

This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen Study Guide

**This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen by
Tadeusz Borowski**

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Contents

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen Study Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Plot Summary..... | 3 |
| This Way For the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen..... | 4 |
| A Day at Harmenz..... | 6 |
| The People Who Walked On..... | 10 |
| Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)..... | 12 |
| The Death of Schillinger..... | 14 |
| The Man With The Package..... | 16 |
| The Supper..... | 18 |
| A True Story..... | 19 |
| Silence..... | 20 |
| The January Offensive..... | 21 |
| A Visit..... | 23 |
| The World of Stone..... | 25 |
| Characters..... | 26 |
| Symbols and Symbolism..... | 29 |
| Settings..... | 31 |
| Themes and Motifs..... | 32 |
| Styles..... | 34 |
| Quotes..... | 36 |

Plot Summary

This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen is a novel by Tadeusz Borowski. The book paints a dramatic picture of the way the Jews who came to Auschwitz were treated. Short stories additionally address the way of life in these concentration camps for both the prisoners and, to some extent, the leaders. Other stories tell the struggles faced by those who survive the concentration camps once they return to life outside the camps.

The narrator is a member of the Kommando, a group of labor prisoners who are used to unload the incoming prisoners, strip them of their belongings, and clean out the cattle cars used to transport the Jews to the camp. A Polish citizen, Borowski was arrested when he was found with copies of his poems and a book by Aldous Huxley. In his stories, Borowski records his time working with the Jews entering the camps as well as his time taking classes to be an orderly. He additionally records memories of a time when he lay in the Auschwitz prison, convinced he was going to die.

Borowski survives his time in the camp. His stories ("The January Offensive," "A Visit," and "The World of Stone") tell about his time after being released from the camp. Though he is free, Borowski's mind still seems to be held captive by the things he has seen and done in the camp. He and his friends contemplate if it is understandable that a person who has once had to steal and kill to survive should keep acting in this way.

One of the major themes of the novel is the idea that there is no limit to the cruelty through which one man can put another. Borowski has learned firsthand how cruel people can be to one another. Despite their cruelty, however, humans also have the ability to be selfless and self-sacrificing in their desire to help others. Both these sides of humanity are explored in Borowski's stories.

This Way For the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen

Summary

This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen paints a dramatic picture of the way the Jews coming into Auschwitz were treated. The narrator is a member of the Kommando, a group of labor prisoners who are used to unload the incoming prisoners, strip them of their belongings, and clean out the cattle cars used to transport them to the camp. As the men eat, they talk about the way they haven't had many transports recently. They wonder briefly if all the people have been killed when they are called to report to the ramp.

Three transports, totaling 15,000 people, are brought into the camp during the course of that day and night. The Jews are packed into trains for transport. They arrive begging for water and air. They are unloaded from the trains and instructed to pile their things up near the train exits. Then, they are packed into trucks to be taken to the gas chambers. Families are separated with women and children taken away from the men. After the trains are unloaded, the workers are ordered to clean the human waste and bodies from the train. While trying to unload the third transport of the day, the narrator vomits after grabbing what he believed was a corpse's hand only to have it grasp back.

Analysis

This story is told from the viewpoint of one of the Auschwitz's prisoners in the Kommando, or labor camp. He and his bunk mates are in charge of helping to unload new residents when they come into the camp by the train. In the story, Tadek writes of the conditions in which the Jews were transported to the camp in cattle cars. They are crammed into the cars so that they are begging for air and water when they arrive. Immediately upon their arrival, the families are separated and their belongings taken from them. Anything of value taken from the Jews is confiscated by the camp leaders. The workers, however, are often allowed to keep any food the people have with them when they arrive.

At the beginning of the story, Tadek describes the practice of delousing the camps. All of the prisoners are doused with pesticide to kill the lice, a bug that spreads disease and is often found in dirty and overcrowded living conditions. The prisoners, men and women alike, are stripped of their clothes and moved into public spaces to be deloused.

In this short story Tadek also describes the way that any prisoner who has food has power. Those in the camp, especially in Tadek's work detail, have their own justice system in which they police their own in order to keep from getting in trouble with the German police.

Most memorable in Tadek's writing is his inner struggle as he deals with the idea that the Jewish people are humans who are being mistreated. Although Tadek does not approve of what is being done to the Jews, he is angry with them because he feels they are the reason that he is in the camp. In his own misery, Tadek finds himself treating the Jews in the same way the Germans do. He feels as if he is losing his humanity.

Discussion Question 1

What is Tadek's job at the concentration camp?

Discussion Question 2

How are the people brought to the camp?

Discussion Question 3

Under what conditions do Tadek and the other men work?

Vocabulary

Delousing, diversion, crematoria, sententiously, rhetorical, crematorium, stupefied.

A Day at Harmenz

Summary

In the first section of the story “A Day at Harmenz,” the narrator speaks briefly with Mrs. Haneczka a woman who used to get food for him when he was first brought into the camp. She offers him food now, but he won’t take it because he believes she had given him enough food when he was poor in the camp. He had some good soap to give her as a gift but someone has stolen it. She tells him not to worry as Ivan has given her some soap that day. The narrator recognizes it is the soap that he had planned to give her.

A Jew begins giving Tadek a hard time for not taking Mrs. Haneczka's food. Tadek reminds him that he had killed his own people for stealing and that his own son has marked him for death because of his actions. Becker tells Tadek that he also had his own son hanged for stealing. Becker asks Tadek how long he has been in the camp and if he really knows what hunger is. Becker explains to Tadek how the people in his camp went without food because the cooks would trade their bread and food for cigarettes and alcohol. Tadek reminds Becker that Becker also took rations that weren't his own. Becker reasons that since he was a camp senior, he had the right to take from others. This section closes with Tadek tormenting Becker about the possibility of Becker being chosen for the crematoria.

In the second section of the story, the narrator is supervising men trying to shift a railroad turntable. Members of the Kapo hit the workers across the heads with spades because they aren't working hard enough. They are told to dig through a hill to lay tracks. Another man asks Tadek about a coming selection. The men have cleaned themselves up and try to appear in better shape than they are in order to avoid being sent to the gas chambers. A man asks Tadek what time it is. When the German supervisor sees the watch, he asks for it. When Tadek refuses to give it, the German takes it from him and breaks it by throwing it against a wall. Tadek begins whistling, angering the Kapo. The Kapo sings “Red Flag,” which Tadek tells him would get him death if a real SS man heard him. The Kapo sends the men to dinner.

