**Kanada at Auschwitz**

**W. George Lovell**

**O**

n my way to Auschwitz, I was picked up at my hotel in Kraków, the driver’s first passenger of the day. “Three stops more,” the genial Petro said, opening the van door and gesturing to the front seat where I could sit alongside him. Our final pick-up was in Kasimierz, the old Jewish quarter. We approached the hotel where the last passenger was waiting, not far from the factory made famous by the film *Schindler’s List*. I noticed graffiti sprayed, in English, on the wall of an adjacent apartment. “Bad choices make good stories,” it declared. I found myself pondering what the words might mean, conjuring up a line from Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* (1295): “Nomina sunt consequentia rerum” – “names are the consequences of things.” Not for a moment anticipating what they might portend, my ruminations faded as quickly as they’d surfaced, until our arrival at Auschwitz.

Petro introduced us to our guide. Anna relayed what she had to say via microphone and headset, her English soft-spoken and somewhat clipped. She led us through the wrought-iron gate emblazoned atop with the ominous words ARBEIT MACHT FREI (“Work Will Set You Free”) and indicated, off to the right, the spot where camp musicians played rousing tunes as work parties marched past. We were ushered into an austere brick building that had formerly served as a barracks, one of scores refurbished from what they once were to function as exhibition spaces and points of information. Positioning herself beside a display of photographs, Anna told us about the warehouses Kanada I and Kanada II, so-named by prisoners whose job it was to stock them and safeguard their contents, which were later shipped all over the Third Reich. Why Kanada, I wondered?

Upon disembarking from the freight cars that ferried them to their doom, Jewish families were instructed to leave the belongings they carried with them on the platform ramp to which they had been herded. The selection process came next, overseen by doctors of the Nazi SS (*Schutzstaffel*, meaning “Protection Squadron”). Males over 14 years of age deemed fit for labour were ordered to one side, some women also. Most women and most children, however, the elderly and the infirm too, went the other way, and thereafter (an estimated four of every five who stepped off the train, 1.1 million in all) to their death.

As the two lines parted company, never to meet again, the Kanada Kommando set about its business. Individuals chosen for the task loaded the bundles and suitcases left behind onto awaiting trucks, destination the warehouses named Kanada. Work as a member of the Kommando increased one’s chance of survival considerably, for two reasons: first, having an important job to perform, conscripts were less brutally treated; second, they ate much better, able to scavenge food from the receptacles they opened, devouring or sharing it in situ in the warehouses, even under SS surveillance. Under no circumstances, however, were provisions to be smuggled into living quarters, a violation of conduct that was punished severely.

The German name for Canada, I learned, had come to be referred to because it represented a land of plenty, a bountiful country from where emigrant relatives would have written, in glowing terms, prior to the outbreak of war. Dante’s invocation, as sung by countertenor David James in a recording I have of Gavin Bryars (*Vita Nova*, 1994), resounded in my mind along with Anna’s harrowing recounting. When the horror of the Holocaust was over, I mused, did anyone whose fate it was to work in Kanada ever make it to the Canada they imagined at Auschwitz?

Kanada I, located in Auschwitz proper, was officially called Effektenlager I, a complex of six units where, between March and December 1942, a crew of some 1,000 to 1,600 inmates sifted through, and sorted out, the luggage of an estimated 197,000 predominantly fellow Polish Jews. The anticipated arrival of 430,000 Hungarian Jews had prompted, by December 1943, the construction of Kanada II, formally known as Effektenlager II, a massive complex of thirty buildings that called for the induction into Kommando ranks of hundreds of Hungarian Jewish women, swelling crew numbers to approximately two thousand.

Kanada II, built four kilometres from Auschwitz on the site of the village of Brzezinka, formed part of the vast sprawl of Birkenau. Rózsi and Lili Berkovits, two Hungarian sisters from Munkács, in present-day Ukraine, offered the following testimony upon their release from captivity in 1945: “This was an enviable place: one could have some extra bites of food, and did not need to starve. We sorted [through] the luggage that the transports [brought] here; we always found food in them, which we could secretly seize. This saved us from starving to death.” One member of the Kanada Kommando, sixteen when she was freed, testified that “one could find everything here, starting [with] clothes, food, and bedclothes to the most expensive jewellery, precious letters, and photos. We saw the most beautiful things, since everyone brought the best belongings they had.”

On occasion, the luggage opened was that of departed kin, a jolt no less traumatic than the one caused by the proximity of Kanada II to the gas chambers. “Work was basically not difficult,” disclosed another survivor, “but the conditions under which we worked were awful. The crematorium was in front of us, and we could see how they selected each transport that arrived. We could see the elderly and children entering the gate of the crematorium, we could hear the horrible screams, but we never saw anyone coming out.” The eyewitness concluded: “On the whole, it was easy for us because we had great quantities of stolen food. But no one could eat it, hearing all those screams, breathing in air that was stinking of burnt human flesh.”

The last site to which Anna took us was perhaps the most haunting of all, a structure marked in German Gothic lettering Block 16a. Close to it, a sign read: “[Here] stood a wooden barracks where, in 1944, more than 200 Jewish children between the ages of 2 and 16 were kept as prisoners. These children, the majority of them twins, were used for criminal medical experiments by the SS doctor Josef Mengele.” A wall painted in Block 16a depicts a school, children ambling playfully towards it, a girl carrying a doll, a boy riding a hobby horse.

“Incipit vita nova,” Dante also wrote, “a new life is beginning.”

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** W. George Lovell, FRSC, is Professor of Geography at Queen’s University. His research interests have involved grappling with issues of genocide, its historical occurrence, commemorative recognition, and continued denial.