This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen

Tadeusz Borowski

All of us walk around naked. Actually, we have been through the delousing, and we have got back our clothes from the tanks filled with the diluted in water cyclone which efficiently killed lice in clothing and people in the gas chamber. Only the inmates in the blocks cut off from ours by the ‘Spanish goats’ still had nothing to wear. But all the same, all of us walked around naked: the heat was unbearable. The camp has been sealed off tight. Not a single prisoner, not a single louse would dare to sneak through its gate. The Kommandos have stopped working. All day long, thousands of naked people shuffled down the roads and Appelplatz, lay against walls and on roofs. We slept on plain boards, since mattresses and blankets are being disinfected. From the rear Blocks one could see the FKL, there, too, they were delousing. Twenty-eight thousand women were stripped naked and driven out of the barracks – now they swarm around the large yard, the roads, the squares.

All morning long we wait for lunch, eat packages, visit friends. The hours go by slowly, as happens in the heat. We are without even our usual diversion, the wide roads leading to the crematoria are empty. For several days now, no new transports have come in. Part of Canada has been liquidated and detailed to a labour Kommando. They ended up on one of the hardest, on Harmenz, since they were fat and well-rested. For there exists in the camp a special brand of justice based on envy, when the rich and mighty fall their friends see to it that they fall to the very bottom. And Canada, our Canada, which, actually, smells not of maple forests but of French perfume, probably, however, there are fewer maples there than there are hidden diamonds and currency gathered from the whole of Europe here.

Several of us sit on the top bunk, lightheartedly swinging our legs. We slice the neat loaves of white, crisp, crunchy bread. It is a bit coarse to the taste, but, as a result, stays fresh for weeks. Bread, sent all the way from Warsaw – only a week ago my mother held it in her hands – dear Lord, dear Lord.

We unwrap the bacon, the onion, we open a can of evaporated milk. Henri, the fat Frenchman dreams aloud of the French wine brought by the transports from Strasbourg Paris, Marseille . . . Sweat streams down his body.

‘Listen, mon ami, next time we go up to the loading ramp, I’ll bring you real champagne. You haven’t tried it before, eh?’

‘No. But you’ll never be able to smuggle it in through the gate, so stop teasing. Why not try and organize some shoes for me instead – you know, the perforated kind, with a double sole. And I won’t mention the shirt again, which you promised long ago.

Patience, patience, when the transports come, I’ll bring you everything. We’ll be going on the ramp again!’

‘And what if there aren’t any more cremo transports?’ I say spitefully. ‘Can’t you see how much easier life is becoming in the Lager. No limit on packages, beating not allowed, you even wrote letters home. They speak in all kinds of ways about the orders, you do so yourself. Anyway, dammit, they’ll run out of people.’

‘Stop talking nonsense,’ – the lips of the corpulent, soulful, like that in Cosway’s miniatures, face of the man from Marseilles (he’s my friend, but I don’t know his name.) are stuffed full of a sardine sandwich. ‘Stop talking nonsense,’ he repeated, swallowing with
difficulty (‘it went, dammit!’) stop talking nonsense, they can’t run out of people because we’d croak in the Lager. We all live off what they bring.’
‘All? Not all. We have packages . . .’
‘You and your friend have that and ten of your colleagues, some of you Poles do, but not all of you. But what about us, and the Jews, and the Russkis? And what if we had no food, no organizing from the transports, do you think you’d be eating those packages of yours in peace? We wouldn’t let you!’
‘You would, or you’d starve to death like the Greeks. Whoever has grub in the camp, has power.’
‘Anyway you have enough, we have enough, so why argue?’
Right, there’s nothing to argue about. You have enough and I have enough, we eat together, sleep on the same bunk. Henry slices the bread, makes a tomato salad. It tastes terrific with the commissary mustard.
On the Block below us, naked, sweat-drenched men mill around down the aisle between the bunks, along the huge intelligently built stove, by the horse stable (on its door still hangs a sign that the ‘verseuchte pferde/the contaminated horses must be placed over there and there) which is being upgraded into a pleasant (gemütlich) home for over half a thousand people. They lie in eights and tens on the lower bunks, naked, withered, reeking of sweat and excrement; their cheeks are hollow.
Beneath me, at the very bottom – a rabbi: he has covered his head with a piece of rag torn off a blanket and is reading from a Hebrew prayer book (there is no shortage of this literature here), wailing loudly and monotonously.
‘Can’t somebody shut him up? He’s raving as though he’d caught God himself by the feet.’
‘I don’t feel like getting off the bunk. Let him rave, he’ll go to the chimney that much sooner.’
‘Religion is the opium of the nation, I very much like smoking opium’ – the man from Marseilles who is a Communist and a rentier adds sententiously from the left. ‘If they didn’t believe in God and the afterlife, they’d have smashed the crematoria long ago.’
‘Why haven’t you done it then?’
The question is rhetorical, but the man from Marseilles responds:
‘Idiot’ he stuffs a tomato in his mouth, and gestures as though he wants to say something, but eats and remains silent. We were just finishing our snack when there was a greater commotion at the door of the Block, the Muzulmen jumped away and scurried between the bunks, a messenger ran into the Block Elder’s shack. A moment later, the Block Elder came out majestically.
‘Canada! Antreten! But fast! A transport is coming!’
‘Great God!’ screamed Henri, jumping off the bunk.
The man from Marseilles choked on the tomato, snatched his jacket, and screamed ‘raus’ at the men sitting below, and they were already at the door. There was a scramble on the other bunks. Canada was leaving for the ramp.
‘Henri, the shoes!’ I yelled in farewell.
‘Keine Angst!’ he shouted back from outside.
I packed up the grub, tied a piece of rope around the suitcase, in which the onions and tomatoes from my father’s garden in Warsaw, lay next to the Portuguese sardines, and the bacon from Lublin’s ‘Bacutilu’ (this from my brother), mingled with the most authentic sweetmeats from
Salonika. I tied it all up, pulled on my trousers, slid off the bunk. ‘Platz!’ I yelled, pushing my way through the Greeks. They stepped aside. At the door, I bumped into Henri.

