

# *Camp of* **DISAPPEARING Men**



The record written in blood at Oswiecim and institutions like it in the Nazi dominated countries should be preserved to document the diabolical methods of Nazi suppression and warn the free men of the future against the tyranny which we allowed to rise and blight our time.

*Elmer Davis, Director, OWI*

*Illustrated by* JOHN GROTH

“**R**UN! . . . **RUN!**” shouted the guards.

At first I thought the Nazis had softened with human sympathy and were giving us a chance to stretch our legs after the long torture of our journey from Warsaw to the prison camp in cattle cars. Without food, water, or sanitary facilities we had somehow survived the trip, a hundred-odd men packed into each human stable.

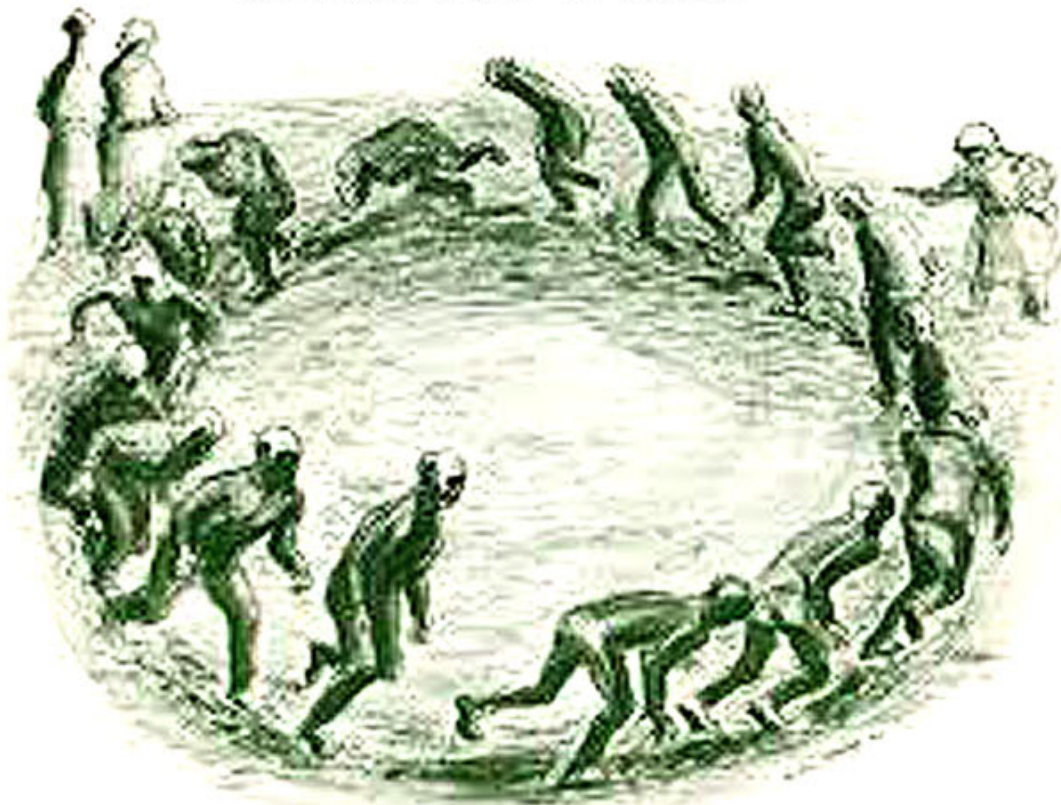
“Gymnastic exercises for the new arrivals,” the Oswiecim receiving officer had curtly ordered when we landed at length in the camp we had all so greatly feared.

They brought us to the exercise yard, where we changed into prison clothing. We were broken up into groups, each forming a big circle. Then we were told to run—smartly and in formation.

The first lap felt good. It warmed my bare feet—they had had us remove our sticky shoes. But on the second lap the hard gravel began to burn my soles. The third time around, it seemed like I was running on soft, green grass, but that was just the numbness coming into my feet, numbness that soon turned to sharp pain.



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“Run . . . run!” A hundred and fifty steps a minute on thousands of sharp needles that stabbed and jabbed. Some of the men began to waver. By slapping and beating them the guards kept them going.

