

SIMON LAKS ET RENÉ COUDY

MUSIC FROM ANOTHER WORLD

Preface by Georges Duhamel of The *Académie Française*

Translated by Virginie Actis and John Knych

We, men of the West, thought we had a thousand chances, each more awful than the next, to measure the abyss of degradation into which humanity plunged itself through the mad and the sick to whom, for twenty years, the Germanic world surrendered its destiny.

We, men of France, having read book after book, testimonies of countless narrators whose good faith no one can doubt, since they all say the same thing, we thought we had, with them, visited all the circles of hell.

This crisis of cruel insanity, this crisis that has perverted almost an entire people and for a long time filled civilized societies with suffering and shame, it seemed to us, anguished observers, that it was now subject to the judgment of historians, that investigation was closed and that, on the confused drama that tortured so many victims and revealed so many executioners, we knew everything that could be known.

It seems that we were wrong.

To all those who would intend to maintain some illusion on this point, I advise them to read chapter XIX of the book composed by Mr. Simon Laks and Mr. René Coudy. I advise them, in particular, to turn their attention to the end of this chapter and to the confidences of SS Wolff. They will see that Mephistopheles is not the figment of a poet's imagination, but the figure, constantly revived, of a truly national hero.

With desolation we would take our side in this misery if, at least, our last refuges were spared in this universal shipwreck, if, at least, we had the feeling that, in spite of everything, the immaterial goods which, for us, still have a consoling and redeeming value, are preserved from all defilement.

The book brought to us by two Auschwitz survivors seems likely to take away any element of comfort. It teaches us that the executioners in the German camps were sensitive to music. Yes, holy music, divine music is also compromised in the adventure!

Every man, after reading this book, can retire for an hour in solitude. He can, with the help of faith or reason, compose a prayer. He is no longer even sure of this supreme asylum: he may learn one day that the torturers also prayed, in their own way, in their own language and according to the impulses of their desperate genius.

-Georges Duhamel, of the French Academy

OUVERTURE

Towards the end of 1943, the prisoners of Auschwitz II-Birkenau were authorized by the German camp command to send a written message to their families.

To be exact, I should not use the word “authorized” because in fact it was an order whose execution was going to be scrupulously controlled. Also, those who did not want to submit addressed their letters to imaginary people. These postcards could have revealed, if they were sincere, the places where many of the elements sought by the Gestapo were to be found or hidden. More than one prisoner had been suspicious of them. Most of our comrades saw them as propaganda.

However, certain conditions were imposed on us: a limited number of words, a ban on soliciting money or parcels, to speak only of oneself, and to indicate this original address: Arbeitslager Birkenau being Neuberun, i.e., Birkenau Work Camp, when in reality our address should have been: Konzentrations-und Vernichtungslager [Concentration and Extermination Camp] Birkenau-Auschwitz II.

Driven by the desire to let my loved ones know that I was alive and convinced that this was the only chance to do so, I wrote to my loved ones that “I was healthy and working in my profession.” My profession being that of musician, I thought I was making them understand that I had an easy job.

When I saw my wife again after my release, she informed me that she had received this card. She had never believed, however, that I was really working in my profession, and assumed that I had written this to put her mind at rest.

Who, indeed, could have believed that such a job existed in a German camp?

Two years have passed since the liberation and despite all the investigations that have been made, despite the quantity of books that have been published, despite even the films made about the concentration camps, my interlocutors are always amazed every time I talk to them about Auschwitz in general and its musical activity in particular.

How, they say, was there music in your camp? What was it used for? What was its purpose? What did you play? Funeral marches?

I was asked many other questions. All of them seemed naive, but justified, given the complete ignorance of the question.

There was actually music - Commando Lagerkapelle - in Auschwitz, just as there was one in every German camp that “respected itself.” And this music, an essential part of the organization of the camps, was, as paradoxical as it may seem, an accessory, and not the least, of its internal police force.

The very first ambition of a Lagerführer - camp commander - was to constitute "his" Lagerkapelle, to ensure the impeccable functioning of the disciplinary machine and also, as we shall see in these pages, for the personal entertainment and maintenance of the morale of the SS herd, our guards.

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It is not the purpose of this book to describe, once again, the horrors and atrocities of which Auschwitz was the theater. If from time to time we cannot avoid evoking them it is to make the text more understandable.

Much has been written about the Nazi camps and we do not think it is necessary to add new, even unpublished, documents. Everything happened there, in a universe of infinity. Whether we multiply this infinity by ten, a hundred, or a thousand, we always remain in this infinity. Beyond a certain limit, human suffering ceases to be perceptible and definable for those who have not exceeded it. We who “saw it” did not want to believe, neither at the beginning nor later, that it was possible. How, then, can we make those who did not see it admit the authenticity of the facts?