‘Allez, allez, vite, vite!’

‘Was ist los?’

‘Want to come with us on the ramp?’

‘I can go.’

‘Come along then. Take you jacket! We’re short of a few men, I’ve talked with the Kapo,’ and he shoved me out of the Block.

We stood in rows, someone marked down our numbers, someone up ahead yelled, ‘March, march,’ and we ran up to the gate, accompanied by the shouts of a multilingual throng, being pushed back with cowhides into the barracks. Not everybody can go on the ramp . . . People have been bidden farewell, we are now at the gate. Links, zwo, drei, vier! Mutzen ab!

Erect, with our arms stretched stiffly along our hips, we march past the gate briskly, smartly, almost gracefully. A sleepy SS man with a large pad in his hand drowsily checks us off, waving us ahead in groups of five.

‘Hundert!’ he called after the last one passed.

‘Stimmt!’ comes a hoarse answer from the front.

We march fast, almost at a run. A lot of guards all around, young men with automatics. We pass all sections of camp BA II: the uninhabited Lager C, the Czech, the quarantine, we pass through the pear and apple trees of the Truppenlazaret; through an unknown, moonlike green, strangely exuberant after several days of sun, we pass by some barracks, we cross the line of the great Postenkette, and, running, burst onto the highway – we have arrived. Just a few more yards – there, surrounded by trees, the ramp.

It was a pastoral ramp, as always on remote, provincial stations. A small square, framed by the green of tall trees, and paved with gravel.

At the side, beside the road squatted a tiny, wooden shed, uglier and more flimsy than the ugliest and flimsiest railway shack, farther along huge stacks of rails, train tracks, heaps of wooden beams, barracks parts, bricks, paving stones, bits of wells. This is where they load freight for Birkenau: supplies for the construction of the camp, and people for the gas chamber.

The guards are posted on the rails, on the beams, in the green shade of the Silesian chestnuts, forming a tight circle around the ramp. They wipe the sweat from their brows, sip out of their canteens. It is unbearably hot, the sun stands motionless at its zenith.

‘Fall out!’

We sit down in the narrow streaks of shade along the rails. The hungry Greeks (several of them managed to come along, devil knows how) ferret around among the rails, one of them finds some mildewed bread, half-eaten sardines. They eat. ‘Schweinedreck’ spits a tall, young guard with bushy, flaxen hair and dreamy blue eyes -- ‘For God’s sake, any minute you’ll have so much grub, you won’t be able to stuff it all down. You won’t want to for ages.’ He adjusted his gun, wiped his face with a handkerchief.

‘He’s an animal’ we all concur.

‘Hey,’ the guard’s thick boot lightly touches Henri’s neck ‘Pas mal auf, do you want a drink?’

‘Sure, but I haven’t got any marks,’ replies the Frenchman with a professional air.

‘Schade, too bad.’

‘Come, come, Herr Posten isn’t my word good enough any more?

Haven’t you done business with me? Wieviel?’
‘One hundred. *Gemacht?*

‘*Gemacht*’ – we drink the water, insipid and tasteless. It will be paid for by the people who have not yet arrived.

