



Cilka's journey

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Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp, February 1945

Cilka has been sitting in the block, as close as she can get to the one stove that provides heat. She knows she has already drawn attention. The other able-bodied women, her friends included, were forcibly marched out of the camp by the SS weeks ago. The remaining prisoners are skeletal, diseased, or they are children. And then there is Cilka. They were all meant to be shot, but in their haste to get away themselves, the Nazis abandoned the mall to fate. The soldiers have been joined by other officials—counter-intelligence agents, Cilka has heard, though she's not sure what that means—to manage a situation the average soldier has no training for. The Soviet agency is tasked with keeping law and order, particularly as it relates to any threat to the Soviet State. Their role, she's been told by the soldiers, is to question every prisoner to determine their status as it relates to their imprisonment, in particular if they collaborated or worked with the Nazis. The retreating German Army are considered enemies of the State of the Soviet Union and anyone who could be connected to them is, by default, an enemy of the Soviet Union. A soldier enters the block.

“Come with me,” he says, pointing to Cilka. At the same time, a hand clutches her right arm, dragging her to her feet. Several weeks have passed and seeing others being taken away to be questioned has become part of the routine of the block. To Cilka it is just “her turn.” She is eighteen years old and she just has to hope they can see that she had no choice but to do what she did in order to survive. No choice, other than death. She can only hope that she will soon be able to return to her home in Czechoslovakia, find a way forward.

As she's taken into the building the Soviet Army are using as their headquarters, Cilka attempts a smile at the four men who sit across the room from her. They are here to punish her evil captors, not her. This is a good time; there will be no more loss. Her smile is not returned. She notices their uniforms are slightly different from those of the soldiers outside. Blue epaulettes sit on top of their shoulders; their hats, placed on the table in front of them, have the same shade of blue ribbon with a red stripe. One of them does eventually smile at her and speaks in a gentle voice.

“Would you tell us your name?”

“Cecilia Klein.”

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“Where are you from, Cecilia? Your country and town.”

“I’m from Bardejov in Czechoslovakia.”

“What is the date of your birth?”

“The seventeenth of March, 1926.”

“How long have you been here?”

“I came here on the twenty-third of April in 1942, just after I turned sixteen.”
The agent pauses, studies her.

“That was a long time ago.”

“An eternity in here.”

“What have you been doing here since April 1942?”

“Staying alive.”

“Yes, but how did you do that?” He tilts his head at her.

“You look like you haven’t starved.” Cilka doesn’t answer, but her hand goes to her hair, which she hacked off herself weeks ago, after her friends were marched from the camp.

“Did you work?”

“I worked at staying alive.” The four men exchange looks. One of them picks up a piece of paper and pretends to read it before speaking.

“We have a report on you, Cecilia Klein. It says that you in fact stayed alive by prostituting yourself to the enemy.” Cilka says nothing, swallows hard, looks from one man to the next, trying to fathom what they are saying, what they expect her to say in return.

Another speaks.

“It’s a simple question. Did you fuck the Nazis?”

“They were my enemy. I was a prisoner here.”

“But did you fuck the Nazis? We’re told you did.”

“Like many others here, I was forced to do whatever I was told by those who imprisoned me.” The first agent stands.

“Cecilia Klein, we will be sending you to Kraków and then determining your fate from there.” He refuses, now, to look at her.

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“No,” Cilka says, standing. This can’t be happening. “You can’t do this to me! I am a prisoner here.” One of the men who hasn’t spoken before quietly asks, “Do you speak German?”

“Yes, some. I’ve been in here three years.”

“And you speak many other languages, we have heard, and yet you are Czechoslovakian.” Cilka doesn’t protest, frowning, not understanding the significance. She had been taught languages at school, picked others up by being in here. The men all exchange looks.

“Speaking other languages would have us believe you are a spy, here to report back to whoever will buy your information. This will be investigated in Kraków.”

“You can expect a long sentence of hard labor,” the original officer says. It takes Cilka a moment to react, and then she is grabbed by the arm by the soldier who brought her into the room, dragged away, screaming her innocence.

“I was forced, I was raped! No! Please.” But the soldiers do not react; they do not seem to hear. They are moving on to the next person.

Montelupich Prison, Kraków, July 1945

Cilka crouches in the corner of a damp, stinking cell. She struggles to register time passing. Days, weeks, months.

She does not make conversation with the women around her. Anyone overheard speaking by the guards is taken out and brought back with bruises and torn clothing. Stay quiet, stay small, she tells herself, until you know what is happening, and what the right things are to say or do. She has torn off a section of her dress to tie around her nose and mouth in an attempt to minimize the stench of human waste, damp and decay. One day, they take her out of the cell. Faint from hunger and exhausted by the effort of vigilance, the figures of the guards and the wall and floors all seem immaterial, as in a dream. She stands in line behind other prisoners in a corridor, slowly moving toward a door. She can lean, momentarily, against a warm, dry wall. They keep the corridors heated, for the guards, but not the cells themselves. And though the weather outside must be mild by now, the prison seems to trap cold from the night and hold on to it through the whole next day. When it is Cilka’s turn, she enters a room where an officer sits behind a desk, his face bathed in greenish light from a single lamp. The

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officers by the door indicate she should go over to the desk. The officer looks down at his piece of paper.

