead already. It's Irka who tells Olga about the true use of the bakeries.

Irma Griese

Known as the "blonde Angel of Belsen," she is an S.S. officer who cruelly selects those to be exterminated. Olga says that when she first saw Irma, she thought this beautiful woman couldn't possibly have been as cruel as her reputation indicated. Irma has several lovers and one day calls on a detainee who is a surgeon and good friend of Olga's to perform an operation. Though it's not detailed, it seems likely that the surgery is an abortion. Olga says that Irma - the woman who coldly sends thousands to their deaths - whines with pain. Irma is among those executed for their war crimes and has to be dragged away by the executioners who carry out the sentence.

Dr. Klein

One of the S.S. physicians at the camp. He works often with Olga and is one of the few who can overpower Dr. Mengele. It's Dr. Klein who discovers a group of women who have been locked away for days as they await their turn at the gas chamber. Dr. Klein



pretends outrage that they are "faking" illness to get out of work and overrides the order, releasing thirty-one of those who are still able to walk after the days without food and water. Olga notes that Dr. Klein seems sometimes interested in the sick and, though he sends many to their deaths, sometimes shows compassion. It's also Dr. Klein who tells Olga that the "war will soon be over." She thanks him for his honesty, a point that he disregards. He says that once the prisoners are released, no one will "have the slightest regard for me." Olga believes this to be nothing more than a farsighted calculation on the part of Dr. Klein, who knows Germany to be losing the war and is hoping his victims who testify against him will at least remember some slight kindnesses.

Dr. Mengele

The doctor in charge after Dr. Klein and Dr. Kramer leave. He is described as a tall man who might have been handsome except for his cruel expression. Olga says that he should have been tried for his role in the atrocities, but he contracts typhus at the time the camps are liberated and escapes during his convalescence. Olga says that he whistles constantly - except for those times when the war is going exceptionally badly for the Germans - and shows up at all times of the day or night. He watches the internees, simply motions them to the left or the right, then chooses one of the groups for extermination.

Eva Weiss

Eva is a young girl who is assigned as a nurse. She is also from Cluj and works alongside Olga. When Eva finds that she has scarlet fever, she and the others know that she's to be killed. However, she reassures those being taken with her to the gas chambers that they are fortunate to be going to the hospital and says that they might find their mothers there. Olga cites her courage in the face of imminent death and says there's no way to know what Eva herself might have been thinking during those final hours of life.

L

A Frenchman who comes for treatment from Olga and offers information about the war and the advance of the Allied armies. It's this man who has Olga become involved with the resistance movement. This man, though never named by Olga as anything more than "L," is apparently an active member of the movement for many years.



Objects/Places

Cluj

The city of 100,000 people, the capital of Transylvania and the home of Lengyel's family prior to being interred.

Doctor Lengyel's Sanatorium

The hospital owned and operated by Olga and Miklos Lengyel.

Berlin

Where Miklos Lengyel had studied medicine.

The University of Cluj

Where Olga Lengyel studied medicine.

Birkenau

A concentration camp. The objective at this camp is simply to exterminate all who arrive.

Auschwitz

A concentration camp where Olga spends much of her time. She notes that this camp is horrible but is immeasurably better than Birkenau.

Barrack 26

The horse barn where Olga is housed upon her arrival at Auschwitz.

Canada

This is a building set aside for the reclamation of valuables from those who arrive in the concentration camps.



The Czech Camp

A camp that houses several thousand Czechs until the day the Germans exterminate them all.

Tommies

The word used to describe all English-speaking soldiers.

Banu

The camp where Miklos works as a surgeon until shortly before his death.



Themes

The Will to Survive

Olga finds the will to survive in the admonishments of others that someone must survive to tell the world what happened at the German prison camps. It seems that, until that point, Olga might have given in to the temptation of escape through suicide. A Frenchman who is part of the underground resistance also tells Olga that some must survive in order to tell the story. This man seems to have latched onto this - as well as his role in the prison underground resistance movement - as his own encouragement to survive.

While those in the prison found ways to prompt their will to live, there were Germans who never lost their will to survive. Olga tells of a ruthless German officer named Irma Griese who was convicted of her war crimes and sentenced to death. Irma was taken away to her execution, screaming. She was willing to send others to their deaths without giving it a second thought, but counted her own life dear and was clinging to it with everything she had.

Disbelief in the German Atrocities

There was, at the time of the war, a general air that no one - not even Hitler - could carry out the atrocities that were being laid at his doorstep. Olga says that even when they hear a German major talking about the horrific deeds do they believe it can be true. That attitude is why so few guards were able to herd people to their deaths.