‘Now you be careful,’ says the Frenchman, tossing away the empty bottle. It strikes the rails and bursts into tiny fragments. ‘Don’t take any dough, they might be checking. Anyway, why the hell do you need dough. You’ve got enough to eat. Don’t take suits, either, or they’ll think you’re planning to escape. Take a shirt, but only a silk one with a collar. And a vest. And if you find something to drink, don’t bother calling me. I’ll manage. And make sure you don’t get it.’

‘They beat you?’

‘Naturally. You’ve got to have eyes in your ass.’

Around us sit the Greeks, their jaws working greedily, like huge, inhuman, insects, greedily munching on stale lumps of bread. They are restless, they don’t know what they’ll be doing. The beams and rails have them worried.

They dislike carrying heavy loads.

‘*Was wir arbeiten?*’ they ask.

‘*Niks. Transport kommen, alles Krematorium, compris?*’

‘*Alles verstehen,*’ they answer in crematorium Esperanto. They calm down: they will not be loading rails onto cars, nor carrying beams.

In the meantime, the ramp has become increasingly alive with activity, increasingly noisy. The *Vorarbeiter* were dividing groups for themselves, assigning some to the opening and unloading of the wagons which were about to arrive, others to the wooden steps and instructing them how to proceed efficiently. These were moveable, comfortable, wide steps, like an entrance to a tribunal. Cars drove up, people had to climb in . . . Motorcycles drive up with a roar, delivering SS officers, bemedalled glittering with the silver insignia of SS officers, beefy, men with highly polished boots and shiny brutal faces. Some have brought their briefcases, others hold thin, flexible whips. This gives them an air of military readiness and agility. They walked into the commissary – for that miserable barrack was their commissary, where in the summertime they drank mineral water – *Studentenquelle*, and in winter they warmed up with a glass of hot wine, they greeted each other in the state-approved way, raising an arm Roman fashion, and then cordially shook hands, smiled cordially at one another, talked about letters, about news from home, about children, showed each other photographs. Some strolled majestically on the ramp, gravel clattered, boots clattered, the silver squares on their collars glittered, and the bamboo whips snapped impatiently.

The multi-striped crowd lay against the rails in the narrow streaks of shade, breathed heavily and unevenly, spoke in its various tongues, and gazed listlessly at the majestic men in green uniforms, at the close, yet unattainable, green trees, and at the steeple of a distant church from which a belated *Angelus* had just sounded.

‘The transport is coming,’ somebody said, and everyone rose in expectation. From around the bend, the cattle cars began rolling in: the train was backing in. The conductor, standing on the break, leaned out, waved his hand, whistled. The locomotive whistled back with a shrieking noise, puffed, the train backed slowly into the station. In the tiny, barred windows could be seen peoples’ faces, pale, wilted, exhausted, terror-stricken women with tangled hair, men, who – exotically enough – had hair. They went by slowly, gazed at the station in silence, until they stopped. And then, suddenly there was a stir inside the cars and a pounding against the wooden boards.
‘Water! Air!’ rose weary, desperate cries.

People’s faces pushed through the windows, mouths gasped desperately for air. Having drawn a few breath, people disappeared from the windows, others came in their place, and then also disappeared. The cries and the moans grew ever louder.

A man in a green uniform covered with more silver than any of the others twisted his lips in annoyance. He inhaled his tobacco deeply, then with a rapid gesture threw his cigarette away, moved his briefcase from right to left, and signaled to the guard. The guard slowly took his automatic off his shoulder, aimed and sent a series of shots along the wagons. All grew quiet. Meanwhile, the truck were arriving, stools were being drawn up. The giant with the briefcase raised his hand.

‘Whoever takes gold, or anything at all besides food, will be shot for stealing Reich property. Understood? Verstanden?’

‘Jawohl!’ was screamed randomly and individually, albeit with good will. ‘Also loos! Work!’

The bolts cracked, the wagons were opened. A wave of fresh air rushed inside, hitting people as though with effluvium. People . . . inhumanly crammed, buried under incredible heaps of luggage, suitcases trunks, packages, crates, bundles of every description (everything that had been their past and was to be their future). Monstrously squeezed together, they were fainting from the heat, suffocating themselves and suffocating others. Now they gathered by the open doors, breathing like fish cast out on the sand.

‘Attention: Out and take your luggage with you! Take out everything. Put all your stuff in a pile by the wagon. Give your coats away. It is summer. March to the left. Understand?’

‘Sir, what’s going to happen to us?’ They already jumping down onto the gravel, anxious, worn out.

‘Where are you people from?’

‘Sosnowiec-Będzin. Sir, what’s going to happen to us?’ They repeat the question stubbornly, gazing into foreign, tired eyes.

‘I don’t know, I don’t understand Polish.’

