

## LET US NEVER FORGET

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In a secluded forest near the city of Krakow, a young sentry stood watch. Muted rays of sunlight filtered through the pines casting a pale light on the soldier, just a boy of 17. A tattered grey uniform sagged over his thin frame and the silver eagle on his helmet was faded to the color of dust. The emblem, denoting him as an infantryman in the army of the Third Reich, had once been a symbol of pride and honor. But those days had long since passed.

Though it was early Spring, a biting wind whispered softly through the treetops, and he raised his collar and peered up into a morning sky turned murky grey. He felt the moist sting of snowflakes on his cheeks and closed his eyes, reflecting on more tranquil times. His mind began to drift and for a moment he could see his loving mother's face, the noble lines of age etched above her lips, and the gentle creases beneath deep azure eyes. But soon the image faded, and he returned to this place and time. He wiped a smudge from his watch and stared pensively back toward the camp below him, watching the soldiers scurry about in preparation.

Soon the trains would come, and the madness would begin.

A tall SS colonel, hardened by years of combat in north Africa, strutted from the comforting warmth of his barracks and quietly surveyed the expanse of rail tracks stretching to the south. He lit a cigarette with his right hand and exhaled, sending a blue plume of smoke drifting into the frigid air. His left arm dangled uselessly at his side and a serpentine scar snaked along the length of his jaw.

Both were remnants of his service to the cause. He had been selected for this commission because he had spent his life devoted to the fatherland. But more important, there was a harsh coldness in his heart that suited this task well.

Thin strands of ice clung to the barbed wire stretching around the camp, and he seemed to regard this curiously. He stood in the early morning mist, pacing and smoking his cigarette, then tossed it to the ground and began to shout orders to the troops.

The young soldier and his comrades moved to their assigned positions, and within minutes the ground began to rumble, and the mechanical grind of the locomotive pierced the air as it lumbered toward the camp. Suddenly the face of the engine broke through a silver fog hovering over the tracks, and it crept toward them slowly like a great beast. Its bones creaked as its weight was absorbed by the steel rails, and when it finally came to a stop, it uttered a loud sigh like a mournful mother.

The soldiers quickly began their business of unloading the cargo as terrified screams filtered through the tired wooden slats of the cars. The victims, men, women, and children poured through the narrow doors and some stumbled to the icy ground to be trampled by those behind them.

The officer watched this melee with no emotion, then strutted to the entrance of the camp and waited while the people were herded into two lines. As the innocents marched past him, he studied them carefully as a farmer would view livestock for purchase. The strongest would be chosen for a slow death through starvation, and disease. The rest would be ushered into the buildings for disposal.

The first group of women and children were herded into the courtyard by guards brandishing rifles with bayonets. The wet steel of the blades glistened like teeth in the morning mist, and the terrified shrieks of frightened children filled the air. After they had been carefully counted, they were ordered to remove their clothing. They slowly disrobed, dropping their garments to the snow, and as their bodies were exposed, the soldiers laughed, shouting taunts and jeers. The women huddled against one another, covering their breasts, and shivered under an icy mist that fell like tears from the sky.

Towels and bars of soap were distributed to some, and they were told they would be cleansed in the showers before entry into their barracks. These words of deception calmed many of them as they made their way into the red brick structure.

When the building was filled, the heavy oak doors were closed and locked behind them. Minutes later, the canisters would be opened, and cyanide gas would pour from the vents in the ceiling. Seeing the pale blue vapors descend upon them, they would shriek in horror and frantically scratch and claw at the doors imprisoning them. Some would die within minutes, but others lasted longer.

When the chamber had been safely ventilated and the bodies removed, the process would begin again.

The young sentry stood silently at his post, feeling the warmth of tears on his cheeks, knowing what he would he had seen and been a part of, would haunt him the rest of his days.

I am in southern Poland, at a place known as Auschwitz. It's a word that brings an aura of darkness and gloom to those who hear it. Over a million innocent people were systematically exterminated here as part of the Nazi's final solution.

Remnants of the horror still stand, a reminder of the evil that can exist in men's hearts. Rusty tracks bearing the trains filled with victims, are still intact. Wooden buildings housing prisoners under unspeakable conditions, stand alongside the gas chambers and incinerators, horrific reminders of the atrocities that existed here.

I walk through a dimly lit hallway in a building that has witnessed grief and sorrow beyond what most of us can imagine. Its walls are lined with photos of those who suffered and died here. Their eyes stare at me, dark and vacuous, pleading, crying out for mercy. A mercy that never came.

Cobbled streets meander through the camp. The stones are ash in color and splintered and cracked from age. The tears and blood spilled on these pathways have long since washed away, but I can sense sorrow and despair once flowed here like a raging river. I close my eyes and

smell the stench of the bodies being incinerated and hear the panicked cries of pain drifting over me like a macabre mist lingering over the forest.

Twisted strings of barbed wire still encircle the encampment. I see the gaunt, broken bodies of those who may have chosen a quicker death by attempting escape. Their emaciated corpses hang suspended in the air, entwined in the harsh teeth of the metal strands, ravaged by the bullets from the machine guns guarding the camp.

The gallows, where thousands were publicly executed, stand tall and forthright in the courtyard. I see the victims' bodies twist slowly in the breeze. The ropes around their necks creak as they tighten under the victims' weight. Their feet flail about in desperation and the cords cut deeply into their flesh, until they gasp their last frantic breath. A gruesome message of obedience or death, to those who lived there.

The ones who were chosen by the Germans to remain at Auschwitz faced an incarceration filled with hardship and suffering. Prisoners were relegated to harsh conditions with barracks barren of heat, toilets, or other basic comforts required in civilized society. Many died of starvation or from lack of hope for a better existence.

My steps take me into the last building. On display are thousands of tiny shoes and boots from the children who were savagely exterminated, a horrific message even the young and innocent are not immune to the evil in the world. Tears fill my eyes and I marvel how any human being could inflict such suffering on another.

I could never have imagined a place so somber, so absent of light. Despair surrounds Auschwitz like a dark fog, stifling one's ability to put into words what is seen and felt here. As a member of the same human race guilty of committing these atrocities, I am ashamed and horrified such evil could have existed in modern society.

Some may ask, *'How could God allow this to happen?'*

I consider this question, as I envision the faces of the millions who must have stared into the heavens crying out for deliverance from their torment.

But it wasn't God who perpetrated this misery. It was the wickedness in men's hearts, allowed to grow and thrive, killing over seven million people before Allied powers finally brought an end to the insanity.

It's impossible to make sense of what happened at the death camps. That knowledge comes only from the One who created us. But if there is a lesson for us, perhaps it's a message of intolerance. Intolerance for senseless human suffering. Suffering we must never turn our backs on. To do so would degrade our morality, making us no better than the ancient Romans who derived pleasure from the senseless massacre of Christians in the Coliseum.

In scripture, Saint James tells us we must always be vigilant and confront evil in this world.

For one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, it is a sin. (James 4:3-4)

I pray God gives us the vision to recognize the truth, and the courage to always do what is right, regardless of the cost.

What I saw here will remain a part of me, the eyes of the damned forever etched in my mind. But beyond the darkness, I leave here with a greater understanding of the true depth of human misery. It has put my own trials and challenges in a different light. As I confront adversity in my life, I hope I endure it with the same dignity and courage as those who perished here.

In the Book of Revelation, John poetically described the vision and imagery of His return. It is his words that give me comfort and solace, knowing in the end, pain and suffering in the world will no longer exist.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing, or pain for the old order has passed.

The End