

# One Summer's Night in Oświęcim

*By Genni Flynn*

It seems to be that one who consistently goes unnoticed invariably appears to notice everything. I myself am living proof of this statement. As I look back on my life and the many things I have lived through, I see a pattern begins to form. My complete and utter unremarkability has frequently enabled me to bear witness to events that others always appear to miss. My ability to be present in a situation but for no one to really feel my presence has meant that I often go unnoticed when people are attempting to hoodwink those who they perhaps deem a threat to their inconspicuousness. The most colourful illustration of this in my life occurred during my time working as a clerk in the train station in a small Polish town by the name of Oświęcim. The mere name of this town now strikes fear and sorrow into the hearts and everyone who hears it. Many, many decades have come and went since I worked at a small train station in this town. However, the memory is still so clear in my mind, it is as if I am merely thinking back on the events of last week.

I was a very young man during the summer of 1943, just shy of my 18th birthday. I was spending my summer living with my mother's sister in this small Polish town. In comparison with my home town of Munich this rural countryside appeared dull and lifeless to me. I took it upon myself to attempt to find employment, if only to pass the time. I managed to find work in the small train station. The hiring process was less than rigorous. A small background check secured that I was German and it was visually apparent that I was Aryan. This combination was rare for one living here who was not a militant so management were eager to take me on board. My job was unimportant, manning a desk and instructing people on where and who they should go to if they had any queries. It appeared that I was as important as my position. I largely went unnoticed, which I definitely found to be ideal. This meant that I was in a position to observe all of the happenings of this station.

As my summer progressed I began to feel the station became more and more eerie. It seemed that even with the hot summer sun beating down upon our backs no heat could penetrate these walls. It was always cold. Always still, lifeless. To me it seemed lifeless predominantly due to its largely dormant status. Sometimes days could go with no trains arriving or departing. Every few nights however, an immense raucous would arrive. It seems no officers had any concerns of the young, weedy, spectacled clerk paying any heed to any out of the ordinary activities. Cartloads and cartloads of people would arrive all at once. Trains lugging cattle carriages would arrive at the station at the beginning of nightfall. The doors would be opened all at once and from each tiny carriage hundreds of people would pour out from within. I had been told that these carriages had been arriving from countries far and wide across Europe such as Hungary and Italy. When the passengers would spill out onto the platform they were not people. They hardly resembled anything that could be associated with life. Their hair was matted and greasy. Their skin waxy and yellow. They appeared withered and broken. They were gaunt, shells of humanity. A putrid, acrid smell followed them from the compartments and seemed to hang in the air, enveloping everything it reached. One could only imagine the torture of travelling in these carriages for days on end. No sunlight, no water, no room to move nor even space to breath. Though all of these afflictions one would notice at once, the most striking aspect of their appearance was the six pointed star each and every one of them had stitched into their clothing. Every passenger, or dare I say it, prisoner, on these trains were Jewish. Of

course the attitude of the Nazi regime towards the Jews was no secret. It had been taught and accepted to me for many years that they were inferior, scum many said. I had never fully bought into this view though I never would have dared to say it. However, up until that summer I never would have considered myself to be a Jewish sympathiser either. Yet even I who kept my head down and submitted to the Nazi regime like a well oiled cog in a very large machine, could not help but to feel this was unacceptable. Of course I knew of these 'work camps' that many Jews were supposedly employed in but no one tells you of their treatment while getting there. They were being treated like livestock. No, worse than livestock for at least livestock are treated as if they have some sort of worth. A deep gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach also told me that livestock was a false comparison, animals being sent to the slaughterhouse seemed a more perfect metaphor. No one would admit this of course, but even I, in my young naivety, knew that there were no return trains from where they were headed. They were sent there in bulk and it appeared very few ever left again.

And so that's how it went. Every few nights the same bustling arrival. Jewish families would stumble out onto the platform and in a frenzy of screaming and tears, they were split up and directed on where to go. The elderly, the very young and the ailed were grouped together. The healthy women and girls herded in one direction and the fit males in another. I had my suspicions of their fates but it was not until years later that these fears were confirmed and wildly succeeded. Of course I felt a sense of guilt even by being present in these situations though I was not directly taking part. One can convince themselves of many things to hide from what they fear most, the truth. I convinced myself that by merely being a bystander my status was still innocent. Though the fact remains today that it is possible, if not likely, that my silence condemned many. There was one instance however, where I feel perhaps my silence may have saved lives.

