An Excursion to a Museum

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A crowd is headed from the railway station to the museum--men in woollen coats, girls in colourful sweaters and tight pants, women with young children. They carry baskets of food, yellow leather briefcases, and photographic equipment. The men wear elegant thick-soled shoes with white-thread trimming. The crisp October sky is clear. The wind swirls around dry leaves as the crowds stream past the long blocks of buildings. The windows are open. Some children are playing in sandboxes, while others ride bicycles, amuse themselves on swings, or play tag. Some fruit stands are not far from the buildings, and a sign reads, ‘Attended Parking.’ A red bus just in from the city disgorges another group of people. The museum buildings, adorned with landscaped gardens, are visible through the trees. Colourful benches have been set under the poplar trees; bright red flowers blaze through the darkening grass. One-story brick houses, encircled by wire fences, show through the bushes. An elderly woman is sitting near one of the tables, on which she has arranged museum brochures, guidebooks, and photo albums.

‘Interesting reading. Buy one, Mister. You can’t stop readin’. Everythin’ you wanna know! Deportations, transports, all about torture and how they burned peoples’ bodies. All sortsa descriptions. It’s worth the money!’

The old crone keeps hyping her merchandise, but there are no buyers.

In an open field to the right of the first block, people eating plums and sandwiches, or just enjoying a bit of sun, meander among the display cases containing the pictures of the hangmen.

‘Sir, where are the gallows?’

‘Look! Here it is! This is where he was hanged, and the palace he lived in used to be over there.’

The crowd pauses at the gallows, a huge wooden chest with a cover consisting of two parts. The cover is raised, exposing two wings suspended on two rusty hinges. Two poles rising out of the chest are attached by a board at a slant. A rusted hook is sticking out of the board. Adults and children stare into the wooden chest. The earth around the gallows is overgrown with weeds and littered with scraps of paper, pieces of half-eaten fruit, and empty cigarette packs. A man standing behind a group of children sounds off in a resonant voice. He could be speaking to himself or to the world at large:

‘I’d string him up, to within an inch of his life, then I’d string him up again, and again--five times, till the bastard croaked.’

‘Let’s get out of here,’ urges a woman in grey pants. ‘The movie’s about to start.’

The door of the block opens and the people start pushing through a narrow corridor.

‘Is it worth going in there?’

‘It’s worth it.’

‘Whatta they showin’?’

‘Ah, all sorts of things.’

‘Let us out. People are shoving.’

‘Aren’t you shoving yourself, Missy?’ a man asks.
In the small auditorium where the film is being shown, children are shifting boisterously from chair to chair because the adults are obstructing their view.

‘Can you see anything?’ a concerned father asks his son. ‘You won’t be able to see a thing from here. Go up front, where granny is sitting.’

The windows are covered by green shades as the first black and white images appear on the screen. Prisoners. Corpses. Nurses. The living dead. Another large pile of corpses. Children, nurses, doctors, Russian soldiers. The pictures flicker. The movie is ending. The door of the block opens, and squinting people emerge into the light. They walk down the empty lanes as other guides lead new groups of visitors around the camp. The visitors are gathered around one of the guides, who is lecturing them:

‘I must tell you that very often groups of visitors behave so that they have to be reminded where they are. The females usually conduct themselves decently, but the males are quite unruly. They play and laugh. That’s what our young people are like. They don’t understand that war is serious business. Please step closer.’

‘Where’s the hair? They say you’ve got hair here. I don’t see any hair.’

‘Ignace, do you know where they keep the hair and the artificial limbs?’

‘What do you want with hair and artificial limbs? Ten years ago, the last time I was here, the place was loaded. It was overflowing.’

‘They stood right on this spot, and this hut probably used to be a guardhouse. Let’s go. Let’s find the gallows.’

The young boy in the navy blue suit grimaces as he follows his mother.

‘Mommy, there’s nothing here. What kind of a museum is this, anyway? I want to get out of here. When are we leaving?’

‘You see, my dear ladies and gentlemen,’ the guide explains, ‘this is the gallows where ten prisoners were hanged all at the same time. Once, when they were trying to hang a young man, the rope snapped. So they tried a second time and the rope snapped again. But finally he was hanged, anyway. Everyone knows there is a universal law that when the rope snaps, the prisoner is given a reprieve. But the Nazis hanged this young man for the third time, in defiance of all civilized rules. You must be aware of the character and behaviour of the Teuton Crusaders, who were so beautifully described by Sienkiewicz in Kryzacy (The Crusaders) and by Kraszewski in Stara Basn (An Ancient Tale). Now, let’s go on.’