In section three, because the men have gotten to dinner early, they are able to switch the caldrons of soup intended for them so that they get more food. Although the men who don't get the larger portions of food curse Tadek, he notes that the next day it will be the other men who will steal from Tadek and his group. After dinner Tadek goes to visit Ivan. He sees an old Greek with Ivan. The Greek is tucking a goose into a bag. He then hands Ivan some lard that has come from Mrs. Haneckza. Ivan is angry about the lard, thinking Mrs. Haneckza should have sent more. Tadek mentions the soap that was stolen from him and tells Ivan he has seen it. Ivan gets fidgety and tells Tadek it is time to give his men a nudge. Tadek mentions to Ivan that he does deserve more and that he will get it.



In the fourth section of this story a guard tries to convince Tadek to sell him his shoes. The guard offers too little and Tadek messes with the guard by suggesting he give his food to a nearby starving Jew. The guard asks Tadek why he is in the camp and Tadek tells of a round up, a story the guard says he's heard before. Tadek also tells the story of a man arrested for singing off key. The guard tries to get Tadek to walk into an area where he has permission to shoot people found in that area. Suddenly the guard jerks to attention as a higher-ranking officer walks by. The prisoner working with Tadek speaks to the officer, earning him a slap on the face.

When they are almost finished with the ditch, the Kapo's boy comes by. Tadek gives him a lemon and then suggests to the boy that he check the geese as some men catch them and fry them at night. Ivan, whose group is last to dinner, stops to speak to Tadek's guard. As he walks past Tadek, Ivan indicates Tadek hasn't gotten much done. But, Tadek tells him there is still time.

The story continues in the fifth section where the men sit in their ranks for dinner. One man is kicked in the genitals by the Kapo for licking his bowl. The Kapo has absolute control over the meal and the power to grant second helpings to the men. Because he is a foreman, Tadek gets two bowls of soup. He gives his first to Becker, warning him not to let the Kapo know. He gives his second bowl to Andrei who will give him apples in exchange. Andrei and Tadek see a woman's group nearby. One of the women is being forced to hold a heavy beam. She collapses under the weight and cries. The Kapo approaches Tadek wanting to know why he gave his food away. As a punishment, Tadek won't be given any food the following day.

In the sixth section, Tadek comes upon Ivan kicking Becker for eating Mrs. Haneczka's food. Tadek tells Becker that he's been making stretchers and reminds him what that means. Andrei is charged with teaching two Greek Jews to march. Tadek tells a group of men who ask that the soldiers have taken Kiev. Tadek's guard has heard and comes running, cocking his gun. Tadek covers by telling the man that he has misunderstood. The men to whom he was speaking agree with Tadek, saying that he was talking about sticks.

Rubin catches up with Tadek as he walks away. He convinces Tadek to give him his watch so he can give it to the guard. The Kapo sees the exchange and approaches Tadek angrily. Tadek tells the Kapo he gave Rubin his watch. This angers the Kapo but Tadek quickly tells him the guard wants to report Tadek for subversive action. The Kapo suddenly stiffens as the Unterscharfuhrer rides his bike up, almost hitting Tadek. The Unterscharfuhrer says the men who can't march should be killed. He also says that another goose has disappeared. Tadek is sent to tell Andrei that he is to kill the men. Tadek also watches as Rubin speaks to the guard on his behalf. Rubin then tells Tadek to thank the guard for agreeing not to report him. Ivan's confidant approaches him asking about the S.S. man. He says that it must be true about the coming selection.

In the seventh section of this story, Tadek and his men are trying to hoist a cart full of sand back up on the rails. Suddenly Tadek calls "Antreten!" the men line up even though it is only 3 p.m. The camp clerk counts the men. The S.S. and Kommando guards

surround the men. The seasoned inmates realize that there is about to be a selection. The men, including Ivan are searched. A goose is found in the Greek Jew's sack. Ivan admits that he gave it to him. The Unterscharfuhrer hits Ivan over and over again with his whip. As the men walk past Mrs. Haneczka, Tadek notices that her eyes are filled with tears. Following roll call, the men are made to go into their barracks where they wait for the selection to be finished.

Tadek comments that he believes the selection is somehow his fault. Becker calls to Tadek, asking a favor of him. He says that he knows that he is going to the gas chambers. He asks Tadek for something to eat. Becker takes the food offered and climbs up onto Tadek's bunk blindly.

Analysis

Significant in this portion of the book is Becker's description of hunger. He asks Tadek if he has ever been really hungry before. Becker says that real hunger is when other people start to look like something that can be eaten. Becker and Tadek bump heads as Tadek knows that Becker has had his own family members killed and put in prison for stealing, yet Becker admits that when he was a camp superior, he also took more than his share of the rations. Notice that Tadek threatens Becker by warning him about an upcoming selection process where those less able to work are singled out for death. He says that he hopes Becker will go to his death.

Notice also the way that Tadek writes that the men clean themselves up and try to look as healthy as possible when there is threat of a selection. It is a testament to the human will to live. Even though conditions are so bad, the men would rather stay alive than risk death. The will to live also speaks of the hope that humans seem to have ingrained in them. In order to want to stay alive, the men must have hope that things will get better and they will be released from the camp. Otherwise, it seems they'd just give in to their eventual end and allow themselves to be killed.

It is in this story that Tadek speaks of the horrors of the camp. In one instance, a camp leader tries to get Tadek killed by luring him into a place where Tadek can be shot. When another leader discovers Tadek has a watch, the leader takes his watch and intentionally breaks it. Tadek pretends not to care about the watch because he knows it will irritate the guard. Also note the way the men could sabotage the soup caldrons so they will get more food. Although each prisoner gets very little food, they are punished if they try to get the most out of what they are given. For example, a man is kicked in the genitals when he tries to lick his bowl to get every last bit of soup.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the relationship between Becker and Tadek.



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way prisoners use food as a trade for favors and other items.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way that the men try to avoid being selected for the gas chambers. What does this say about hope and the human will to live?

Vocabulary

Cupolas, palisade, quarantine, torpor, angular, furlough, subversive, gesticulating.

The People Who Walked On

Summary

In the story "The People Who Walked On," the location of a new soccer field being built in the camp is described. As soon as the field is finished, the men entertain themselves after dinner playing soccer. During one of the games, the narrator chases a ball and sees that a train has arrived. People are filing out of the trains. The narrator returns to the game. When he chases another ball, he notices all of the people are gone. He mentions that some of the people walk one direction to the crematoria while the others walk in the other direction. These who walk in the other direction are allowed to stay alive.