It was nearing the closing days of July and I had become well adjusted to the routine of shipments arriving. I was sitting at my regular post assuming another less than comfortable night was ahead. At least thirty Nazi militants were present, lining the one small platform, in anticipation of an arrival. Dusk was falling and the last hopeful glimmer of sunlight had just disappeared behind the trees on the horizon. The officers appeared to me merely as shadows, standing in small clusters on the platform, laughing and talking in jolly voices. I watched the officers for about fifteen minutes, their shadows becoming less and less distinguishable. One of the most senior officers grabbed the attention of the other men and yelled "*mach dich bereit, sie kommen*" signalling that the newest shipment of Jews would be arriving soon. All of the officers took their positions and before long the carriages arrived. It was as if there were an invisible director calling 'action!' and this was all one large theatric. Every night the same, without fault or delay, though invariably different cast members. It was well rehearsed and efficiently executed. After a while I tore my gaze from the organised chaos and began to doodle on a stray piece of parchment. It never became easier watching these scenes unfold.

Sensing I would not be needed at this very moment I decided to get up and stretch my legs as I was in need of a lavatory, There was but one male lavatory in the small station and when I reached it, it appeared to be engaged. It was a warm pleasant evening so I decided to quickly walk behind the station and do my business there. At the back of the station was an old, rusting train carriage that had been rotting there for many years. The windows were smashed and the doors broken so they were permanently off their hinges. The carriage was of no use to anyone

and it had long since been forgotten about. I walked over a bed of cracked cement to reach the shrubbery into which I would relieve myself. I had my back to the ruined compartment and was facing the forest that stretched out to the East, watching the first twinkling stars begin to light up the sky. A small smile had been threatening to creep over my face when I heard a quiet and quickly stifled sobbing noise coming from behind me. I tensed up and tried to hold in my gasp. I slowly turned to face the direction of the noise and found myself facing the rusting train compartment. It was very dark now and the depths of the compartment was just a vast expanse of dark,inky blackness. I found myself getting more and more nervous as I slowly inched towards the carriage, not knowing what to expect. Many scenarios danced around and played out within my head but none of them resembled what I found. I reached the door of the carriage and pulled out the torch that was attached to my belt. I did a quick scan of the carriage and at first saw nothing one would deem to be astray. Then, just as I was turning to leave, I noticed a large pile of moth eaten, grey blankets, quivering in the corner. I shone my torch at the pile and they began to tremble even more. Overcome by curiosity, I slowly walked over to investigate further. As I looked closer at the bundle of blankets I realised how lumpy and misshapen they seemed to be. Suddenly realising what I was likely to find I grabbed a handful of the blanket and slowly lifted it up. There, cuddled tightly together in the corner of the compartment were two shivering children nestled into the arms of a young woman. Startled, I took a small step back and rubbed my eyes. I looked first at the children. Two sallow skinned little girls with dark ringlets tumbling down their backs and framing their deep chestnut eyes. They were twins, I assumed, or at least definitely sisters. Their small, round faces were thick with grime and both had tracks running down their cheeks in the wake of their tears. One wore a faded blue coat and the other a red, both brandished with the star of David on the arm. They gazed up at me and all I could see in their eyes was fear. The woman in the middle kept both arms protectively around the children. The peculiar thing about this woman was that I recognised her. She had pale skin and fair hair with watery blue eyes. She wore a clean,new fancy coat that was notably clear of any embroidery. She raised her head to meet my gaze and in a flash I realised where I had recognised her from. She was the baker's assistant in the village. Every Saturday I bought breakfast for my auntie and I from her down in the bakery. From what I gathered she was not a local in this town. She and her mother had opened the bakery in this town when they moved here with her father, a senior SS officer. She was certainly far from Jewish. A million questions flooded my mind. How did she know these children? What was she doing protecting them? Why had she seemingly risked everything to save these girls? I realised in that moment that sometimes the less one knows, the better. I decided then to carefully recover the girls with the blanket and simply back away. I had remained silent while witnessing many atrocities in the past few weeks perhaps it was time to remain nobly silent this time. I turned on my heel to leave when I heard a whisper from beneath the blankets "*Danke mein Herr*" it said. I paused for a moment, and smiled. "No one must know" I replied in German, "*und viel Glück*" I wished them well on my way back out into the night.

The baker's daughter and I never spoke of that nor acted as though it had ever occurred in any future encounters we had. I never learned the fate of the little girls nor of their story. I do not know what became of the baker's daughter nor if her story was ever heard. Though that night has always stayed fresh in my memory. To me I found it incredibly reassuring that there were some out there that were stronger than I. That did what myself and many others never had the

courage to do. It gave me hope in humanity that there were those brave enough to take risks to fight for what they believed in. They had honour within the shameful, integrity amid the weak. They were the Righteous Among the Nations.