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THE railroad tracks that lead to the "Death Gate" of the Auschwitz II (Birkenau extermination camp) where the Jews and other prisoners from all over Europe arrived in cattle cars and were unloaded like animals near the gas chambers.



Losing luggage on my way to Auschwitz

Text and photos by Shiela Samonte-Pesayco

On a rainy night in June, my husband and I boarded a flight from Manila to Singapore, the first leg of our 18-hour trip to Warsaw, Poland. The pilot announced that the flight would be delayed as a plane stalled on the runway. It took off almost an hour late. Since we had only 55 minutes to catch the connecting flight to Warsaw, I found myself praying for a miracle.



A ROW of granite slabs in various languages (photo shows the one in English) set up between the ruins of the crematoria in Auschwitz II in memory of the more than a million lives who perished in the Holocaust.

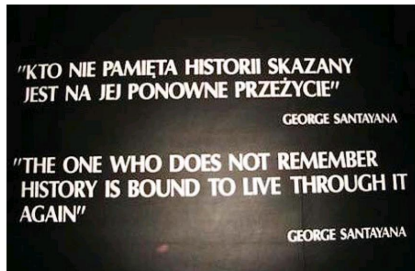
THIS sign greets visitors entering the Extermination Block in Auschwitz I main camp (right). A stockpile of canisters of Zyklon B, the cyanide-based pesticide used in the Auschwitz gas chambers. Ironically, the Zyklon pesticide gas was first developed by a Jewish chemist named Fritz Haber who received a Nobel Prize for his work on ammonia (bottom right).

We made it to the boarding gate just in time. But we had to beg for another miracle; we knew it would be next to impossible for our luggage to be loaded onto our next flight. So the journey to Warsaw became a long and sleepless 15-hour ordeal. I'd be turning 48 in just a week, and the thought of spending my birthday in my "birthday suit" crossed my mind. When we arrived at the baggage claim area at the Warsaw airport and did not see our luggage, we knew we were in for a challenging adventure.

This story, however, is not about the luggage we lost. It's about the next day.

AT THE HEARTLAND OF TERROR

On the eve of the National Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Nazi Concentration Camps in Poland on June 14, we went to Auschwitz, a small Polish town roughly an hour away from Krakow. On that day 78 years



ago, the German Nazis sent 728 Polish political prisoners to a concentration and extermination camp in Auschwitz. Eventually, the camp was expanded to accommodate Jews and other perceived enemies of the Nazis from all over Europe.

So for seven heartbreaking hours during the walking tour, we listened, witnessed, and wept with people of various nationalities we had never met till then.



We were glued to our headphones as our Polish tour guide explained the camp system — from the prisoner selection to extermination.

The tour started in Auschwitz I. The main camp has 22 brick buildings that covered about 40 square kilometers, equivalent to nearly 7,500 baseball fields. As soon as we entered the main gate, we started taking photos of the infamous wrought-iron sign on which is written *Arbeit macht frei* (German for "Work sets you free"), that has symbolized the gateway to Holocaust hell. From 1940 to 1945, over a million prisoners passed by this gate and only 7,000 managed to come out alive after the Soviets liberated the camp on Jan. 27, 1945.

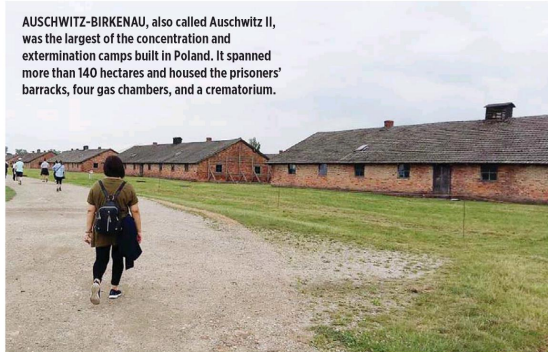
Prisoners from Poland and around Europe were transported like animals in cattle cars to Auschwitz II (the extermination camp in nearby Birkenau). Each was packed with 100 people —

double the carrying capacity — and prisoners had to share a bucket of water for drinking, another bucket for their bowels. As the trains had very tiny windows, some people suffocated and died even before they could reach the camp.

INHUMAN SELECTION

Once in Auschwitz II, the prisoners scrambled out of the cattle cars with desperate gasps for air. They were told to leave their belongings behind with the promise of a better life that awaited them inside the camp.