He describes the women's part of the camp that the men refer to as the "Persian Market." The narrator and his men put roofs on the barracks in the "Persian Market." They do this because the women have done favors for the men, either with gifts of gold or their bodies. He writes that it was during the time he was working on the roofs that he learned about the camp. At first they bring things for the women who surround them, begging, but later stop bringing anything with them.

Of the women he remembers, the narrator writes about his memories of Mirka. One day Mirka calls to the narrator and his men hoping they can help her. There is a baby in the barracks who is dying. She had hidden the infant so that it would not be taken to the gas chambers. One of the men tries to comfort Mirka but she pushes him away. The narrator walks away, but thinks later how he would like to have a child.

He remembers another Block Elder who asked the narrator if evil will really be punished. She wants to know if there will ever be justice. She has tried to keep the morale up in the women's barracks, encouraging them not to go to the doctor if they are pregnant, and to stay in the barracks if they are sick. She has the singers and dancers perform for the women. She tells the narrator how she believes that the women are falling all over themselves to get to the gas.

The narrator next writes that he believes conditions have improved at the camp. The improvements are only in 'perspective' but he notes that the worse things become for the Germans on the battlefield, the better the things become for the prisoners. The women, however, seem to have things worse than the men. Their conditions are like those in the early days of the camp. The ugly, skinny and fat women are taken off to be killed. They are called out for extra roll calls. S.S. women invite the sick and the pregnant to go to the hospital where they are told they will get milk and white bread. These women are instead taken to the gas chambers.

The narrator remembers spending time chatting with the block elders, or sitting in the latrine talking to the latrine girl. People continue to be killed. The people in the camp wonder how many of them have been killed. The peoples' belongings pile up in



warehouses and outside. The narrator and others steal the food they can and take it back to eat. He can see the crematoria from the warehouse roof. They run daily from morning to night.

Analysis

Through all of the activities of the camp, even though things have been cleaned up and made to look more attractive on the outside, people continue to be killed and sent to the camps' gas chambers. This story deals with some of the unique challenges the women face in the concentration camps. They offer their bodies in trade for food and favors. Those that get pregnant are promised white bread and milk, but are instead taken to the crematorium. Fat, ugly or skinny women are killed immediately. One barrack leader walks away from the women whom she tries to help and advise, wondering if there will ever be any true justice. She believes the women are begging to be sent to the gas chambers instead of trying to keep themselves alive.

Discussion Question 1

Explore the way it is believed that the concentration camps are not as bad as they really are because of the extracurricular activities and pretty lawns.

Discussion Question 2

What particular challenges do women in the concentration camps face?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the significance of Mirka's story.

Vocabulary

Solidarity.

Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)

Summary

In the first section of this story, Tadek is one of ten chosen for training as a medical orderly at the concentration camp's hospital. He writes in his letter to his girlfriend that he has set out trying to find someone to take his letters to her. He also details an incident where he promised to try to keep a well-known leader in the camp from being burned on a pile with a hoard of other prisoners. Instead of dying, the man gets better. Tadek counts this as his most recent contribution to lowering the camp's mortality rate.

In the second section of the story, Tadek writes about how delightful he finds the camp. He describes how different and how much better this camp is than Birkenau. He writes that it has been so long since he has seen his girlfriend that he has forgotten what she looks like. It is hard for him to imagine what she must look like in the concentration camp. He says that he knows she has kept her spirit up and that he knows he must keep his up for her. He is awed by the people who have survived from the beginning days in the concentration camp.

In the third section of the story, Tadek tells that his medical training has been delayed. He also writes about the way that he thinks the Germans really believe the things they tell the prisoners, like work making one free, for instance. Staszec and Witek are Tadek's companions. Staszec has helped others in the past and these people now repay him with food. Witek, however, is obsessed with finding a piano.

Tadek describes The Puff, which he writes is the most important place in that area of the camp. Men are allowed in The Puff, which appears to be the concentration camp form of a brothel, as a reward for good work or good behavior. Tadek describes how The Puff works, though he claims to have turned down an offer to use the services. Women can also be found in the experimental block, where men break in to have sex with research subjects. Tadek defends the obsession with women in the camp as a normal fascination.

As he writes, Tadek changes topics and tells his girlfriend that he is thinking of Staryszewska Street. He thinks of how she must have been found in his room after he was arrested. He praises her for being so mature even though he had so little to give her. Love and discovering another person through love is one of the most lasting things on Earth despite other people's attempt to turn their age into one of toughness. He writes of his worst times as being in the prison with no books and no way to write down the poems that he put together as he paced the cell.

Analysis

While the title describes this story as a letter, it is actually several letters put together to form a dialogue. They are written by Tadek to his girlfriend who is also a prisoner at



Auschwitz. One thing that sticks out about this portion of the novel is the decidedly more positive tone. Tadek has been taken from his position as one who unloads incoming prisoners and has been chosen to train as an orderly. Tadek sees this job as helping to reduce the mortality rate in the camp.

He considers himself lucky to be taken from Birkenau and given the opportunity to train as an orderly. The people who are in the area of the camp in which he now resides are actually proud of their area in the camp. Tadek is surprised at how many people who he meets that are tattooed with low numbers, indicating they have been in the concentration camp the longest. Even the older prisoners who have survived years in the camp are afraid of Birkenau because of the inhumane way people are treated there.

Also in this section, Tadek describes his hunt for a person who can sneak his letters to his girlfriend, who is a prisoner in the camp as well. He tells her it has been so long since he has seen her that he has forgotten what she looks like. In his letters, though, he instructs her to keep her spirits up despite the way she might be being treated.

Discussion Question 1

To whom does Tadek write his letters? Why are they significant?

Discussion Question 2

How is Tadek's situation as a orderly in training different from what he faced as a worker meeting and unloading the cattle cars?

Discussion Question 3

What do the old numbers signify?

Vocabulary

Pastoral, monopolized, improvised, atavism, notorious, renounce, liberation, subservience, lamented, exploited, antiquity, extermination, constitute, messianic, omnivorous, linguistics.

The Death of Schillinger

Summary

In the story “The Death of Schillinger,” Schillinger is a chief commanding officer who rules labor sector D with an iron fist. The men of the narrator’s bunk learn that Schillinger has been killed in unusual circumstances. It is a Sonderkommando foreman who tells the men about a restless transport coming into the camp. The Polish Jews know what is going to happen to them. The foreman believes everything would have gone well if Schillinger hadn’t taken a fancy to one of the women. He tries to take her hand but she scoops up gravel and throws it into his face. In pain, Schillinger drops his revolver. The woman picks it up and shoots Schillinger in the stomach. She also shoots the chief, wounding him in the face. The men manage to get the inmates into the gas chambers even though they turn on them. After the Polish Jews are killed, they pick up Schillinger, who doesn’t understand what he has done wrong. The foreman calls Schillinger’s disbelief an irony. The narrator notes the same irony when this same foreman tries to escape after he learns he is about to be killed. He is caught by the S.S. and killed.