It is the camp law that people going to their death must be deceived to the very end. It is the only permissible form of charity.

Tremendous heat. The sun is at its zenith, the hot sky quivers, the air vibrates, the wind which occasionally blows by, is heated, oozing, blast. Our lips are parched, in one’s mouth one feels the salty taste of blood, the body is weak and heavy from lying in the sun for a long time. A drink, oh, a drink!

A huge, multicolored wave of people loaded down with luggages, pours from the train like a blind, mad river trying to find a new bed. But before they have a chance to recover, struck by the fresh air and the scent of greenery, one snatches bundles from their hands, rips off their coats, grabs women’s handbag, and takes away umbrellas.

‘But please, sir, it’s for the sun, I cannot . . .’

‘Verboten!’ one barks through one’s teeth, hissing loudly.

Behind our back stands an SS man, calm, efficient, watchful.

‘Meine Herrschaften, ladies and gentlemen, don’t throw your things around like this. You need to show some goodwill,’ he says courteously, but the slender whip twitches nervously in his hands.
‘Of course, of course,’ the passersby answer, and walk alongside the train somewhat more cheerfully. A woman reaches down quickly, picking up her handbag. The whip whizzed down, the woman screamed, stumbled and fell under the feet of the crowd. A child running behind her cried in a thin little voice, ‘Mamele,’ such a small disheveled little girl . . .

The pile of stuff grows. Suitcases, bundles, backpacks, blankets, clothes, handbags that open as they fall, spilling out colorful, iridescent banknotes, gold, watches; by the doors of the wagons pile up mountains of bread, jars of colorful marmalades, jams, masses of hams, kielbasas, sugar spills on the gravel. Trucks loaded with people leave with a deafening roar and drive off amidst the wailing and screaming of the women separated from their children, and the stupefied silence of the men suddenly left behind. They are the ones who had gone to the right, the young and the healthy, they will go to the camp. The gas will not avoid them, but first they will work.

Trucks leave and return, without interruption, as on a monstrous conveyor belt. A Red Cross van drives back and forth, back and forth. The enormous bloody cross painted on the hood melts in the sun. The Red Cross van incessantly drives back and forth, it is in that it is carried gas, gas with which they poison those people.

The Canada men at the steps don’t have a moment to rest. They separate those for the gas from those going into the Lager, they shove the first up the steps, pack them in tightly, more or less sixty per truck. Nearby stands a young, clean shaven ‘gentleman’ an SS officer with a notebook in his hand; for each departing truck hunters a mark, sixteen gone means one thousand people, more or less. The gentleman I calm and precise. No truck can leave without his knowledge or mark. Ordnung muss sein. The marks swell into thousands, the thousands into whole transports, which we simple say ‘from Salonika,’ ‘from Strasbourg,’ ‘from Rotterdam.’ This one will be called ‘Sosnowiec-Bedzin.’ Those who will go on this transport into the Lager will receive serial numbers 131-132—thousand, of course, though afterwards we shall simply say precisely this ‘131-132.’

The transports swell into weeks, months, years. When the war ends, they will count the burned. They will estimate four and a half million.

The bloodiest battle of the war, the greatest victory of the strong, united, Germany. Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer -- and four crematoria. But, in Auschwitz, there will be sixteen crematoria, capable of burning fifty-thousand a day. The camp will expand until with its electrified wire it will touch the Vistula, thirty thousand people in stripes will live in it, it will be called ‘Verbrecherstadt’ – ‘city of criminals.’ No, there’ll be no shortage of people. Jews will burn, Poles will burn, people from the West and the South, from the continent and from the islands will come. People in stripes will come, will rebuild bombed German cities, plough fallow land, and when they weaken from the merciless labour, doors of the gas chambers will open in the eternal ‘bewegung, bewegung.’ The doors of the gas chambers will open. The chambers will be improved, more economical, more cleverly disguised. They’ll be like those in Dresden about which legends already exist. The train has been emptied. A thin, pock-marked SS man calmly peers inside, shakes his head in disgust and motions to our group, pointing inside:.

‘Rein. Clean it up.’

One jumps inside. Scattered in the corners, amid human excrement and abandoned wrist-watches lie squashed, trampled infants, naked little monsters with enormous heads and bloated bellies. One carries them out like chickens, holding several in one hand.
‘Don’t take them to the trucks. Pass them on to the women,’ says the SS man, lighting a cigarette. The lighter is not working properly, he is very troubled about it.

‘Take these infants, for God’s sake,’ I explode because the women are running away from me in horror, burrowing their heads in their shoulders.

The name of God sounds strangely pointless, since the women with children are going on the trucks, every one of them, without exception. We all know well what this means and we look at each other with hate and horror.