They filed into lines for inspection. German SS doctors then started the process of "selection." With a single motion of their thumb, they decided if the prisoner was fit to work or to die. Those who made it past this lineup endured hard labor for nearly five years, with very little food and water, but with plenty of reasons to die. ▶



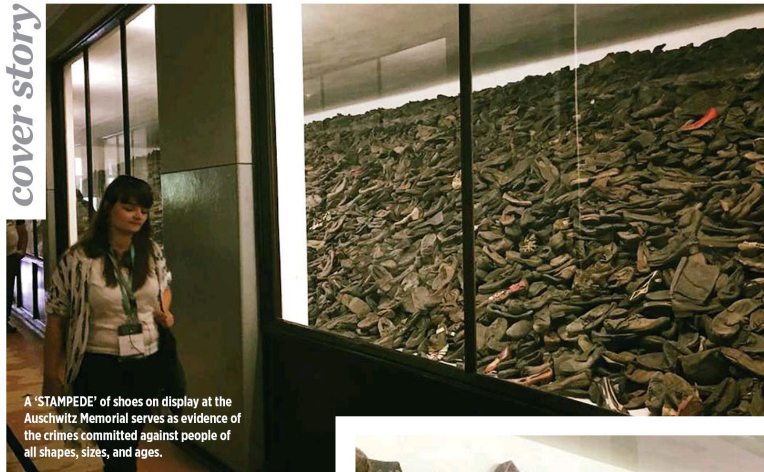
AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU, also called Auschwitz II, was the largest of the concentration and extermination camps built in Poland. It spanned more than 140 hectares and housed the prisoners' barracks, four gas chambers, and a crematorium.



TONS and tons of human hair shaved from the heads of dead Jews and other prisoners in Auschwitz (above). Some were later fashioned by German textile makers into furniture stuffing and liners for the uniforms of Nazi soldiers. Electrified barbed-wire fences separate the barracks in Auschwitz II (Birkenau extermination camp)



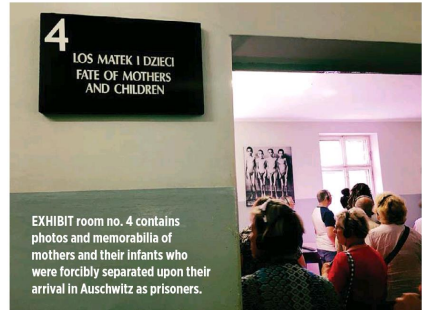
cover story



A 'STAMPEDE' of shoes on display at the Auschwitz Memorial serves as evidence of the crimes committed against people of all shapes, sizes, and ages.

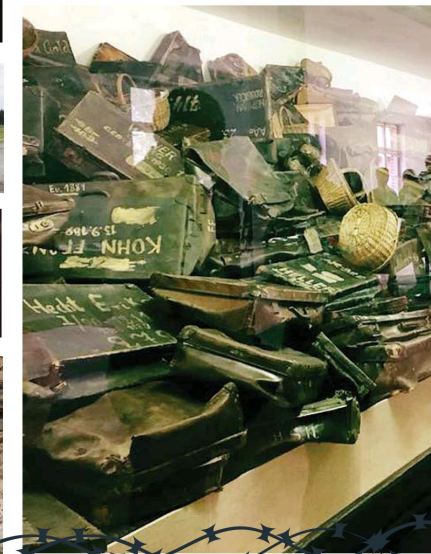
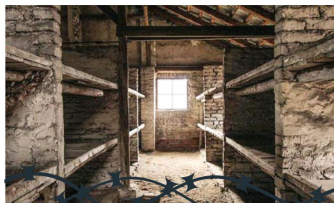


THE prisoners were given three meals a day, but got less than half their daily calorie requirement. In the morning, they were each rationed half a liter of unsweetened coffee or herbal tea. Lunch consisted of a foul-tasting, watery soup with potatoes and vegetables. For supper, each was given a 300-gram piece of bread with a spoonful of margarine, jam, or cheese.



4
LOS MATEK I DZIECI
FATE OF MOTHERS
AND CHILDREN

EXHIBIT room no. 4 contains photos and memorabilia of mothers and their infants who were forcibly separated upon their arrival in Auschwitz as prisoners.



SUITCASES stolen from people deported to Auschwitz still bear the names and birth dates of their original owners.

THE gas chambers in Auschwitz II (Birkenau extermination camp) were disguised as shower rooms and had fake shower heads so the unsuspecting prisoners were unaware that they were being led to their death (top photo). The furnace where bodies of prisoners killed in the gas chambers were brought for cremation (middle photo). The barracks in Auschwitz II, which housed Jews and other prisoners, were originally designed to serve as stables for horses (bottom photo).

About a quarter of the prisoners — the elderly, the handicapped, and mothers who refused to hand over their babies — were immediately sent to Auschwitz II (the Birkenau extermination camp). They were told that they would shower, undergo delousing, and shave their heads. Inside the gas chambers, they "showered" in Zyklon B, a cyanide-based pesticide that proved more efficient at killing than shooting with guns. Meanwhile, those deemed "fit" for work were sent to one of the other brick buildings where they were registered, told to undress, were shaved, disinfected, and forced through showers that were either extremely cold or

scalding hot. Each was assigned a serial number, tattooed on their arm (on the chest below the breast for Russian prisoners of war) and sewn on their clothing.

Stripped of their identity, male prisoners were given striped pyjamas while women got smock-type dresses. All received a pair of wooden clogs. As socks were not supplied, the hard clogs would rub on their feet and ankles, causing foot sores and infection. They worked and slept in the same clothes, which would be changed only every six weeks.