Analysis

In this story, a camp commander with an iron fist is killed because of his inability to keep his hands off the women. He brags about the people he has killed in the past. As he is watching a transport of people being unloaded and taken to the gas chambers, Schillinger breaks one of the unspoken laws of dealing with the prisoners by touching one of the women. When the woman shoots him, using his own revolver, Schillinger cannot believe that he has been injured. He doesn’t seem to understand what he has done to deserve the pain he is feeling. It is almost as if he believes he was better than all of the Jews he has killed and injured in the past. Tadek and the Sonderkommando with whom he discusses the death of Schillinger agree it is ironic that Schillinger never realized his death was coming. Tadek adds an additional irony when he notes at the end of this story that the Sonderkommando with whom he discussed the irony of Schillinger’s disbelief that his time of death had come, runs from the camp when he learns his own “liquidation” is coming. Tadek writes that, as expected, this man and all those who participated in the revolt are tracked down and killed.

Discussion Question 1

What is the irony in the way that Schillinger dies?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that the people in the story express their disbelief when their time for death comes?

Discussion Question 3

Why are the men in this particular transport unusually restless?

Vocabulary

Vigilance, allegedly.

The Man With The Package

Summary

In the story "The Man with the Package," the Schreiber is marked for the gas chambers after he gets sick with the flu. Before he is transferred to Block 14, the men notice the Schreiber tying up a package with string. The Block Elder gives him a blanket and hands him his sandals before he is escorted to Block 14. Outside this block, however, the men take away the blanket and the sandals, leaving him wearing only his nightshirt. The narrator later sees the men as they are being led to the crematoria. The Schreiber is still carrying his package. The narrator comments that the man should know better. He will not be allowed to keep the package. He should give it to someone else. He indicates he would have done so in that situation. The doctor, who is also watching, says he might do the same as the man. The story concludes with the narrator mentioning that the Jews sent to the crematoria were singing a Hebrew song which was moving even though no one understood the words.

Analysis

Hope seems to be the theme of this short story. The sick man clings to hope even on his way to the gas chamber. The package the man clings to even as he goes to his death represents his hope. His act of keeping the package instead of giving it to someone else seems to indicate he believes something might happen at the last minute to stop his death. Hope is additionally illustrated by the Hebrew songs, probably hymns, that the Jews sing as they are taken to the gas chambers. Even though they are at the point of death because of their beliefs, the Jews are still singing about their faith.

Discussion Question 1

What does the package in this story represent?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the doctor in the story believe he might act as the man with the package does?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Tadek believe the man with the package's actions are silly?

Vocabulary

Escorted, laboriously.

The Supper

Summary

In the story "The Supper," the narrator tells the story of a cold evening when the men's hunger is becoming worse and worse. A group of twenty Russians is brought out and lined up in front of the waiting men. Because they are communists, the men are to be punished. A young Block Elder has already told the men they will not get any supper that evening. A line of S.S. men steps forward and shoots the Russians. The following day a Muslimized Jew tells the narrator that brains are so tender they can be eaten raw.

Analysis

The men in the concentration camps are so hungry that they are reduced to cannibalism. It is almost as if the leaders in the camp are seeing how far they can push the men before they break and go against their own moral code. The men are already hungry and it is cold, which intensifies the misery of hunger. They have been told they will not be getting any dinner. When the Russians are killed in front of the hungry men, they do what they have to do, by becoming cannibals, to keep themselves alive.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the leaders of the concentration camp manipulate the prisoners?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss this story in light of Becker's statement in the story "A Day in Harmenz." "Real hunger is when one man regards another man as something to eat."

Discussion Question 3

Considering that cannibalism is immoral, are the prisoners more or less immoral than the people who are forcing them to resort to cannibalism? How should it be determined in this situation what is and what isn't moral?

Vocabulary

Permeated, waft, guttural, retinue.

A True Story

Summary

In the story “A True Story,” the narrator lies on a rough straw mattress in the hospital and believes he is going to die. He daydreams of cold water. In the bed next to him, Kapo Kwasniak has half of an apple, a piece of bread, and a cup of coffee. Every time he hears Tadek move, the man demands that he tell him a story. He wants to hear stories from Tadek’s own life. Tadek tells the man the story of a boy with a Bible. The men try to get the boy to admit he was a Jew but the boy will not do so. His name is Zbigniew Namokel. The Kapo tells Tadek the story is not true as the boy had been in the bed next to him with typhoid fever. The Kapo claims the boy died in the bed in which Tadek is now lying. The Kapo gives Tadek his coffee and asks him not to tell any more stories.

Analysis

In this short story Tadek remembers suffering with typhoid fever during his time in the concentration camp. He believes he will die as he suffers with thirst on a hard mattress, proof even sick patients were not taken care of well in the camps. A man in the bed next to Tadek makes matters worse by expecting Tadek to entertain him with stories. Notice also in this section the practice among those in the concentration camps of reading the Bible so that they appear not to be Jewish.

Discussion Question 1

What does the reader learn about the hospital in the concentration camp in this story?

Discussion Question 2

What is its significance of reading the Bible in the concentration camp?

Discussion Question 3

What are the differences between Tadek and the man next to him in the hospital?

Vocabulary

Detested, nostalgic.

Silence

Summary

In the story "Silence," a man is caught in the German barracks and dragged into a dark alley. An American officer with an interpreter catches the attention of the men as they prepare food in their barracks. The American tells them that although they must feel hate for their tormentors, they are not to take the law into their own hands. He tries to convince them the S.S. men will be made to pay for their crimes. Two of the men mutter against what the man is saying. One, however, tells them they should listen to the American. The guard tells the men they should pass any criminals over to the camp guards and be patient. After the American has visited all of the barracks and has left the camp, the men of Tadek's barrack pull a man off his bunk and trample him to death.

Analysis

Since the men of the camp have taken so much ill treatment, they are not willing to wait for justice to come even when they are promised it by the American guards. After remaining silent when the Americans ask for names of the guilty parties, they take justice into their own hands. The story is an example of inner barrack relations where the inmates policed themselves, often in ways that went against the law, to avoid turning to any other parties to help them out.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the men decide to kill the man in their barracks?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think happened to the first man who was killed?

Discussion Question 3

Why do the men not trust the American?