Auschwitz was in a way the “photographic negative” of the world we had left. Our most essential dignities were regarded as vices, our sense of logic was interpreted as a symptom of insanity, while our most vile instincts, repressed by the education we had received, had become undeniable virtues and one of the conditions for our survival. Thus, the aristocracy of the camp generally included bandits, common criminals, professional assassins, while intellectuals, artists, scholars, and priests formed the underbelly of this new society, invented by the German genius.

Only a very small number of deportees returned. Does this prove the humanity of man who reacted predictably to this change in atmosphere, from the first contact with a world whose existence he was far from suspecting? How many perished after a few days, often a few hours after their arrival! All those who survived Auschwitz do not owe it exclusively to the factors of luck, endurance, will, or resistance. Indeed, these factors contributed greatly to our salvation, but they would certainly have been insufficient if we had not understood, with lightning speed, that in order not to succumb immediately, we had to rid ourselves of a major part of our old morals, of our “humanity,” of all the prejudices of our civilization, in short, to assimilate ourselves by all means to the society of which we were henceforth to be a part, to its way of thinking, its morals, its feelings, its educational spirit, and its laws.

We are well aware that having lived in this climate of adoption, both instinctive and conscious, we have all become more or less inhuman and often shocking for the society we have been fortunate enough to reintegrate. A deep abyss separates us from it, perhaps forever. Its literary, moral, sentimental, and even humorous vocabulary is far too poor to plead in our favor. The most faithful accounts, the most meticulous descriptions will never reflect reality as we have experienced it. We do not pretend to fill this abyss, knowing that it is something impossible to achieve. We are a bit like Pirandellian characters in search of an author capable of telling our adventure. But we are sure we will never find one.

That is why, although we are not writers and although we realize that the task we have undertaken is beyond our means, we want to talk. Our pretensions are modest. We wish to make known an unknown and authentic page in the history of Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

As part of the music commando, we have had the sad privilege of observing almost all the workings of the camp, not only the “atrocities” but also the conception, organization, method, and results expected by its leaders for the immediate future and for the very distant future. It is around us,

musicians, that the heterogeneous world that populated Auschwitz revolved, be it the SS or the inmates. And we believe that we, more than anyone else, had the opportunity, on the one hand, to get to know the German soul, and on the other hand, to closely follow the psychological vicissitudes of the Auschwitz inmates, our brothers in misery.

I. ALLA TEDESCA

When we got off the cattle train that had taken us across Germany to Auschwitz, we were sorted: on one side the old men (the women and children were loaded onto trucks parked on the platform) and on the other side the younger men, including myself, were lined up in columns of a hundred, each consisting of twenty rows of five people.

This it thus how I saw myself, without expecting it in the least, separated from my parents.

After undergoing a cursory check of our strength, we set out on our march, flanked by a dozen armed German soldiers. My neighbor, knowing a little bit of the German language, tried to have a conversation with the soldier who was marching beside us. He was quite talkative. In the midst of a legitimate concern, I interrupted this conversation from time to time to ask my companion to translate the German words for me. He did so not without reluctance, as if he wanted to keep these revelations to himself. However, I came to know them little by little.

The trucks would transport the old and the weak to a special camp, reserved for easy work. As for us, young and of strong constitution, we were going to be assigned to various jobs, according to the aptitudes of each one. Our luggage, left on the arrival platform, would be returned to us inside the camp as soon as the control and hygiene formalities were completed. We would be able to see our families every Sunday, provided that we behaved well.

I felt the tension in my chest loosen. I was not afraid of work, even very hard work. And I thought that I would work all the more courageously because I would receive the promised reward at the end of the week.

After half an hour's walk, our column stopped in front of a red building that looked very gloomy. We had undoubtedly just arrived at the camp which was intended for us.

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I am trying to clearly reconstruct my first memories of Auschwitz. I am struggling to do so. I have the feeling that I experienced these things at the time of my early childhood. Only furtive images remain. They are vague impressions rather than memories.

I hear foul swearing and guttural utterances from strange, rowdy characters, robust like professional wrestlers, wearing red or yellow armbands and equipped with sturdy clubs that fall on our faces and backs constantly and for any reason. They are not German soldiers, these individuals are prisoners, like us, dressed in striped convict costumes or civilian suits with clearly visible red lines painted on the back of the jacket and on the pants. While taking off our hats in front of our SS guards, as each one of us must do, they talk to them almost as equals, confide in them with a familiarity that seems inappropriate to me and seem to enjoy our misery with all their heart. They are the ones who direct us from one service to another, they are the ones who distribute our food to us, and finally they are the ones who represent for us the supreme authority.