I wondered if we were permitted to run outside the gravel path where the ground was softer. Others must have had the same idea, until one fellow swerved out of the circle and was tripped up at once by a guard. He lay on the ground, bent up in agony, until the guard kicked him to his feet and pushed him back into the circle.

Gradually the brown gravel took on the color of human blood.

Several of the men, including Jan, lost consciousness—but not for long. Jan was revived by being dragged over to a pump, where they poured water over him until he got onto his feet and came back to the exercises. One they brought to by stamping on his chest with their heavy boots. Another was brought back to his senses by a guard who jammed a stick in his mouth and twisted it.

To relieve their boredom the guards introduced a new routine:—“Halt! About face! Run!” The idea of this was to produce dizziness, nausea and more unconscious victims to pummel. Each time I turned around the faces of my fellow gymnasts seemed to be whirling in a fantastic ballet.

The last exercise turned out to be an ingenious form of torture.

“Halt!” cried a guard. “Squat on the knees. Do not move until the order is given.”

How long we had to stay in the squatting position I cannot say, it seemed so eternal. The guards roared with laughter at the grotesque exhibition. A blow on the shaking knees was intended to steady them and bring the prisoner to order.

They waited until a dozen or more of us collapsed completely before ending their little initiation to Oswiecim.



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“Attention! March to the barracks!”

Once inside, we tried to bandage our feet. We found some scraps of paper, but the blood soaked through it quickly.

“You’re wasting your time,” said a camp veteran of six months. “Wounds never heal in Oswiecim.”

**THE OFFICIAL** slogan of Oswiecim was *Arbeit Macht Frei* — “Work Brings Freedom.” It was lettered on a big sign that hung over the camp entrance.

The symbol of our colony was a huge chimney painted bright red—the chimney of the crematory, which came to be known to us as “The Factory.” Fifty a day was a good “production” average. Every day the casket cart made regular trips to the crematory.

The day began at four a.m. We jumped from our pallets, pulled on our clothing, rushed to the latrines that were always occupied, splashed ourselves in the same bowl of water used by hundreds of others. If we hurried we might have time to grab a few mouthfuls of food—one bowl had to serve three prisoners—and to drink our acorn coffee, before it was time for roll call.

My first day in Oswiecim was typical. In the middle of the camp was an uneven rise of ground. My group was detailed to cart dirt from some distance away and level off the top of the plateau.

With our wheelbarrows we formed a continuous “production line.” After the first few trips—each at a quicker tempo—the slope seemed like a mountainside, the wheelbarrow like a five-ton truck.

“Quicker . . . quicker,” cried the overseer, striding along the line using his whip at random.

“Courage,” whispered Jan.

The deadweight of the wheelbarrow swayed from side to side. I am sure we both would have toppled over had I not seen the beat-





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ings administered to those who fell.

Many of my companions collapsed. Although that cut down the manpower, it seemed to please the Germans . . . it was all in line with policy—the workers had earned their “freedom.”

How I longed for sleep those first few nights in Oswiecim! My pallet of straw had been threshed a thousand times by the twisting bodies of former tenants, until now there was nothing left but chaff. I should have said “our” pallet—Jan’s and mine—for each mattress was shared by two or more prisoners.

There was only one paper-thin blanket to cover both our bodies, gripped with cold and trembling with fatigue.

I was not long in learning to identify the sounds in the barrack—the groaning that accompanied the torment of festering wounds; the low murmuring of men who prayed through the night; the weary sighs.

I tried to sleep, but the fitful dozing that was the shabby substitute for sleep brought neither forgetfulness nor relaxation.

Even the nights at Oswiecim granted no relief.

Some weeks later, after Jan had been punished on the post, I found out more about this twentieth century form of Inquisition. Each post was always occupied; there were never any vacancies.

“They put your arms over your head,” Jan said, “and chain your wrists to hooks driven in the posts. You are hooked up to a height so that your feet just miss the floor. Your arms strain under the weight of your body until it seems as if they are pulled loose from their sockets. At first you twist and squirm to relieve the pressure on your wrists and shoulders, but every motion



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is agony.”

“Crimes” that led to the post could be almost any minor offense—smoking during work, hiding from work during a rainstorm, stealing bread, speaking out of turn at roll call.