Vocabulary

Pilfered.

The January Offensive

Summary

In the story "The January Offensive," Tadek tells of the trouble that he and others had adjusting to life as free men outside of the concentration camp. He describes the way the men were isolated in military barracks through the summer after their liberation. They try to find any way possible to get out of the barracks. Tadek and three of his friends are able to get an apartment vacated by a Nazi.

In the second section of this story, the men first begin searching for their friends and family members. Out of curiosity, they invite the Polish poet, his wife and mistress to stay with them at their apartment. They argue with the poet considering the effects of the war on the morality of men. They believe that once a man has had to commit crimes in order to save himself, he will begin to commit crimes for more and more trivial reasons. After the men explain to the poet that in many ways the world as a whole is like a concentration camp with the strong and rich having the benefit over the weak and unwilling, the poet tells a story.

In the third section, the poet tells that the Soviet armies were advancing to the Oder River. The poet and his family are living in an apartment in the hospital. They are among those who watch as the soldiers march across the city. Tanks and trucks move through as well. Any Germans found are taken prisoner. The hospital prepares to take care of the wounded. A nurse rushes in and informs the doctor there is a situation he will have to take care of himself. A female Russian soldier is having a baby. She asks the doctor if there is a place she can deliver. After she gives birth, the girl rests for a day but the following day she dresses in her uniform and rolls the baby in a sheet. She ties the baby to her and takes off for Berlin.

In the fourth section, the men and poet drink a toast to the Russian girl. They decide the story is not really true as a pregnant woman marching with an army and carrying a gun would put others in danger. The mistress poses the question if it is better for a person to stay in the ghetto and make counterfeit money or escape to save his life. Tadek indicates he admires the women saying that they would not make fake money. The mistress tells him that she was one who crossed over and hid in a friend's sofa to escape persecution.

In the fifth section, when the poet leaves, he takes messages back to the friends and family of the four men. In the spring, two of the friends return to Poland. One now studies architecture and wants to rebuild Polish buildings. One has found and married his girlfriend who survived the concentration camp. The leader of the group has moved to Boston. The fourth joins the Polish army. He learns the girl he left pregnant, as well as her baby, was saved by the January Offensive.

Analysis

This story details the post concentration camp struggles the inmates face. They have no place to live and have often lost connection with friends and family. In this particular story, Tadek writes about he and three friends who are lucky enough to be able to get out of military barracks into an apartment. As they try to readjust to life outside the work camps, they debate the idea that now they have been in a position where they've had to commit crimes in order to keep themselves alive, they will continue to commit crimes.

The poet who lives with the men tells a story hoping to prove to them that not all people are selfish and self-centered. The story is of a Russian girl who is pregnant during her stint in the military. Her work in the January Offensive is put on hold because she stops at a hospital to have her baby. The doctor indicates his belief that the girl will not continue her work with the Russian military but she takes only one day to rest, then bundles the baby up and packs it on her back as she makes her way to join her troop. Although the men believe this is not a true story, one of them later learns that his own wife and baby are saved through the work of the Russians who took part in the march in the January Offensive. Even though there might not have been a pregnant woman who sacrificed her safety for that man's wife and baby, there were other people willing to put themselves in harm's way so that those imprisoned might be saved.

Discussion Question 1

What does the pregnant Russian woman symbolize?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it fortunate that Tadek and his friends are able to find an apartment in which to live?

Discussion Question 3

What is the consensus on the issue of morality the roommates discuss? Is it okay for them to act immorally because of the way they have been forced to act in the concentration camps?

Vocabulary

Philologist, obstinate, bourgeoisie, endowed, macabre, exploitation, deluge, dyke, inertia, armaments.

A Visit

Summary

In “A Visit” the narrator thinks back over the people that he saw and met while at the concentration camp. The first night he writes of walking in line with others including a girl that was once his. A man falls from the train, then gets up and wraps his arms around another man, calling him brother. Another man, thought to be dead, kicks when people begin trying to take his boots. He sees the men working with their axes and the women building dams and selling themselves for food. The people who are taken to the gas chambers beg those who watch them go to remember how things were. As he tries to write, the narrator thinks of the way that he has never been able to vision himself in the concentration camp. He has been told that he has a concentration camp mentality. At the conclusion of the story, he thinks of the way that it was to him that the man who fell off the train — now a prosperous bar owner — referred as his “brother.”

Analysis

This story focuses on the way that the narrator has not been able to vision himself as prisoner at a concentration camp. It is not until the end of the story that he is able to admit that he is the person whom the man who fell from the train called “brother.” Tadek does not think of himself as having any relationship to the people who were taken to the camp because they were Jewish.

It is assumed that the night that he writes about at the first of the story is the night that he came to the concentration camp. He notes that a girl “who had once been mine” was with them, probably referring to a girl he once dated, perhaps even the recipient of the letter that make up the story “Auschwitz, Our Home.” Later in the story he notes he saw this same girl with running sores and a shaven head, the sores were a consequence of living in the concentration camps too long while the shaven head was one more of the ways that the German soldiers belittled the prisoners. This is a visit of the facility through the writer’s memory.

Discussion Question 1

What is Tadek “visiting” in this story?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Tadek seem to have so much trouble recognizing that he was a prisoner in a concentration camp?

Discussion Question 3

What effect does the sight of his former girlfriend in the concentration camp have on Tadek?

Vocabulary

Invigorating.

The World of Stone

Summary

The writer spends his day walking among the poor people, collecting what is owed to him from the government, then walking back home before he spends part of his evening looking out his window over his neighborhood. He steels himself to dredge up some feelings of compassion for the people he meets in the world as he sits down with the intention of writing a great epic book.

Analysis

In this chapter, it appears that the narrator and the writer of the novel are the same person. It appears that the epic book he intends to write at the end of the chapter is this book. He is obviously trying to make sense of his life after the war and his imprisonment in the concentration camp. He walks through the poorer parts of town trying to find some sympathy for the people who move around him. He says as he walks into what is assumed to be some sort of governmental building that is being renovated that he asks too nicely for too little. This indicates that he feels that he has an entitlement for more than the government is willing to give him for what he has been through.

Discussion Question 1

With what does Tadek struggle now that he has returned to “normal” life?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Tadek feel he is entitled to government reimbursement for what he has gone through in the concentration camp?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Tadek wrote his great epic work? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Coagulated, parapet, tubercular, exorbitant.