Olga says that this disbelief isn't easily dispelled. Even when the people are transported to the prisons in cattle cars with many dying along the way, they arrive believing they've survived the worst and that they are now going to be cared for. That disbelief seems to continue, seemingly through a great deal of suffering. Olga says there are many who are at the prison camps for some time and still refuse to believe that the great chimneys are the evidence of crematory ovens and that they are being slaughtered by the thousands.

That level of disbelief is eliminated after the war when the prison camps are discovered and as the survivors begin to tell their horrifying tales. But there remains a faction who continue to disbelieve and it seems that they are the victims of the same problem that pervaded the world as Hitler's plan was being implemented - there is simply no way a man, an army and a nation can commit these atrocities and no way people would simply walk to their deaths.



The German Machine

Olga's is not the first story to tell of the elaborate steps taken by the Germans to calm the people who would be the victims of the German army or to deceive the world regarding the atrocities of the Germans. One of those is the use of musicians. As the cattle cars arrive and the hundreds disembark, they're calmed by the sounds of an orchestra. Olga says that they literally walk off to their deaths to the jazz and other melodies being played by musicians in prison garb themselves. As those about to be sent to their deaths in the gas chamber disrobe, they are warned to remember the number of their hanger so that they can be certain to find their clothing once they return. In truth, they are killed immediately and never return. Once Olga knows the truth, she tries to ward newcomers and urges the sick to pretend they are well since they are the first sent to the gas chambers. She says that one woman tells a doctor of Olga's claims, though doesn't mention where she heard the stories. The German doctor tells the woman that it's not true and seems to convince her that the gas chambers are nothing more than a rumor.

Olga says that she herself one day has the opportunity to grab a pistol and kill a German officer, but that she passes up the chance because she knows that any action of this nature prompts a retaliation on the entire camp. She says that she believes this to be on the minds of others. It seems impossible to believe that so few German soldiers could maintain control over the thousands of prisoners, but Olga says it's a combination of the fear and subterfuge of the German Machine.



Style

Perspective

The story is written in first person, completely from the perspective of the author, Olga Lengyel. This is the only option open because the only purpose, according to her writing, is for Olga to tell her story. The book includes a dedication which reads, "Dedicated to the memory of my parents and husband, my godfather and children and to my fellow inmates of Hitler's concentration camps of World War Two who, silenced for ever, are mostly forgotten - 1959." This dedication further outlines the reason for her resolve to tell the story.

There is one section of the story that is not told in first person from Olga's perspective. The section of Dr. Albert Wegner's declaration is, according to Olga's writing, taken directly from a statement written by Wegner. This portion of the book tells the story of Wegner's own arrest for harboring a Jewess and his subsequent treatment as well as things he witnessed during his incarceration.

There are some details included of which Olga did not personally witness, but she details these things that are told to her by others. For example, she isn't present when her husband is shot and killed during the evacuation of Buna, but does learn about the incident from someone else. Those details outside her personal perspective do not take away from the first-person account.

Tone

The story has dark overtones but there is a subtle undercurrent of hopefulness that pervades the writing. It seems that Olga's personal method of coping could have been the same other victims of horrendous crimes report in that she seems almost to be reporting what she saw rather than what she personally witnessed. This impersonal approach is likely a self-preservation mechanism that arises from her strong resolve to survive in order to tell the world what happened at the hands of the German soldiers. It's interesting that she often tells about things in general. For example, she tells about the tendency for sexual relationships but doesn't say whether she was ever involved in one. She also doesn't say that she wasn't, leaving the reader to decide for oneself.

There are many details of horrific deeds. For example, Olga writes an entire chapter about the "scientific" experiments at the hands of the German doctors. She says that the results are seldom worth the deeds and that the doctors often get bored with the experiment before its conclusion, meaning they simply don't care to record any findings at all, however limited their use.



Structure

The book is divided into twenty-seven chapters, ranging from four pages to more than fifteen. The chapters are titled by Roman numerals and a title that offers a glimpse at what can be expected in that section. Some of the names are places, such as "Barrack 26," "Infirmary," "Canada," "The Morgue," and "In the Death Car." Others are events such as "I Am Condemned to Death," "Paris Is Liberated," "A Proposal in Auschwitz," and "A New Reason for Living." Still others indicate some horrific incident. The first chapter is titled, "8 Horses - or 96 Men, Women, and Children," and details the ninety-six people crammed into a horse car for the trip to the concentration camp. Another is titled, "Accursed Births" and outlines the way medical personnel killed many infants because of the Nazi requirement that mothers of live infants be put to death. The final two chapters, "Freedom" and "I have faith," are indications that the author does manage to live until her release and, though it's doubtful she could ever recover, will survive.