Leading his group further into the depths of the museum, the guide goes on with his lecture.

‘Sometimes, in the dead of night, my dear ladies and gentlemen, I find myself steeped in thought. I start making all sorts of calculations. Four million people were exterminated here, so I start estimating that if you were to pile the corpses one on top of another they would reach all the way to the celestial spheres. But if you were to lay them side by side . . .’

‘Be quiet, and listen to what the man is saying . . .’

‘Now, we’re going to walk through the gate and tour the entire museum. You will see everything there is to see, and I will tell you everything you ought to know. You won’t miss a thing, except that there is not much that remains here now. But what there is, is symbolic. Take, for example, the few Jewish prayer shawls hanging in this hall. The older people know what the Jews used to look like while they were at prayer. They would put on those shawls and place little black boxes on their heads. As we know, Hitler
murdered the Jews. Now, there are almost no Jews left in Poland, so the young people can’t see such things any more. We are planning to put a barrack up over there, to the right, that will look just like the ones in the women’s camp in Brzezinka (Birkenau), where we will be going later on, so that we can see everything. And now please follow me in single file.’

‘Grazynka, Grazynka, come here. Come here to mother. Sir, take us to the other block. My old man was there already and said that everything is still there.’

‘If that’s what you want, why don’t you go there, Ma’am?’

‘I don’t like going by myself, and anyway, I’m afraid. Grazynka, come to mother. Do you want some chocolate? Are you through dawdling?’

‘Mommy, where is that movie?’

‘We’ll see the movie later. Mr. Joseph, why don’t you tell us what happened, because this guide is just spouting everything from a book, but you saw everything, and you know all about it.’

‘What can I tell you, Ma’am? Those trees weren’t here in those days. The land then was flat and bare. When the transport arrived, we were received politely and efficiently. I didn’t see any children here. There were no children. I don’t know if there was any gold here. Everyone who came here had to give up everything he owned, and a list was kept of everyone’s belongings. When someone left, everything was returned: a suit, a shirt, and other personal effects. They were even all washed and ironed. But the belongings of those who didn’t leave remained here. That’s it! So, tell me, Ma’am, do you think anybody was taking pictures? Nobody took such pictures here. Now everything is neatly arranged. Do you think that when a person died they took a picture of him?’

‘Mr. Joseph, they said that the women’s hair would be here. But there’s nothing here.’

‘You’re looking for the hair? It must be around here somewhere.’

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ the guide continues, ‘as we all know, the Nazis also exterminated cripples and invalids who were left from the First World War, so they wouldn’t have to pay them a pension. They were a drag on the state because they weren’t able to work. Sixteen thousand of them were burned in this place alone.’

‘Ignace, come here. Hurry up! Here are the artificial limbs. My God! Did a human being actually wear this iron bar? Isn’t this a dainty lady’s leg!’

Young Ignace says teasingly, ‘Let’s keep going. Mommy, why are there so many artificial limbs here? What are they all doing here? Whose legs are these?’

‘What foolish questions!’

The guide, a former prisoner in the camp, conveys precise and accurate information. He gives a detailed account of the numbers, the weight of the clothes, the exact amount of women’s hair, the thousands of shaving brushes and bowls, the millions of burned bodies. He leavens this information with philosophical remarks, moralistic comments, aphorisms of his own, and quotations from learned papers. His purpose in all this is to bring the visitor into close contact with the ‘Hell’ enclosed behind the gates of the museum. Doing his best to make the museum come alive, he emphasizes that whatever is to be found here now is but a tiny fragment of what once used to be here, and that it is impossible to describe what actually took place on these grounds. It was Hell, pure and simple!’
‘What happened,’ the guide tells his audience, ‘surpasses the limits of the human imagination. It can’t be described in words. You must try to imagine it for yourselves.’

‘When are we going to Brzezinka? Is it far?’ asks Ignace.

‘It’s two kilometres,’ Mother answers. ‘What went on there is really awful. There’s nothing left in Brzezinka. Nothing, but nothing. I don’t even know if there’s any point going there. I can’t bear to look at the children’s clothes. But the pacifiers . . . I think the pacifiers were put there later . . . just as a display. Nobody is going to tell me that those pacifiers have been lying there all these years. A pacifier is made of rubber, and rubber decays. They’ve arranged it so that spectators will be able to imagine what happened here as they walk by. There’s a lot of German writing on the valises. German names. Did you see that, Ignace? The Germans used to bring their prisoners here. Those baskets look brand new. The Hungarian pavilion is very modest.’