Characters

Narrator

Tadeusz “Tadek” Borowski is the narrator and author of the stories. He uses the book to tell about his experiences as a work prisoner Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp. He starts out as a worker who unloads new prisoners when they first arrive at the camp. In this position, he sees the horrid treatment these prisoners are given as they are transported in cattle cars packed so tightly that some people are trampled to death. He sees family members separated from one another, their belongings taken from them and some of them taken immediately to the gas chambers. During his time in Auschwitz, Tadek is given the opportunity to train as an orderly in the hospital, a job not as labor intensive as being a transport worker.

Tadek’s work is timeless as he was a writer and scholar before he was ever taken into the camp. He views the cruelties that take place in the camp and writes not only about what happens in the camp, but gives his opinions of what is happening. He has additionally written stories after he has been released from the camp, three of which are included in this novel. These stories describe the cynicism with which he views the world after he has seen how terribly cruel humans can be to one another. At one point, he indicates he is told that by a young friend who says he has a “concentration camp mentality.” More than anything, Tadek seems shocked by the part he has played in the death of so many people. Although he was not there by choice, he did nothing to save any of the people, but instead treated them in some cases, with the same inhumanity that concentration camp leaders.

Becker

Becker is a character in the story “A Day at Harmenz.” Becker is a Jew who chides Tadek for not getting food for them from Mrs. Haneczka when she asks if he is hungry. In response to Becker’s nagging, Tadek reminds Becker how he knows that he had members of his own family killed for stealing food. Tadek’s relationship with Becker is intriguing as Tadek first tells Becker he hopes he will be chosen for the selection, then feels guilty because he believes he has somehow brought about the selection for which Becker is sentenced to die. In the ending section of “A Day at Harmenz” Becker asks Tadek for some food, which Tadek gives him.

First Sergeant Schillinger

First Sergeant Schillinger is the main character in the story “The Death of Schillinger.” He is described as a cruel man who brags about the record of people he has sent to their deaths. When the end of his life comes, however, Schillinger cannot believe he has done anything worthy of death. In the story that Tadek hears of Schillinger’s death, Schillinger puts his hands on a Jewish prisoner, apparently with the intention of keeping



her for himself. She is quick, however, and catches him unaware by throwing gravel in his eyes then stealing his gun. She shoots him with his own pistol. Even with his reputation of cruelty, Schillinger cannot understand what he has done to deserve to die.

Zbigniew Namokel

The boy with the Bible, Zbigniew Namokel, is a character in the tale “A True Story.” His is the one who is said to have died in the hospital bed in which Tadek lies in the story. He is also mentioned in the story “Auschwitz, Our Home” as the boy who allowed Tadek to write a poem, a message to those outside, in the back of his Bible.

Kapo Kwasniak

Kapo Kwasniak is a character in “A True Story.” He is the man who inhabits the bed next to Tadek in the hospital. He pressures Tadek to entertain him with stories even though Tadek feels as if he is about to die of his illness.

The Doctor

The doctor is a significant character in the story “The Man with the Package.” He tries to explain to Tadek how he might act just like the man who bundled his belongings and took them with him to the gas chambers. He reasons that holding onto the package is like holding onto the hope that something might happen at the last minute to change his situation.

Mirka

Mirka is a character in the story, “The People Who Walked On.” She finds a sick child and hides it in her shack, calling Tadek and his friends to see if they can help save the child. Mirka wants to save the child, not only from its sickness but also from going to the gas chambers. Tadek walks away from the woman and child, seeming to indicate nothing can be done for her. Mirka’s actions make him think of the way that he, too, would like a child one day.

Girl with the Blonde Hair

The Girl with the blonde hair is a character in the story “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen.” Her name and her fate are never known but Tadek suspects she will be killed eventually. Her death will either come immediately, he believes or she will be taken into the camps, her head shaved, then she will be killed later. This character is significant because she represents beauty in an otherwise ugly place.

Andrei

Andrei is a character from the story “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen.” He is a work detail man in Tadek’s group who hits and chokes a woman who tries to deny that the child running after her is her own. He is praised by the SS for the inhumane way he handles the situation.

Symbols and Symbolism

Cyclone B Solution

Cyclone B solution is used to delouse clothes and also kill prisoners in the Auschwitz gas chambers. This solution is first mentioned in the story "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen."

Kommando

The Kommando is a term used to refer to the prisoners of the camp who are on the work detail. The Kommando are first mentioned in the story "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen."

A Red Cross Van

Ironically, it is this van for the Red Cross, a group that usually provides assistance to people in times of need, that carries the gas that will be used to kill the people in the gas chambers. This van appears in the story "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen."

Soap

This soap, called Warsaw soap, has the cameo of King Sigismund imprinted on it. Ivan steals this soap from the narrator and gives it to Mrs. Haneczka in the story "A Day at Harnenz."

Old Numbers

Old numbers are significant symbols in the story "Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter)." These old numbers are important because they can help to identify the prisoners who have been in the concentration camps the longest.

Schillinger's Revolver

In the story "The Death of Schillinger" a woman, whom Schillinger tries to molest, uses his gun to shoot him.

A Package

In the story "The Man with the Package" the package symbolizes a man's hope that his life is not really over. Even though he knows he has been condemned to the gas

chambers, he neatly packages his things together so that he can carry them with him. It seems that he believes he needs to keep his things with him until the last minute as something might change and he might be freed.

A Copy of the Bible

A copy of the Bible is an object found in the story “A True Story.” Jews in the concentration camps would often read Bibles in an attempt to prove they were not really Jewish.

Settings

Auschwitz

Auschwitz is the concentration camp in which Tadek is being held prisoner. It is at this camp that his stories “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen,” “A Day at Harmenz,” “The People Who Walked On,” “Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter),” “The Death of Schillinger,” “The Man with the Package,” “The Supper,” and “A True Story” take place.

Frauen Konzentration Lager

The Frauen Konzentration Lager, abbreviated F.K.L., is the name of the women’s portion of the concentration camp. Tadek first speaks of the F.K.L. in the story “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen” when he mentions he and the other men can see the women being deloused in this area of the camp from their barracks.

Harmenz

Harmenz was a portion of the concentration camp Auschwitz. It is the setting of Tadek’s story “A Day at Harmenz” where he describes the conditions of the work camp and the things that took place there.

The Ramp

The ramp is the name of the train station where new prisoners of the concentration camp are unloaded when they arrive. Tadek is one of the work prisoners assigned to work the ramp — unloading prisoners, washing out cattle cars and taking the Jews’ belongings — in the first story in the book.

The Hospital

The Hospital, the Krankenbau, in the concentration camp is the setting for the tale “A True Story.” It is in this hospital that Tadek feels certain that he is dying of typhoid fever yet he is tormented by his bunkmate who wants Tadek to entertain him with stories of his life. This is the same hospital in which Tadek is working when he watches the man in the story “The Man with the Package” try to take his belongings with him to his death.