Posting took place every Sunday. The idea of holding it in weekly installments followed out the Oswiecim principle of torturing a prisoner already condemned to death for months after sentence had been secretly passed.

**THE MOST** closely guarded secret in Oswiecim was the underground penal chamber—some spoke of it as the “Purgatory Chamber.” We knew many who went there, but none who ever returned.

One night in October we heard the crunching of feet on the gravel and the sounds of steps filtering down and vanishing into the basement. We counted 500 lost souls on their “descent into Hell.”



We finally learned they were Russian prisoners of war. So now we had a new element in our transient population, which was largely Polish with a sprinkling of Czechoslovaks, Germans and Yugoslavs.

Then came the shrieking—in-human cries that penetrated the heavy walls of the lethal chamber. Several times the cries rose and fell in the night. At last there was silence, ominous silence that seeped through our souls. “God help them,” whispered Jan.

Four nights later there was again the sound of crunching gravel. Carts were being brought up by special details to pick up the Russians’ uniforms, which were taken to the camp warehouse for repair and recondition. Finally they came for the corpses.

Jan, who had been assigned to the removal detail, was shaken by his experience for days, although dead men were common sights in Oswiecim. It was not just the corpses themselves, he said, it was the mute eloquence with which they cursed this gigantic outrage against all mankind. And it was the eerie



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setting, too—the moon threw a ghastly floodlight over the stacks of stiffened limbs and livid flesh. The detail worked hard, laboriously wheeling the carts from Purgatory to the crematory.

On one trip, Jan told me, his cart overturned and the corpses rolled down an embankment, seeming to regain life for a few seconds, waving their sprawling arms and finally coming to rest in a scattered mass.

The first rays of dawn streaked across the bodies of the dead and brought out an extraordinary greenish pallor in them. And then, in that strange luminosity, Jan discovered the secret of Purgatory. He had a corpse by the arm and suddenly he stopped and stared into its face. Years ago—in 1917—he had seen that same spectral appearance when he came across a dead soldier in an abandoned trench.

It was the mark of poison gas.

One night the siren's ominous wail could be heard by all for miles around as warning that a prisoner had escaped. To us it was the knell of death, for the camp rule provided that ten prisoners be held hostage for every escaped prisoner and that they be put to death in the event he was not captured.

We all rushed to the yard for roll call. It became a familiar Oswiecim routine. There we stood, paralyzed with fright.

Meals, sleep, everything was suspended while the chill wind tore at our flimsy wood-fibre uniforms. Backs ached, legs ached, feet ached—and always the cold and the suspense.

Once in awhile a body would fall to the ground . . . one prisoner was no longer concerned with the death watch.

Finally the commandant would appear, pacing up and down the ranks. Each prisoner would straighten himself to the utmost, stick out his chest and raise his head, to look as healthy and valuable a piece of property as possible.

“*Komm!*” fell the verdict softly, and the victim's body would make a final vain effort to convince the commandant of his indispensability.

“*Komm!*” echoed the verdict harshly, and the prisoner's body deflated.



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The ten hostages were marched to the penal barrack, down the ten steps to Purgatory.

One tragic incident demonstrated how thoroughly the "ten-for-one" routine had debauched our mentality and character.

A crew of twenty prisoners was tearing down a building near the main road. The men were fairly green and had not yet acquired the prison tricks of faking work.

Only one of them behaved like a veteran. He kept appearing in a different spot in the wreckage carrying the same piece of lumber. As the guard did not make a move, the prisoner became bolder. He put down his load and disappeared from view, but the guard spied him wriggling under a pile of rubbish. Giving him a few moments to get well out of sight, the guard gave a hoarse shout of alarm:

"Wojcik has escaped! Quick—look for him!"

The Nazi, assuming the role of beater in the hunt, directed the crew first one way and then another, to build up the suspense of the sport as long as possible, but always moving them gradually in the direction of the would-be runaway.

At last one of the crew uncovered the hiding man. He struck at him with a crowbar.

"Don't hit me," the captive begged.

But his appeal for mercy went unheeded. One after another, prisoners rained blows on him, each seeking personal vengeance.

The guard was delighted with his little game of cops and robbers, until he realized it was about to end.

"Stop!" he called, but it was too late.

A blow on Wojcik's head had ended his struggles . . . "freed" by the hands of his own brothers in suffering.