‘You know, Ma’am, I can’t understand how people live here. . . .”

‘Where?’

‘They probably live in some of the old blocks. Didn’t you notice all those little kids in carriages? They’re playing near the walls . . . I can’t stop wondering how they can live here.’

‘So what’s the big deal. A human being can get used to anything. He can live here just as well as anywhere else. And what’s the difference if people live in a cemetery?’

‘You’re right. But I just couldn’t do it. I feel too much pity for those gassed children.’

‘Guide, where’s the hall where they did the experiments on women?’

‘There’s nothing there but empty halls. Anyway, I think it’s all closed now.’

‘Gather ’round, so everyone can hear what I’m saying. Please come closer. If you look carefully you can see it resembles a wooden chapel. At times it looks like a roadside stand. We call this hut ‘Kaduk’s Chapel.’ Kaduk was Rapportführer Oswald Kaduk. [A Rapportführer was an official in the Concentration Camp system who commanded several Blockführer who oversaw order within individual prisoner barracks.] That was his name, and he might have been of Polish descent, because you don’t find names like that among the Germans. That was the name of the sadist who tortured prisoners. He forced them to build this hut for him so that he could get out of the rain during the long hours of the appel (roll call).’

A young girl calls out, ‘There’s a bell inside. I see the bell.’

‘So what if you see a bell,’ says her friend. ‘There are lots of them.’

‘That bell, my esteemed ladies and gentlemen, called the prisoners to roll call, and was probably stolen from some church. Please follow me further. . . .’

‘What used to go on here! The prisoners stood here, out in the open, while he sat in his little hut.’

‘Where did the orchestra stand? If you please, Sir, where were the musicians who were playing the music?’

‘Let’s get to the wall of death.’

‘Please stay together. Please don’t wander off, because then you won’t be able to hear my explanation.’

‘He’s right. You can’t just wander around here helter skelter. You need someone to explain. Take this death block, for example. I see the windows are all boarded up. So what does that mean? Somebody has to explain the whole thing and show you exactly
what happened here. There was no way you would have been able to get out of this place. The only ones here were the prisoners and the Death’s Head SS Men. . . .

‘Tell me, what are the quilts doing lying here?’
‘Where? What quilts?’
‘This is the kind of thing that went on here. You can see it in the photo. The dead bodies lay in this hall, on the cement floor, covered with these quilts.’
‘The ashes, ladies and gentlemen, were taken out in carts and dumped in the rivers Sola and Vistula. In Majdanek, for instance, the ashes were buried, and later they were found, but here the ashes were carried away by the flowing waters.’
‘Daddy, why did they keep these people here?’
‘Be quiet.’
‘Did they lock them up in this bunker to punish them?’
‘They locked them up in here when they didn’t behave themselves. If you don’t behave, they’ll lock you up in there too,’ the father tells his young daughter.
‘Mommy, look! The word Block is written there.’

Leaves drop from the trees in the slant autumn light. The insides of the blocks, which have been refurbished, are nice and clean. Pictures of the dead and the slaughtered hang on one of the walls of the block. Women. And men. Faces. The pictures hang in a dusky corridor. They stare blankly day and night. But at night, when there are no people in the museum, their faces exude a suffering that no longer exists in the museum itself. The large hall is partitioned by a glass wall. A mountain of old boots. Another mountain of mouldy skins resembling a dinosaur who died in prehistoric times and has just been excavated into the light of day. Mountains of brushes, little brushes, shaving brushes.

‘There is so much to see, my dear Madame.’
‘I thought that all of this stuff lying on the tables would be on the floor. What’s the point of all these old brushes lying around here? Instead of good ones, all of them are beat up and worn out. What is it--did people take the best things with them?’
‘Look! Who’s interested in a coarse brush like that, all worn out. It’s a disgrace that it should even be lying here.’
‘You’ve got to understand how many years this stuff has been lying around. Everything is different. I think that . . .’