‘What, you don’t want to take them,’ said the pock-marked SS as though in amazement and reproach and started to detach his revolver.

‘No need to shoot, I’ll take them.’ A gray-haired, tall woman took the infants from me and for an instant looked straight into my eyes.

‘My poor boy,’ she whispered smiling. She walked away tripping on the gravel.

I leaned against the side of the train. I was very tired. Someone grabbed me by the hand.

‘Come, I’ll give you something to drink. You look as though you’re about to vomit. En avant, to the rails, come on!’

I look up, but the face swims before my eyes, dissolves, huge and transparent, melts into the motionless, inexplicably black, trees, and the overflowing sea of people . . . I blink rapidly: Henri.

‘Listen, Henri, are we good people?’

‘That’s stupid. Why do you ask?’

‘You see my friend, a completely incomprehensible anger at these people rises in me, that I have to be here because of them. I feel no pity that they’re going to the gas. Let the earth beneath them melt. I could throw myself at them, beat them with my fists. It must surely be pathological, I just can’t understand it.’

‘Ah, on the contrary, it is normal, predictable and calculated. The ramp exhausts you, you rebel – and the easiest way to relieve your hate is to turn against someone weaker. It’s even acceptable for you to unload it. It’s simple logic, compris?’ the Frenchman says somewhat ironically, comfortably propping himself up against the rails. ‘Look at the Greeks, they know how to make the most of it! They devour everything they can find; one of them next to me devoured a full jar of marmalade.’

‘Pigs. Tomorrow half of them will die of the shits.’

‘Pigs? You’ve been hungry too.’

‘Pigs,’ I repeat furiously. I close my eyes, hear screams, feel the earth shake and the sticky moisture on my eyelids. My throat is completely dry. People stream on and on, trucks growl like mad dogs. Before my eyes corpses taken out of the train move by, trampled infants, cripples piled up along with corpses, wave after wave after wave . . . freight cars roll in, heaps of rags, suitcases and backpacks grow, people climb out, look at the sun, take a few breaths, get into the trucks, drive away. And again freight cars roll in, again people . . . I feel the scenes becoming confused in me, I don’t know whether this is actually happening, or if I am dreaming. I suddenly see some verdure of trees, which are swaying together with the whole street, with the colorful crowd, Alleys! There is a humming in my head, I feel that I’m going to vomit.

Henri grabs my arm . . .

‘Don’t sleep, we’re off to load the loot.’

There are no more people. The last trucks roll far away along the road raising up huge clouds of dust, the train has left, SS officers promenade on the empty ramp, the silver glittering on their collars. Their boots shine, their red beefy faces shine. Among them a woman, only now
I realize she’s been here all along, withered, flat-chested, bony. She has combed her thin, colorless hair back and tied it in a ‘Nordic’ knot, she’s put her hands into the pockets of her wide culottes. She walks from one end of the ramp to the other, with a rat-like resolute smile glued on her thin lips. She detests feminine beauty with the hatred of a woman who is herself repulsive, and knows it. Yes, I have seen her more than once, and remember her well: she is the Kommandant of the FKL, she’s come to look at her new acquisitions, because some of the women have been put aside from the trucks and these will go on foot – ‘to the Lager.’ Our boys, the barbers from the Zauna will completely deprive them of their hair, and will take great pleasure in their ‘outside world’ modesty.

So, we load the loot. We carry heavy, capacious, expensive suitcases, throw them with effort onto the trucks. There one arranges them in stacks, packs them tight, cuts what one can with a knife for the fun of it, and in search of vodka and perfume, which one instantly pours on one’s self. One of the cases falls open, suits, shirts, books drop out of it . . . I grab some small package: heavy, I unwrap it: gold, two good handfuls: watchcases, bracelets, rings, brooches, diamonds . . .

‘Gib hier,’ an SS man says calmly, holding up his open briefcase, filled with gold and colourful foreign currency. He closes it, hands it to an officer, takes another empty one, and lies in wait by another truck. That gold will go to the Reich. Heat, tremendous heat. The air is stagnant, a glowing pillar. Our throats are dry, every uttered word hurts. Oh, a drink. Faster, faster, so that it is over, that there is shade, rest. We finish loading, the last trucks are driving away, we swiftly pick up off the track all the papers, we rummage out from among the rubble all the foreign transports’ filth ‘So that not a trace of that hideousness remains’ and just as the last truck disappears behind the trees and we walk – finally! -- towards the tracks to rest and to have a drink (perhaps the Frenchman will again buy from the guard?) from around the bend can be heard the railway man’s shrill whistle, slowly, terribly slowly, a train rolls in, the engine whistles back with a terrifying shriek, Weary, pale faces, flat as though cut out of papers, with huge, feverishly burning eyes, look out of the windows, Already the trucks are here, already the composed gentleman with the notebook is at his post, and the SS men have emerged from the commissary carrying briefcases for gold and money. We open the train doors.