“Cecilia Klein?” She glances around. She is alone in the room with three burly men.

“Yes?” He looks down again and reads from the paper.

“You are convicted of working with the enemy, as a prostitute and additionally as a spy. You are sentenced to fifteen years’ hard labor.” He signs the piece of paper.

“You sign this to say you have understood.” Cilka has understood all of the officer’s words. He has been speaking in German, rather than Russian. Is it a trick, then? she thinks. She feels the eyes of the men at the door. She knows she has to do something. It seems she has no choice but to do the only thing in front of her. He flips the piece of paper and points to a dotted line. The letters above it are in Cyrillic—Russian script. Again, as she has experienced over and over in her young life, she finds herself with two choices: one, the narrow path opening up in front of her; the other, death.

The officer hands her the pen, and then looks toward the door, bored, waiting for the next person in line—just doing his job. With a shaking hand, Cilka signs the piece of paper. It is only when she’s taken from the prison and pushed onto a truck that she realizes winter has gone, spring never existed, and it is summer. While the warmth of the sun is a balm to her chilled body, her still-alive body, the glare of it hurts her eyes. Before she has a chance to adjust, the truck slams to a stop. There, in front of her, is another train carriage, on a cattle train painted red.

Birkenau Administration Block, 1942

Cilka is sitting beside Gita, each working diligently, their eyes meeting fleetingly, small smiles shared. Cilka was pulled out of the selection line, and chosen for this work, rather than the Kanada. And she is grateful Gita is now working here, too. But she hopes she can also get Magda into the warmth, somehow. Gita’s hair is still cropped close to her head but for some reason Cilka has been allowed to grow hers. It feathers down over her neck and ears.

She doesn’t see the two SS officers approach them and with no warning she is grabbed by the arm, jerked to her feet. As she is dragged away, she looks back at Gita, her eyes pleading. Every time they are separated it could be the last time they see each other. She sees an officer approach Gita and strike her

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across the head with her hand. She tries to resist as she is dragged outside and across to the women's camp. She is no match for the two men. It is quiet in the camp—the women all out at work. They walk past the barracks where the women live until they come to an identical building, but this one is surrounded by a brick wall. Cilka feels bile rise in her throat. She has heard that this is where women go to die.

“No ... Please...” she says.

“What’s happening?” There is a shiny car parked on the dirt road outside. The officers open the gate and go into the courtyard. One of the officers knocks loudly on the door to the left-hand building, and as the door opens, they throw her inside, slamming it behind her. Cilka is sprawled on a rough dirt floor and standing in front of her, in front of rows of empty crude wooden bunks, is the man she recognizes from the selection, the senior officer, Schwarzhuber. He is an imposing man and is rarely seen in the camp. He taps his tall leather boot with his swagger stick. From an expressionless face he stares above Cilka’s head. She backs up against the door, feeling for the door handle. In a flash, the swagger stick is hurled through the air and strikes her hand. She cries out in pain as she slides down to the floor. Schwarzhuber walks to her and picks up his stick. He stands over her, dwarfing her. He breathes heavily as he glares at her.

“This will be your new home,” he says.

“Stand up.” She gets to her feet.

“Follow me.” He takes her behind a wall where there is a small room and a single wooden-slatted bed with a mattress on it.

“You know each block has a block leader?” he says.

“Yes,” she says.

“Well, you are to be the leader of Block 25.”

Cilka has no words, no breath. How could she—how could anybody—be expected to be the leader of this block? This is the block where women spend their final hours before being sent to the gas chamber. And will she ever see Magda, see Gita again? This is the most terrifying moment of her life.

“You are very lucky,” Schwarzhuber says. Taking off his hat, he throws it across the room. With his other hand he continues to hit his leg firmly with his stick. With every whack Cilka flinches, expecting to be struck. He uses the stick to push up her shirt. Oh, Cilka thinks. So this is why. With shaking hands, she undoes the top two buttons. He then places his stick under her

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chin. His eyes seem to see nothing. He is a man whose soul has died and whose body is waiting to catch up with it. He holds out both his arms and Cilka interprets this gesture as “undress me.” Taking a step closer, still at arm’s length, she begins undoing the many buttons on his jacket. A whack across her back hurries her up. He is forced to drop his stick so she can slide his jacket off. Taking it from her, he throws it after his hat. He removes his own singlet. Slowly, Cilka begins undoing his belt and the buttons beneath it. Kneeling down, she pulls his boots off from over his breeches. Pulling the second one off, she becomes unbalanced, falling heavily on the bed as he pushes her. He straddles her. Terrified, Cilka attempts to cover herself as he tears her shirt open. She feels the back of his hand across her face as she closes her eyes and gives in to the inevitable.

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