The book concludes with a glossary, a section that includes some twenty-nine terms and definitions used in the book. Many of the terms are words that have a traditional meaning but that came to mean something entirely different in the lives of those in the concentration camps. For example, the word "Sonderbehandlung," also referred to as "S.B.," is a term for "special handling." In the lives of those at Auschwitz, it came to refer to those who had been condemned to death.

The book begins with an excerpt from a letter from Albert Einstein who apparently read the book. The letter offers a thank-you to the author for her sincere look into her life and for serving as a voice to those who died.



Quotes

"I cannot acquit myself of the charge that I am, in part, responsible for the destruction of my own parents and of my two young sons. The world understands that I could not have known, but in my heart the terrible feeling persists that I could have, I might have, saved them." Chap. I, p. 11

"Quieted by such cunning subterfuges, we allowed ourselves to be stripped of our belongings and marched docilely to the slaughterhouses." Chap. II, p. 23

"When the death facilities were overtaxed, the people were sent to a special barracks or into washrooms, to wait for hours, and sometimes days, until their turn came to be gassed. It was all done neatly and without the least feeling of compassion on the part of our masters." Chap. V, p. 50

"We must observe everything that goes on here. Later we shall write down everything we've seen. When the war is over the world must know about this. I must know the truth." Chap. X, p. 81

"I had two reasons to live: one, to work with the resistance movement and help as long as I could stand upon my feet; two, to dream and pray for the day to come when I could go free and tell the world, 'This is what I saw with my own eyes. It must never be allowed to happen again!'" Chap. X, p. 89

"Of all the horrible tasks I had to do, this one left me with the ghastliest memories. I refuse to elaborate further to describe how we had to trample over the accumulations of rotting, putrid cadavers, many of whom had died from frightful diseases." Chap. XII, p. 97

"The camp was no maternity ward. It was only the antechamber to Hell." Chap. XV, p. 116

"Human nature can get used to anything, even to the continual presence of death. For a bit of pleasure they risked any danger. And pleasures were so rare, and life was so cheap at Auschwitz-Birkenau!" Chap. XVI, p. 117

"What crime had the Gypsies committed? They were a minority, and that was enough to condemn them to death." Chap. XVI, p. 126



"Our sentiments were mixed with selfishness, for we hoped that whoever escaped from the inferno would tell the world what was happening at Birkenau, that someone might come to our aid at last. If the Allies could blow up the crematory oven! The pace of the extermination would at least be slowed." Chap. XVII, p. 136

"The majority of the S.S. left for the front; those who remained were chiefly invalids for whom the service at Auschwitz was a rest cure after combat." Chap. XVII, p. 142

"Every prisoner racked her brain day and night trying to remember the name of some distant relative in America. A few even wept because they could not recall the name of a cousin; others because they had not kept in touch with their overseas relatives." Chap. XXI, p. 179

"Everyone has heard of heartless children who amuse themselves by tearing off the legs and wings of insects. Here there was one difference: the insects were human beings." Chap. XXII, p. 185

"New Year's Eve ... Somewhere on earth, beyond the barbed wires, free men were shaking hands and raising their glasses to wish each other Happy New Year! At Birkenau rats were feeding on the children of Europe." Chap. XXVII, p. 224

Topics for Discussion

Describe Olga's life prior to her assignment to Auschwitz based on the clues offered. What is it about this life that makes Olga want to accompany her husband when he's deported?

Describe, in detail, the trip Olga and her family endure on the way to Auschwitz. What is the first clue that the trip isn't going to be what they'd expected?

Why do the Germans go to such lengths to camouflage their true intentions? List at least three examples of these.

Why does Olga say people didn't initially believe the stories of the atrocities performed by the Germans? What does she say about her own willingness to go along? How does Olga first hear of the camps?

Who is "L?" Thomas Lengyel? Arvad Lengyel? Olly? Tadek? Eva Weiss? Irka? Irma Giese? How are all connected with Olga?

How does Olga come to terms with the loss of her family? What are the actions she takes over the term of her imprisonment that are inspired by her resolve to survive?

Why do the prisoners not revolt? What is the situation in which Olga resists the opportunity to kill an S.S. life? What are other instances in which revolts impact the prisoners?

Describe the situation in which Olga eventually manages to escape.