No, it is impossible to control oneself any longer. Brutally we tear suitcases from their hands, strip off their coats. Go on, go on, vanish! They go, they vanish. Men, women, children. Some of them know.

Here comes a woman walking somewhat quickly, but feverishly. A small young child with a pink cherub’s face runs after her, and, unable to keep up, stretches out his little arms and cries, ‘Mama! Mama!’

‘Pick up your child, woman!’

‘Sir, sir, it’s not my child, not mine!’ she shouts hysterically and runs on covering her face with her hands. She wants to hide, she wants to reach those who will not ride the trucks, those who will go on foot, those who will stay alive. She is young, healthy, good-looking, wants to live.

But the child runs after her, wailing loudly, ‘Mama, mama, don’t abandon me!’

‘It’s not mine, not mine, no!’

And, then, Andrzej, a sailor from Sevastopol, grabbed hold of her. His eyes were glassy from vodka and the heat. He grabbed her, knocked her off her feet with one powerful blow, as she was falling he grabbed her by her hair and pulled her back up. His face was twisted with rage.
'AH, you bloody Jewess! So, you’re running away from your own child! I’ll show you, you whore!' 

He grabbed her by the waist, choked her by her throat which wanted to scream, and threw her with a flourish onto the truck like a heavy sack of grain.

‘Here! And take this with you, too, bitch!’ and he shoved her child under her legs.

‘Gut gemacht’, that’s the way to deal with degenerate mothers,’ said the SS man, standing by the truck. ‘Gut, gut, Ruski.’

‘Shut your mouth,’ growled Andrzej through clenched teeth and went over to the trucks. From under a pile of rags he pulled out a hidden flask, unscrewed it, pressed it to own lips, and then to mine. The strong liquor burns the throat. My head swims, my legs are shaky, nausea rises.

Suddenly, above that whole human crowd, which was blindly pushing forward in the direction of the trucks like a river driven by an unseen power, a girl appeared, she jumped lightly off the train onto the gravel and looked around with a scrutinizing eye, like a person who is very amazed by something.

Her bushy, blonde hair has fallen in a soft wave onto her shoulders, she shakes it back impatiently. With a natural gesture she runs her hands down her blouse, casually straightens her skirt. She stood like this for an instant. Finally, she looked away from the crowd and, with a gliding look examined our faces, as though searching for someone. Unknowingly, I continued to stare at her, until our eyes met.

‘Listen, listen, tell me, where are they going to take us?’

I looked at her. Here, standing before me, is a girl with enchanting blonde hair, beautiful breasts, wearing a cotton, summer blouse, and a wise, mature look in her eyes. She stands, looks me straight in the face and waits.

There is the gas chamber: communal death, disgusting and ugly. There is the camp: the shaved head, the heavy Soviet trousers for the heat, the disgusting, nauseating odour of filthy, burned female flesh, the animal hunger, the inhuman labour, and the same gas chamber, only an even more hideous, even more disgusting, even more terrible death. Anyone who entered here once, will not even take his ashes out of the Postenkette, will not return to that other life.

Why did she bring it, they’ll take it away from her anyway, I thought to myself, noticing a beautiful watch with a thin gold bracelet on her wrist. Tuska had one just like it, except on a thin, black, band.

‘Listen, answer me.’

I remained silent. She tightened her lips.

‘I know,’ she said with a trace of ladylike contempt in her voice, and tossing her head, she resolutely went in the direction of the trucks. Someone tried to stop her, she pushed him aside, and ran up the steps to the almost filled truck. I saw from a distance, her bushy, blonde hair flying as she rushed. I went back into the wagons, carried infants out, threw out the luggage. I touched corpses, but I couldn’t overcome the mounting, ferocious terror. I ran away from them, but they lay everywhere; lined up on the gravel, on the cement edge of the platform, in the wagons. Babies, hideous naked women, men twisted by convulsions. I run off as far as I can. Someone swipes me on the back with a whip, out of the corner of my eye I notice a cursing SS man, I elude him and lose myself in the striped Canada group. Finally, I again crawl in beneath the rails.
The sun has leaned deeply over the horizon and has illuminated the ramp with a bloody, setting light. The shadows of the trees have become elongated; in the silence that settles over nature in the evening, the human screams rose to the sky ever more loudly and persistently.

