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《Book Review》

**A Book Review of Miklós Nyiszli,
*I was Doctor Mengele's Assistant:
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Miklós Nyiszli (July 17, 1901–May 5, 1956) was a Hungarian Jewish physician who was deported from Hungary to Auschwitz with his wife and daughter in May 1944. He was at first forced to work in KL Auschwitz III (Concentration Camp Monowitz); then Josef Mengele, recognizing his wide forensic knowledge and experience as an anatomist, decided to keep him on hand as an assistant in KL Auschwitz II (Concentration Camp Birkenau). During the eight months up until the death marches from Auschwitz in January 1945, he was assigned to work at the crematoria as a prisoner-doctor belonging to the so-called Sonderkommando in KL Auschwitz II. The autopsy room was in the building of Crematorium I, the site of arguably one of the largest final stages of the “Final Solution of the Jewish Problem.”

After being released at Ebensee in

Austria, Nyiszli returned to Nagivárad/Oradea in Romania and, in 1946, published his memoirs in Hungarian, entitled *Orvos voltam Auschwitzban* (I was a Doctor in Auschwitz). The present book is the new English edition of his memoirs, translated from the Polish edition¹ by Witold Zbirohowski-Kościa.

Nyiszli's eyewitness account does not only describe in detail how the Holocaust was carried out through his concrete descriptions of the extermination of innocent people and the inhuman experimentation on human beings in Auschwitz, but also reveals the philosophy and background of the racial policy advanced by the Third Reich in order to promote the breeding of the Aryan race and to eradicate the “inferior” races (mainly Jews). By situating his own experiences in history, Nyiszli analyzes the roots of the dichotomy

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¹ *Byłem asystentem doktora Mengele* (I was Dr. Mengele's assistant), Oświęcim 2000.

of human beings born with the right to live and “those born without it.” Such a dichotomy is still now close to us, both in a direct way, but also in a different way than in the era of the second World War, *i. e.* in a smarter and more grotesque way. In this sense, the eyewitness account might be said to alert us to the dangers involved in such mode of thought that has not yet become a relic of the past.

Some memoirs written by Holocaust survivors were published at a time when memories of the war were vivid: Viktor E. Frankl’s *Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager*, 1947; Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz*, 1947²; and Gisella Perl, *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, 1948³. Needless to say, these are valuable testimonies that reveal the reality of concentration camps. In contrast, Nyiszli, who as an assistant to Mengele, the Angel of Death, had a key role in the pseudo-scientific experiments, provides inside information on the concentration camps, *i. e.* on what the Third Reich never wanted to be revealed to the outside world. In this respect, his memoirs written by one of the “Geheimnisträger (secret bearers)” (Greif/Killian) are unique.

Translations of Nyiszli’s original memoirs have been published in various

countries. The English edition of Nyiszli’s memoirs was first translated by Tibère Kremer and Richard Seaver in 1960 and published by Panther Books in the UK in 1962 as *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eyewitness Account*. The book with the same title and contents was published by Arcade Publishing in the USA in 2011. In 2012, the Kremer-Seaver translation was republished in the Penguin Modern Classics series under the same title as the first English edition, with a new introduction by Richard J. Evans instead of Seaver’s preface.

Nyiszli’s original memoirs contain misremembered dates and SS ranks, mistakes about the number of people killed in Auschwitz and the capacity of the crematoria, as well as hearsay and misconceptions spread in the concentration camp at the time, almost all of which are left uncorrected in the aforementioned Kremer-Seaver translation. Though the new English edition of Nyiszli’s memoirs accepts parts of the aforementioned English edition, it is regarded as a newly-translated edition. The editor, Franciszek Piper, who is the former Director of the History Department of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and who investigated the numbers of the victims murdered at Auschwitz⁴, adds 36 sheets of selected

² These two books mentioned are available in Japanese.

³ Republished with ‘Introduction’ by Phyllis Lassner and Danny M. Cohen, London, Lexington Books 2019.

⁴ “Most researchers now believe that the number of people killed at Auschwitz was between 1 and 1.5 million, the vast majority

photographs and documents as well as 66 notes and a concise biography of Nyiszli. The inclusion of Piper's notes and visual materials is a critical feature of the new English edition. For any memoir, it is necessary and important to research the background as carefully as possible, correcting any errors in dates or misinformation that might have been believed to be true at the time of writing, in order to enhance the memoir's authenticity. This is also true of Nyiszli's memoirs, and Gideon Greif and Andreas Kilian have rightly pointed out the necessity of correcting his memoirs by interviewing survivors⁵. The notes in the new English edition serve this purpose. The German edition of Nyiszli's

memoirs⁶ contains 146 notes and many photos which are of great scholarly value, so that it, together with Evans' introduction in the Penguin Modern Classics series, would be useful in grasping more correctly the situation in Birkenau at the last phase.

For memoirs of the Sonderkommandos who worked in the crematoria built in the concentration camp in Auschwitz, see many eyewitness accounts in Marcel Ruby, *Le Livre de la Déportation: La vie et la mort dans les 18 camps de concentration et d'extermination*, Paris 1995 and Shlomo Venezia, *Sonderkommando: Dans l'enfer des chambres à gaz*, Paris 2007. Nyiszli described in his memoirs how the twelfth Sonderkommando secretly documented the reality of the crematoria and buried the documents near Crematorium II. The documents concerned have not yet been discovered, but other documents have been, as Piper noted. For a deciphering of these documents, see Nicholas Chare and Dominic Williams, *Matters of Testimony Interpreting the Scrolls of Auschwitz*, New York & Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2016⁷. Finally, two films have been based on

of whom (90%) were Jews.” in Note 2 (p. 177) of the newest English edition. Based on Piper's research, Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau states “Overall numbers by ethnicity or category of deportee” as follows: 1 million Jews, 70–75 thousand Poles, 21 thousand Gypsies, 15 thousand Soviet Prisoner-of-Wars and 10–15 thousand others (the sum is approximately 1.1 million). in: <http://auschwitz.org/en/history/the-number-of-victims/overall-numbers-by-ethnicity-or-category-of-deportee>, accessed on September 13, 2021. See also Franciszek Piper, *Auschwitz: How Many Perished Jews, Poles, Gypsies, ...*, Kraków 1992.

⁵ Gideon Greif and Andreas Kilian, “Significance, responsibility, challenge: Interviewing the Sonderkommando survivors,” *Sonderkommando-Studien*, Sep. 6, 2011, in: <http://www.sonderkommando-studien.de/artikel.php?c=forschung/significance>, accessed on August 20, 2012.

⁶ Miklós Nyiszli, *Im Jenseits der Menschlichkeit: Ein Gerichtsmediziner in Auschwitz*, Übersetzerin: Angelika Bihari, Bearbeitung der 2. Auflage: Andreas Kilian und Friedrich Herber, Karl Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1992.

⁷ These three books are available in Japanese. Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003, this book is also available in Japanese.

Nyiszli's memoirs, *The Grey Zone* directed by Tim Blake Nelson (2001) and *Son of Saul* directed by László Nemes (2015)⁸.

⁸ These two films are available in Japanese.