**AFTER ALL** the horror and misery he had gone through, it was finally imagination that broke down my good friend, Jan.

It was because of one short phrase in a letter from his wife:—"I am so grateful that you have your own means of escape." Those twelve words had condemned Jan to death—in his own mind.

"The Gestapo just would not believe that she was only referring to man's spiritual powers of resistance



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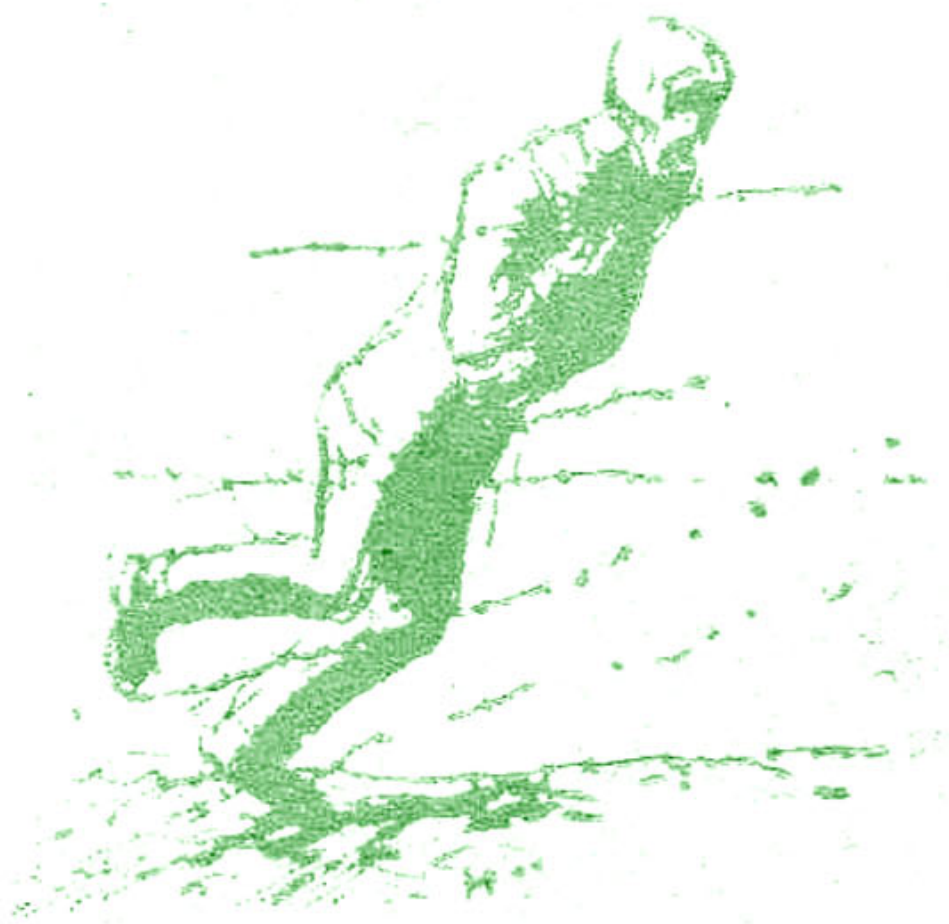
to evil," he said hopelessly. "In their stupidity they would only suspect a crude plot of some kind."

I did not realize Jan was so desperate, until the day we were down in the fields by the southern boundary. We had worked down to the warning wire—a single strand of wire on which was hung a sign marked "Halt!" Beyond that was No Man's Land—a strip of ground about a hundred yards wide extending to the electrified barbed-wire fence. Any prisoner seen between the warning wire and the outside fence was instantly fired on by the guards.

All at once Jan started to walk toward the fence. The guards with our party yelled "Halt!" and started firing on him. Passing the warning wire he ran, his shoulders back, his head up—even from the back you could see his defiance: "Riddle me with bullets, you fools! Come on—kill me . . . hurry!"

The machine guns opened up, but on he ran, streaming blood. Still the spirit was master over the bullets that struck him again and again. Finally, as he reached the barbed-wire fence, he stumbled into it head first.

When they tore his body loose from the fence there was no defiance in his face. Just a smile—a smile of profound relief. Jan had made good his escape.



# CORONET

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