Only from here, from by the rails, can be seen the whole hell of the teeming ramp. A pair of human beings fell to the ground locked in a last desperate embrace. He has dug his fingers spasmodically into her flesh, caught her clothing with his teeth. She screams hysterically, swears, cries, until throttled by the boot, she is silent. They pull them apart like wood and driven like animals into the truck. Four Canada men lug a corpse: a huge swollen old woman, cursing, sweating from the strain, they kick out of their way stray children who are crying on all corners of the ramp, howling loudly like dogs. They grab them by the neck, by the head, by the hand, and toss them in a heap on the truck. Those four aren’t able to carry the women onto the truck, they call others for help, and all together they shove the whole mound of meat onto the platform. Big, swollen, puffed-up corpses are being collected from all over the ramp. Between them are shoved invalids, the smothered, the paralyzed, the unconscious. The heap of corpses seethes, yelps, howls. The driver starts the motor, the truck drives away.

‘Halt, Halt!’ an SS man yells from afar. ‘Stop, stop, damn you!’ They are dragging an old man wearing tails and a band around his shoulder. The old man strikes his head on the gravel, on the stones, moans and monotonously wails, ‘Ich will mit dem Herrn Kommandanten sprechen -- I wish to speak with the commandant . . .’ With senile stubbornness he keeps repeating this all the way, thrown into the truck, trampled on by someone’s foot, choked, he wails: ‘Ich will mit dem . . .’

‘Calm yourself down, man,’ a young SS man calls, laughing out loud. ‘In half an hour you’ll be talking with the top Kommendant! Only don’t forget to say to him ‘Heil Hitler!’

Others are carrying a little girl without a leg; they hold her by her arms and by that one remaining leg. Tears are running down her face, she whispers mournfully: ‘Gentlemen, this hurts, hurts . . .’ They shove her onto the truck, among the corpses. She will burn alive along with them.

Evening fall, cool and starry. We lie on the rails. It is incredibly quiet. On the tall posts, the lights shine anemically, beyond the circle of lights stretches an impenetrable darkness. One step into it, and man vanishes forever. But the eyes of the guards are watching carefully. The automatics ready to shoot.

‘Did you get the shoes?’ Henri asks me.
‘No.’
‘Why?’
‘Man, I’ve had enough, absolutely enough.’
‘Already after the first transport? Just look at me: Since Christmas probably a million people have passed through my hands. The worst are the transports from around Paris—one is always meeting friends.
‘And what do you say to them?’
‘That they are going to have bath, and later we’ll meet in the camp. And what would you say? I do not answer. We drink coffee mixed with alcohol, somebody opens a tin of cocoa, mixes it with sugar. We scoop it up by the handful, the cocoa sticks to the lips. Again coffee, again alcohol.
‘Henri, what are we waiting for?’
‘There’ll be one more transport. But it’s not for sure.’
‘If it comes, I am not going to go and unload it. I can’t take any more.’
‘So, it’s got you down? Canada is nice?’ – Henri smiles indulgently and disappears into the darkness. In a moment he comes back.

‘All right. Just make sure that an SS man doesn’t catch you, you’ll sit here the whole time. I’ll find you the shoes.’

‘Never mind the shoes.’

I want to sleep. It is late at night.

Again, ‘Antreten,’ again a transport. Freight cars emerge out of the darkness, pass through the zone of lights and again vanish in the darkness. The ramp is small, but the circle of lights is even smaller. We are going to unload consecutively. Somewhere the trucks are growling, They back up against the steps, black, ghostlike, they searchlights light up the trees.

‘Wasser Luft!’

The same all over again, like a late showing of the same film: a volley of shots, the wagons fall silent. But a little girl pushed herself halfway through a window of the wagon, and losing her balance, fell out onto the gravel. She lay still for a moment, stunned; finally, she stood up and began walking around in a circle, faster and faster, stiffly waving her arms as in gymnastics, breathing loudly and spasmodically, whining in a faint voice. Choking, she went mad. It is hard on the nerves, so an SS man ran over to her, kicked her in the back with his heavy boot: she fell. Holding her down with his foot, he took out his revolver, fired once, and then again: she remained kicking the earth with her feet, until she became motionless. They started to unseal the train.

I was by the wagons again. A warm, sweet smell gushed out. A mountain of people half-filled the wagon, motionless, horribly tangled, but still steaming.

‘Ausladen!’ resounded the voice of the SS man stepping out of the darkness. Across his chest hung a portable searchlight. He threw a stream of light inside. ‘Why are you standing there so stupidly? Start unloading!’ – and he struck us on our backs with his cane. I grabbed a corpse’s hand, his fingers closed tightly around mine. I pulled it back with a shriek and ran away. My heart pounded, and jumped up to my throat. Nausea overcame me. Hunched under the train, I vomited. Swaying, I snuck over to the rails.