Themes and Motifs

Justice Within the Camp

In the title story it is noted that there is a special breed of justice based on envy in the camps that when the rich and mighty fall, they fall to the very bottom. Tadek indicates the only charity that is given in the camps takes place when new prisoners are deceived about what is going to happen to them. Although it appears that Tadek does have a few friends in the camp he also seems to have just as many people who would willingly have him killed if it would benefit them. The men in the camp seem very divided in that they work against each other in their attempts to try to gain favors with those who they see as being in power. For instance, Ivan steals soap from Tadek to give to Mrs. Haneczka in exchange for food.

Food appears to be a very important commodity in the camp. Tadek writes at one point in the novel that the people who have food have power. Because he works in the portion of the camp where new prisoners are brought in, Tadek and the other men are allowed to keep any food that the new prisoners bring in with them. Tadek's mother additionally sends him food. In the camp, food can be traded for favors and other needed supplies.

The prisoners in the camp also police their own, as is shown in the story "Silence." Although the Americans step in and try to handle a situation in which a Nazi is killed, the men refuse to give the Americans any information. In fact, the man who suggests they should listen to the Americans is drug from his bunk by the other prisoners and trampled to death.

Life in a Concentration Camp

One of the unique qualities of Tadek's stories is that he is one of the few who actually survives the concentration camp to tell what life there was really like. He outlines inhumane treatment of the prisoners and cruelty of the prisoners to one another.

In Tadek's stories, he tells how the majority of prisoners, especially the Jews, are killed immediately upon coming to the camp. They are transported to the camp in overcrowded cattle cars, stripped of their belongings and family members are separated from one another. Those that are not killed immediately are forced to work long hours with little or no food. They are beaten and abused by prison guards for minor infractions and forced to live in crowded barracks. Disease is rampant in the camps with body lice infestations and typhoid fever just a few of the illnesses that Tadek mentions.

In their fight to stay alive, prisoners are cruel to one another. In one case, Tadek recounts a tale where he threatens a man whose actions he does not like by telling him he has been chosen for a coming selection. Tadek also speaks of switching cauldrons of food so his group would get more than its allotted rations. He does not feel bad about his actions as he knows other groups of prisoners do the same thing.

The Effect of the Camp on Tadek

Along with his stories about his time in the concentration camp, Tadek additionally includes some stories about his life after being released from the camp. One of his statements in the book is that a young poet friend of his tells him he has a “concentration camp mentality.” While the friend might have meant this in a joking way, it seems really true for Tadek. In his life outside the camp, he struggles to accept his identity as a camp survivor. He also struggles to rationalize the way he acted and treated others in the camp, and decide on how he should live his life now that he is free.

Although he lived, worked in and was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz, Tadek has trouble accepting that he was one of the people who was sent to the camp. He is particularly troubled by a situation that happened when he was still working on the ramp, where Jews were first brought to the camp. A man falls from the train as he tries to disembark. This same man embraces Tadek, calling him brother. Tadek does not see their relationship and refuses at first to admit they have anything in common. It is only after his release that he is able to see that he was a victim of discrimination, just as the Jews were.

Even after he is released from the camp, the sights of the camp and the memories of his actions there haunt Tadek. He remembers the way he treated prisoners unkindly, just as the Nazis did. He remembers the men forced to cannibalism because they were so hungry. He received a small stipend from the government, but feels he should have asked for more in a more forceful manner. Tadek seems particularly haunted by his inability to feel any sympathy for others, even those living in bad conditions. In his mind, even their bad conditions aren't so bad as the ones he lived in during his time in the concentration camp.

Styles

Point of View

This novel is told from the first person point of view of the author, Tadeusz Borowski. The stories are true stories detailing Tadek's time in a concentration camp during World War II. This story would not have the impact of the personal experience if it were told in any different point of view. Without this first hand look into Tadek's thoughts, his situation would not be as compelling. He thoughts as he goes about life in the camp as well his struggle with identity and place in the world after he is released from the camp are central to the focus of the novel.

The stories are told mostly through exposition; but, they do have scattered patches of dialogue as Tadek interacts with other prisoners in the camp. Some dialogue is in a language other than English, but is generally easy to understand using information in the context of the quote.

Language and Meaning

The novel is a little difficult to read not only because of the horrendous events of which Tadek writes but also because of the German references made in the novel. Most of the places and people have German names, unfamiliar to a reader who speaks English as his native language. The term Kommando, for instance, is a German word used to refer to a group of work prisoners. In some sections of dialogue the characters speak in German. While a reader must go to the Internet to get an exact translation for what the characters are saying as no translations are offered in the book, it is fairly easy using context to get an idea what the German speakers are saying without going to outside sources.

In the introduction to Borowski's collection of stories, it is noted that he is a highly educated person. In fact it is Borowski's education for which he was sent to the camp as he was found with his own poems as well as a copy of a book that was against the law to own, according to the introduction. For this reason, Borowski is able to describe his feelings, his experiences and his reactions to what goes on around him in a very precise way. While it is unfortunate for Borowski that he ended up serving time in the concentration camps, it is a great addition to literature to have his well-described stories about the way of life in these terrible circumstances.

Structure

This book is made up of a collection of short stories written about a man's experience while being held as a work prisoner in Auschwitz, a German concentration camp and his difficulty in adjusting to the world after his release from the camp. Some of the stories are as long as 44 pages while one is only 3 pages long. The longest story is "Auschwitz,

Our Home (A Letter) while the shortest is “A Visit.” Three of the stories are divided into sections, indicated by Roman numerals. These divided stories are the following: “A Day at Harmenz,” which has seven sections; “Auschwitz, Our Home (A Letter),” which has nine sections; and “The January Offensive” which has five sections.

The stories seem to be in a relatively linear order with Tadek describing his experiences in the concentration camp in the first nine stories and his time after being in the camp in the final three stories. It is, however, impossible to determine when each of these stories took place as Tadek gives very little in the way of time references in any of the stories.

In writing his stories, Tadek’s intent seems to be to describe how inhumane the treatment of prisoners was in the camps. He describes the limits to which he sees people pushed and witnesses the things they allow themselves to do in order to survive. He additionally makes the point that his time in the camp has changed the way that he feels about life and the way that he views other people.

Quotes

Around here, whoever has grub, has power.

-- Narrator ("This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" paragraph 12)

Importance: In the concentration camps, where food is often scarce, food is often used as a bargaining tool. Therefore, those who had food could use it to get what they wanted.