I see myself naked, in endless queues, sometimes in barracks, sometimes outside in the mud, under an icy shower, to undergo the relentless protocol of camp hygiene: a haircut and a shower as cold as the rain, followed by a frantic run through the mud with a new accompaniment of rain and blows with sticks. Then, piled up on the cement floor of a building with no windows, we are still waiting for a packet of rags to be handed out to us to be used as our clothing. We are still waiting for a number to be assigned to us, which from now on will replace our social identity. I no longer have a first or last name, and my only identification is this number tattooed on my left forearm. We are constantly waiting... without knowing exactly what we are waiting for. Today is Wednesday and there are still three long days left until Sunday!

If this wait could only come to an end! Whether they take us to work or let us sleep... or at least sit down! The cold penetrates us, the hunger pulls at us, we are harassed, exhausted, at the end of strength and patience.

Finally, all kinds of containers are distributed to us. There are pots, empty cans, spittoons, chamber pots, there are also real camp bowls, in the shape of salad bowls with a capacity of about two liters. A barrel is brought on a kind of stretcher, by two athletes who put it on the ground. A shout is heard:

“Put yourself in groups of five! *Zu fünf!*”

And it is again a fight, blows raining down upon on us, men collapse, others rush to the barrel to draw the grayish liquid it contains. The blows increase in frequency and violence.

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The men are finally arranged in groups of five. One of the red-armed, rowdy characters uses a large ladle to reluctantly pour a tiny part of the liquid into the bowl of those who, calmed by the blows, now advance obediently, still in fives. From time to time, the soup attendant will strike a blow with his sticky ladle to those who have the misfortune to anticipate or delay the prescribed order. As soon as they are served, the men must pull over to the other side of the barracks so that they do not have to go to the distribution a second time. And it is always by five, infallibly by five, that they line up.

Five! This is the fateful number of the German camp. “*Zu Fünf!*” by five - and “*Aufgeben zu fünf!*” - Complete with five! are the eternal refrains. Knowing how to line up by five, how to fill a hole in the previous row, it doesn't sound like anything, yet it's quite an art for a prisoner! I learned it in the end and relatively quickly, but at what a price! How many have had to pay with their lives for their inability to adapt, while walking or even at rest, to this invariable discipline!

After three days and three nights of interminable “formalities” I find myself, at the end of my physical and moral strength, huddled against a wall of the barracks. I can finally extend my bruised limbs. Lying, like my companions in misfortune, on the floor paved with poorly joined bricks, I feel my eyelids closing, but it is impossible for me to sleep. The image of my parents haunts me constantly. I already know that I won't see them, not tomorrow on Sunday, nor ever again. The hairdresser who cut my hair - a Parisian like me and who has been at the camp for a long time already - has informed me of the plight of my father and mother, as well as of the fate that is reserved for me. I am no longer unaware that my parents were murdered and that I myself will not get out of here alive. There is just enough time to offer the little physical strength I have left as an offering to the Nazi Moloch to compensate him for the costs of my maintenance: four or five weeks at the most.

A torpor invades my limbs and I slowly fall asleep. An excruciating hunger gnaws at me. Where are you, gingerbread and sweets left in my luggage? Why didn't I eat you before the end of the trip! My poor parents... For a moment, I lose all notion of reality and I am transported in thought to the life of the past. Home, work, my friends, my juvenile loves... How far away it all seems to me, immaterial!

Suddenly, I jump in a burst of unspeakable joy. I am convinced that I am having an abominable nightmare, and that all I have to do is wake up and chase it away forever! I get up, rub my eyes, and look around me.

Alas! No. The reality is there, cruel, inexorable. A weak light bulb lights up the gloomy decor of my barracks. A long row of inert bodies, wrapped in rags, piled up against each other, moving from time to time to scratch or change position. These were, some time ago, normal beings, beings who lived, worked, hoped... Yes, the reality is there! Yes, the reality is there! I can refuse to accept it, but I will have to submit to it.

I go back to bed and plunge again into torpor. I see myself caught in a horrible mousetrap, with no way out. Outside, there is war, things are happening, people are fighting for a cause. And here I am, lying on an odious pallet, like the last of the vagabonds. Wouldn't it be better to get it over with? But how could it be done?

A shotgun blast outside, then a second one. I shudder with anguish. What is the meaning of this? Who is being shot?

Silence. Sleep finally wins me over and, this time, for good.