I lay on the good, cool metal and dreamt about returning to the camp, about the bunk, on which there is no mattress, about a tiny bit of sleep among companions who are not going to go to the gas at night. Suddenly the camp seemed to me a haven of peace. Others are constantly dying, one is somehow still alive, has food, has the strength to work, has his fatherland, his home, his girl . . .

The lights flicker with a spectral glow, the wave of people – agitated, feverish, stupefied - - flows on and on. These people think that now they are starting a new life in the camp, and they prepare themselves emotionally for the hard struggle for life ahead. They do not know that they will immediately die, and that the gold, the money, the diamonds which they have so prudently hidden in the seams, and the pleats of their clothing, in the heels of their shoes, in the recesses of their body – will now be useless to them. Experienced professionals will probe into every recess of their flesh, will pull the gold from under the tongue, the diamonds from the uterus and the colon. Will rip out their gold teeth. In tightly sealed crates will send them to Berlin.

The SS men’s black figures move peacefully, professionally. The gentleman with the notebook puts down the final marks, rounds out the figures: fifteen thousand. Many, many trucks have gone to the crematorium.
It is almost over. The last trucks pick up the corpses on the ramp, the piles of goods are loaded in. Canada weighed down with breads, marmalade, sugar, and smelling of perfume and fresh linen, line up to march out. The Kapo finishes loading the tea bucket with gold, silks, and black coffee. For the guards at the gate: they’ll let the Kommando out without freely. For several days the camp will live off this transport: eat its ham and kielbasa, jams and fruit, drink its vodkas and liquors, will wear its underwear, trade its gold and its loot. Civilians will take a lot out of the camp, to Slask, to Krakow, and elsewhere. They will bring cigarettes, eggs, vodka and letters from home.

For several days this camp will talk about the ‘Sosnowiec-Będzin’ transport. That was a good, rich transport.

As we walk back to the camp, the stars are beginning to pale. The sky grows translucent, and opens high above our heads, night is becoming light. A cheerful, warm day ahead.

Great columns of smoke rise from the crematoria and merge up above into a huge black river which very slowly floats across the sky over Birkenau and disappears beyond the forests in the direction of Trzebinia.

The Sosnowiec transport is already burning.

We pass a heavily armed SS detachment on its way to change guard. They march in step, shoulder to shoulder, one mass, one will.

‘Und morgen die ganze Welt . . .’ they sing at the top of their lungs.

‘Rechts ran! To the right!’ snaps a command from up front.

We move out of their way.
A Note on this New Translation
Alicja Nitecki

Tadeusz Borowski’s ‘This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen,’ has been mistranslated into English, and a number of sections of the story have been omitted.

The narrator’s two bunkmates and friends, both of whom are French – Henri and ‘the man from Marseille’ – have been conflated into one, and it is not Henri’s ‘last name’ [nazwisko] that he says he does not know, but the ‘first name’ [imienie] of ‘the man from Marseille’, and the physical description of that man has been omitted. When the narrator suggests there’ll be no more transports, it is the man from Marseille, and not Henri, who tells him to ‘stop talking nonsense,’ the lips of the corpulent, soulful face, like that in Cosway’s Miniatures of the man from Marseille (he’s my friend, but I don’t know his name are stuffed with a sardine sandwich – ‘Stop talking nonsense,’ he repeated swallowing with effort (‘it’s gone, dammit’).

So, too, it is not Henri ‘who is a Communist and a rentier’ but the man from Marseille, and it is he who proclaims that ‘Religion is opium for the people,’ adding as he does so, ‘I very much like smoking opium.’ It is also he who says that ‘if they didn’t believe in God and the eternal life they’d have smashed the crematoria long ago,’ and when asked why he hasn’t done so, he replies: ‘Idiot’, stuffs a tomato into his mouth and gestures as though he wanted to say something, but eats and stays silent.’
The section of the story, descriptive of the barracks they are, in has been omitted. Some of ‘the naked, sweat drenched people’ lying beneath them on the barrack’s aisle, are lying next to what had been a horse stable, ‘on its door still hangs a sign that the ‘verseuchte pferde’ – the contaminated horses -- must be put away over there and there’ and it is now being upgraded, as he sardonically says, ‘into a pleasant (gemutlich) home for more than half a thousand people.’

Omitted, too, is the description of the state the world would be in if Hitler won the war. He expands on Hitler’s slogan, ‘Ein Reich, ein Volk, Ein Fuhrer, shows that if Germany took exclusive control of the world the camp of Auschwitz would extend all the way to the Vistula River in Poland; and people from all over the world, of all nationalities, other than the Germans, would, be forced to perform hard physical labor, ‘rebuild bombed German cities,’ and, then, would be gassed.