It is the camp law: people going to their death must be deceived to the very end.

-- Narrator ("This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" paragraph 71)

Importance: Tadek writes how the work prisoners at the concentration camps would pretend not to understand what the prisoners were asking when they questioned what was about to happen to them. Even though everyone knew the people were about to be killed, they were not to be told of their fate.

When I had nothing, I slept in peace. And now! No matter how well I wrap my packages and tie them with string and wire, someone always manages to get them.

-- Tadek ("A Day at Harmenz" paragraph 17)

Importance: Tadek complains to a lady in the camp how he slept soundly when he had nothing of worth for people to steal. Now that he has a few things to call his own, in this case soap, he is afraid to sleep because he knows people will take his things from him.

But you know Becker? I'll tell you this in parting: today there's going to be a selection in the camp. I sincerely hope that you, along with your scabs and sores, go straight to the chimney!

-- Tadek ("A Day at Harmenz" paragraph 96)

Importance: Although he doesn't really know about an upcoming selection, Tadek threatens a man that he hopes the man is chosen in the selection and goes to his death in the gas chambers.

Between two throw-ins in a soccer game, right behind my back, three thousand people had been put to death.

-- Narrator ("The People Who Walked On" paragraph 7)

Importance: This statement by the narrator demonstrates how commonplace and accepted a practice the mass murder of prisoners had become.

It was undeniable that the conditions in both Auschwitz and Birkenau were steadily improving. At the beginning, beating and killing were the rule, but later this became only sporadic.

-- Narrator ("The People Who Walked On" paragraph 63)



Importance: It is almost sarcastic the way in which Tadek indicates things in the camp are getting better. It is only when conditions have become badly inhumane that “sporadic” beatings can be considered an improvement.

Your memory retains only images. Today, as I think back on that last summer in Auschwitz, I can still see the endless, colorful procession of people solemnly walking — along both roads; the woman, her head bent forward, standing over the flaming pit; the big redheaded girl in the dark interior of the barracks, shouting impatiently: ‘Will evil be punished? I mean in human, normal terms!

-- Tadek (“The People Who Walked On” paragraph 96)

Importance: Even after he has left the concentration camp, Tadek can still see the images of the people whom he saw suffering there, wondering if they would ever get the justice they desired and deserved.

It will be up to us — the chosen ten out of Birkenau’s twenty thousand — to lower the camp’s mortality rate and raise the prisoners’ morale.

-- Tadek (“Auschwiz, Our Home” paragraph 2)

Importance: As one of a small number of orderlies at the concentration camp, Tadek and his peers are expected to tend to the 20,000 prisoners there.

Above the gates leading to the ramp, words are inscribed on metal scrolls: ‘Work makes one free.’ I suppose they believe it, the S.S. men and the German prisoners — those raised on Luther, Fichte, Hegel, Nietzsche.

-- Tadek (“Auschwiz, Our Home” paragraph 38)

Importance: Tadek mentions that he believes the Germans believe the printed word to a fault. In this case, he refers to a quote displayed in the camp that states work makes one free. Tadek knows it does not matter how hard the men work, they will probably never earn their freedom.

If I had said to you as we danced together in my room in the light of the paraffin lamp: listen, take a million people, or two million, or three, kill them in such a way that no one knows about it, not even they themselves, enslave several hundred thousand more, destroy their mutual loyalty, pit man against man, and ... surely you would have thought me mad.

-- Tadek (“Auschwiz, Our Home” paragraph 67)

Importance: Tadek suggests that under ordinary circumstances, the things the Germans were doing to the Jews were things other people would never have believed would have happen.

People on the outside know that, of course, life over here is terrible; but after all, perhaps it is not really so bad if there is a symphony orchestra, and boxing, and green little lawns, and blankets on the bunks ... But a bread ration that is not sufficient to keep you alive — is a mockery.

-- Tadek ("Auschwitz, Our Home" paragraph 76)

Importance: Tadek believes the keepers of the camp have the symphony orchestra, green lawns and activities to make it look as if life in the concentration camps is not that bad. These efforts to make the camps more livable are doubly cruel to the people living there when they are not even given enough food to eat to keep them alive.

One thing we have learned well about anatomy: at the camp you are not likely to trip if you stand on the shoulders of men who have influence.

-- Tadek ("Auschwitz, Our Home" paragraph 102)

Importance: Tadek writes of an anatomy lesson that is really not an anatomy lesson at all. He says it is quickly realized in the camp that by figuratively standing on the shoulders of those in charge prisoners or workers, in this case the orderlies, would not have problems in the camp.

I think that even if I was being led to the oven, I would still believe that something would surely happen along the way. Holding a package would be a little like holding somebody's hand, you see.

-- The doctor ("The Man with the Package" paragraph 17)

Importance: The doctor overseeing the ward in which Tadek is working tries to explain to Tadek why a man's actions of hanging onto his package of belongings is not necessarily strange. The doctor says he might do the same with the hope that something might happen at the last minute to stop his death.

We told them with much relish all about our difficult, patient, concentration-camp existence which had taught us that the whole world is really like the concentration-camp; the weak work for the strong, and if they have no strength or will to work — then let them steal, or let them die.

-- Tadek ("The January Offensive" paragraph 12)

Importance: Tadek leaves the concentration camp with the mentality that all of life is like a concentration camp. People must either work willingly for those who have money and power or if they are unable to work, they are left to die.

I sit in someone else's room, among books that are not mine, and, as I write about the sky, and the men and women I have seen, I am troubled by one persistent thought — that I have never been able to look also at myself. A certain young poet, a symbolic-realist, says with flippant sarcasm that I have a concentration-camp mentality.

-- Tadek ("A Visit" paragraph 9)

Importance: Tadek feels like a stranger in his own life after he has left the concentration camp. He feels he is not able to look honestly at himself to accept the things he has done and been forced to do while in the camp.



And since today the world has not yet blown away, I take out fresh paper, arrange it neatly on the desk, and closing my eyes try to find within me a tender feeling for the workmen hammering the rails, for the peasant women with their ersatz sour cream, the trains full of merchandise, the fading sky above the ruins, for the passers-by on the street below and the newly installed windows, and even for my wife who is washing dishes in the kitchen alcove; and with a tremendous intellectual effort I attempt to grasp the true significance of the events, things and people I have seen. For I intend to write a great, immortal epic, worthy of this unchanging, difficult world chiseled out of stone.
-- Tadek ("The World of Stone" paragraph 7)

Importance: After being released from the camp, Tadek describes the difficulty he has in trying to write about the world around him.