On their uniforms were their "badge of shame" — a patch to signify the reason for their imprisonment. Jews were marked with two superimposed triangles that resembled the "Star of David," criminals with green patches, political prisoners with red, homosexuals with pink, Jehovah's Witnesses with purple, and "asocials" (gypsies, alcoholics, addicts, vagrants, prostitutes, and the mentally ill) with a black triangle patch.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

At 4 o'clock in the morning, prisoners would be woken up by the sound of a gong and herded like marked livestock into their long roll-call assemblies. As an all-female orchestra played in the background, supposedly to boost work morale, prisoners would form lines of 10 "so that it would be easier for the SS to count and account if someone has escaped," our tour guide said. The prisoners would then do over 10 hours of backbreaking work — leveling the ground, erecting new blocks and buildings, laying roads, digging ditches, and, later on as the Nazi regime expanded, digging coal, producing armaments and chemicals, and building industrial plants. Whatever spare time they had was spent lining up for food rations or using the pitiless latrines

where three prisoners would usually share a single hole to relieve themselves. Worse, in the first two years that the camp was opened, there was no water supply, and the construction of washrooms and toilets only started in 1944, a year before liberation.

Those unable to survive this daily ordeal due to exhaustion, starvation, disease, and other forms of physical abuse by the SS men, had to "rejoin" the assembly formation at the end of the workday. Their bodies had to be carried back to the camp by their fellow prisoners, and were dumped into an open pit until cremation.

Our tour guide said some prisoners — unable to stand the daily beating with batons from the SS men — were eventually driven to madness or committed suicide by touching the electrically charged barbed-wire fences that separated their barracks.

"This is why the prisoners fought to be assigned to the latrines," our guide said. "At least in the latrines, SS soldiers did not like to hang around because of the filth." She said the prisoners preferred the work of digging out excrement with their bare hands all day, no matter how inhuman, as this kept them alive.

By nightfall, the prisoners would return to their brick or wooden barracks to rest their weary bodies. Their ordeal, however, would extend through the night. As more than 700 people were crammed in one barracks that used to serve as a stable for 52 horses, prisoners had to share a bunk bed with three others. Each wooden bunk had three tiers: those who slept on the topmost bed had to endure the cold winter nights or the scorching summer heat, as the roofs did not have insulation. Those who occupied the lower beds, however, had it worse — not only did they have to suffer

from the dampness of the marshy ground, the vermin and the rats, but they also served as human catch basins for the foul-smelling diarrhea leaking from the prisoners sleeping on the upper bunks.

PROOF OF LIFE

The harrowing tales of the prisoners' living conditions have been told in many books and movies of the Holocaust, several of which I have seen. None of them, however, prepared me for the day I would see with my own eyes the physical evidence of crimes displayed in the exhibit halls of blocks 4 to 6.

In block 4, a huge glass display filled with tons and tons of human hair of different colors and lengths filled half the entire room. The hair belonged to the prisoners who died in the gas chambers, which would then be woven into fabric, rope, carpets, mattress stuffing, and lining stiffeners for uniforms for the SS.

An entire hallway contained huge stacks of suitcases, with the names and birth dates of the prisoners handwritten and painted on the side. Our guide called our attention to the smaller suitcases, marked with 1939 as birth year, which meant that the prisoners were just two to five years of age when they entered the camp. A room dedicated to mothers and children has photos of the young prisoners in striped pyjamas standing behind a barbed wire — their baby clothes, shoes, and dismembered dolls are encased in a glass box.

Other rooms had similar glass displays filled with eyeglasses, artificial limbs, pots and pans, brushes of various kinds, pens, and empty cans of the Zyklon B used in the gas chambers.

On the yard of block 11 is a reconstruction of the so-called "Death Wall" where those condemned to die were shot by a fir-

ing squad of SS men. It was here where our tour guide left us to offer our prayers in silence. A sea of flowers, cards, and teddy bears from visitors from all over the world were strewn on the wall. Some tourists who were unable to stand the sight either broke down or stepped out. I stood still, finding solace in the silence when the tour guide stopped narrating the unspeakable.

A STORY TO BE TOLD

To this day, the exact death toll in Auschwitz remains uncertain, as many were unregistered when they were brought to the camp and much evidence was destroyed by the German SS in the final days of World War II. The only certainty is that, all over the world, Auschwitz has become a symbol of terror and genocide.

I remember the sign on the extermination building that bears the quote, "The one who does not remember history is bound to live through it again."

Of the 7,000 prisoners who left Auschwitz in 1945, only a few wanted to tell the story. Many would rather erase it from their memory, or deny that the Holocaust even happened. Our guide said there are even stories of some survivors who would sleep at night hiding a piece of bread under their pillow, forever scarred with the fear of starvation.

Two days after our tour of Auschwitz, I was reunited with my luggage at Warsaw Chopin Airport. It took me some time to open it and check my belongings. Somehow I felt I no longer needed them. If I had I had were just my passport as proof of identity, a photo of my family in my wallet, a piece of bread to get by, a full lock of hair on my head, and the spirit of a survivor, I should be complete.

This not a story about a lost luggage, however. It's about what you do when you finally get it back.



A GLASS urn with the last handful of human ash in Auschwitz.