‘Here are the bunkers where people were punished. All sorts of things went on in these isolation bunkers. There’s a story that makes the rounds that on one occasion after the bunker was opened, a corpse was observed lying on the floor, and next to it, in a half sitting position, was another, holding on to his friend’s torn-out liver. He died while he was eating it. Here, you can see all sorts of signs and inscriptions. But at the time the reality appeared completely different: ‘Es gibt einen Weg zur Freiheit, seine Meilensteine heissen: Gehorsam, Fleiss, Ordnung, Ehrlichkeit, Sauberkeit, Wahrhaftigkeit, Opfersinn und Liebe zu Vaterland’ (There is one path to freedom, whose milestones are called obedience, diligence, order, honesty, cleanliness, truthfulness, self-sacrifice, and love of the Fatherland).

That floor of this block has been removed and it is now possible to see a variety of dishes that has been left behind.
‘What is this? Bowls, pans, even a chamber pot. Take a look, Ma’am.’
‘This is just a fraction. There were lots of them. Let’s go outside. It’s getting chilly in here. It’s warmer outside.’
‘Please leave on the right and wait in front of the building. Otherwise, there won’t be any order, and I won’t be able to explain to you what you’re seeing.’

‘What did they do here?’

‘They took their clothes off before being shot. They went out this way to be shot. I can imagine how soaked in blood this place is. We are treading on the blood of the tortured.’

‘Mommy, look! There are still two bullet holes in the wall.’

‘No. This was put up after the war. The iron gate was also put in later. There was only a wooden gate. We still have an hour. Buy yourselves some of those interesting books. They make good reading. Everything is described: deportation, transports, and burnings. There are lots of pictures to look at. You can cry your eyes out when you read those descriptions.’

The people walk toward the exit.

‘We still have to do the crematorium. It was rebuilt on the ruins of the real one, which was blown up.’

In the murky interior, rails, carts, and open ovens are barely visible. Lighted olive-oil lamps hang on a wall near one of the ovens. A few wilted flowers are lying there. Three young boys are walking around on the damp concrete floor. They look into the ovens, then touch the black iron doors. The light from the olive-oil lamps flickers. The boys touch the walls. They say something to each other, then burst out laughing.

A woman in a worn navy-blue jacket glares at them and says, ‘You can’t laugh here. There’s really nothing to laugh about.’

The youngsters stop laughing and leave the crematorium. To the right of the ovens is a large concrete cell without windows and with an opening in the ceiling.

‘The gas was poured in here,’ a man says to a woman. ‘The gas was poured in on them and they choked.’

‘Let’s get out of here,’ says the woman. ‘I’ve been here before, and my legs are killing me. I’ve had enough.’

Children are running around the blocks where the workers live. White curtains adorn the windows. Flowers decorate the window sills. A little girl with bows in her hair goes running home. A pregnant woman pushes a baby carriage in which a baby covered by a lacy quilt lies sleeping. The day has turned pleasantly warm. The soft wind delicately prods the branches of the poplar trees as a honey-coloured leaf floats gracefully on the gentle breeze. Double rows of barbed wire join concrete pillars honeycombed with white insulators. The space between the rows of barbed wire is empty, the earth raked clean. A teen-aged boy in tight pants is standing next to a sign that reads ‘Halt!’ His buddy is taking a picture. The sign also has a black skull and crossbones. A third boy punches his head with his fist and remarks that it is stupid to take pictures in a place like this. Once again the branches of the poplars start swaying, and leaves float through the air, alighting softly on the ground.

‘Grazynka, Grazynka, come to mommy. Here, have a piece of chocolate. Wipe your nose, and your face and hands.’

‘I’m hungry, Ma’am. I hope they’re gonna serve dinner.’

‘Ah, don’t bet on it. This whole tour has been poorly arranged. Everyone is wandering around wherever they please. They look and look and they don’t know what is going on. Okay, I see the boarded windows and the death block and the gallows. But
somebody has to describe the whole thing and explain exactly what it was like while all of this was happening. Those chimneys over there—they belong to the kitchen. They have nothing to do with the crematorium.’

‘Our train leaves in an hour. Let’s get going. Where’s Nietka?’

The electric train is waiting at the station. The people who visited the museum are seated in compartments. Little is said about the museum. In the direction of the city, smoke can be seen spewing out of large factories. A roar can be heard from the nearby stadium. Trees are silhouetted against the silver-grey autumn sky. Copper clouds stretch leisurely in the fading sunlight. Church steeples loom in the background. Old women sit along the tracks. Bony, white goats with pink udders are grazing. The sun-washed clouds flare a deep red, then quickly cool and darken. A freight train rolls by on the adjoining track.

Translated from Polish
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