

“One Hour for the Holocaust, Ladies and Gentlemen”

Carole Gottlieb Vopat, Ph.D.
University of Wisconsin

“One can't say how life is, how chance or fate deals with people, except by telling a tale.”
 --Hannah Arendt

In “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen” Tadeusz Borowski’s narrative “camera eye” constantly travels from the broad sweep of the camp, the ramp, the sky, to the close-up of “Tadek,” and then, in what literature can do that history does not, moves the reader through the first person voice into the thoughts, feelings, and memories of the narrator. In what has been called “The Literature of Witness,” the terrible panorama that is the history of the Shoah is sharpened to focus on the story of one particular person. Borowski’s prose illustrates history as a lived experience: the very personal terror and cruelty of Tadek’s first twenty four hours as part of the Kanada Kommando; the state of mind bred by being among the ‘privileged’, and the psychological price paid to remain there. In fact, the story is so compelling that students must be reminded that the narrator is not Borowski, whose real behavior in the camp was very different from that of “Tadek.”

This presentation will discuss “This Way for the Gas” as one of the most powerful ways to show “the face of the individual,” especially in universities that do not offer other holocaust study. Within typical surveys of literature, humanities, or history, the instructor in a single class period can use this singular story to introduce students to Holocaust experiences and issues. Although disturbing, the story is approachable. It doesn’t deal with Jewish traditions. It is realistic; it has no need for symbols or surrealism. Students are dropped onto Planet Auschwitz, and asked to imagine and empathize: “What’s happening here?” “What is the narrator seeing?” “What is the narrator feeling?” “How do we know his feelings?”

First, the instructor must **situate the story within its historical context**: the history and operation of Auschwitz, the use of “prisoner-functionaries,” the camp hierarchies, the Kanada Kommando. The narrator himself observes the physical plant of the camp, the roads, the barbed wire, the barracks, the ramps, the vans, the selections. Readers are introduced to bystanders, perpetrators, victims, and the peculiar class of victims who were victim-functionaries. The instructor will discuss such concepts as **“the gray zone,”** and **“choiceless choices,”** and how Borowski is able to present in **language** and within the **traditional structures of literary form** a work true to the incomprehensibility and unfathomability—the unspeakability—of the Holocaust. The reader also learns to read what is not written—as one does in studying **the literature of trauma**-- in the gaps and silences the narrator himself cannot face; the times when Tadek’s restrained, ironic **voice** breaks down.

Through **close reading** of selected excerpts, and prompted by examples of **“study and discussion topics,”** participants will discuss the themes, issues, experiences, questions, and emotions brought up by the story, and various **strategies** of presenting them to the “uninitiated” student.

Selected Topics for Classroom Discussion

Questions of historical context

- Physical plant of the camp
- Routine of "ordinary" camp life
- Hierarchy, Kanada, selections; the wire, the guards, the lice, the disease; beatings, starvation, slave labor; gas chambers and crematorium;
- social stratification in the camp
- Vocabulary for studying the Holocaust: e.g., "cremo Esperanto," muselmanner, ramp, Kapo.

Literature and representation

- finding an appropriate tone and point of view;
- how to cross the frontier separating the normal world from the abnormal universe of the camps;
- Classification: memoir, autobiography, testimony, fiction, "autofiction"?
- Do we suspend critical faculties when reading testimonial fiction?
- Writing as resistance?
- Tragedy, pathos, sentimentality?
- The writing of trauma
- The writing of atrocity
- Appropriateness of the aesthetic response?

Questions of narration and point of view:

- Use of first person narrator
- Difference between Tadek's camp experiences and those of Borowski
- "the camera eye"
- "Development" of the narrator: may one speak about Holocaust literature in traditional literary terms such as bildungsroman, epiphany, resolution, etc.?
- How does the narrator feel about the work he does on the ramp? Do his feelings change? When? Why? How?
- Which experiences, events, and people cause the narrator to respond emotionally: the dead infants; the old woman; the beautiful girl; what causes the narrator to "see" certain individuals, and what are the effects upon him of doing so.
- Various "voices" of the narrator: "functionary" voice; "documentary" voice; voices of anger and cynicism; bitter irony; disgust and self-disgust; voice of compassion and of fear; of guilt and despair; voice of nostalgia; lyrical voice and poetic sensibilities.
- Uses to which these various "voices" are put; how they serve the narrator; how they reveal the narrator; how some deaden, some shield and some preserve his humanity.
- How Borowski manipulates point-of-view so that the reader is forced to sympathize with the story of a man who survived the camp because he cooperated with his jailers in the persecution of victims less fortunate than himself.

Expressing the inexpressible (literary considerations):

- Literary techniques used by author to present chaos and atrocity; to show the rupture between normal world and abnormal universe;
- Use of chronological order; Aristotelian “three unities” of place, time and point of view to structure chaotic experiences; highly rational structure holds together highly irrational nightmare;
- Passage of time and pacing paralleling the organization of the transports of human beings from train to trucks to crematoria, to reflect the speed of the moment—waiting, then arrival, then extermination; also, to reflect Tadek’s feelings about being on the ramp.
- Deceptively pastoral setting
- Alternation of comradeship and normalcy with violence and destruction; what is “normalcy” in the context of the camp?
- Language and figures of speech to convey to the reader the atmosphere and experiences of the camp; e.g., food, insects, waves, Inferno.
- What is *not* described?

Questions of guilt and responsibility:

- Moral and Ethical Dilemmas: “Are we good people?”
- Choiceless choices
- Heroes and villains, saints, martyrs, demons: how are the the various groups of characters, and the individuals within those groups, presented to us?
- Who is responsible? Who is guilty? Of what? *How* guilty? Depravity, heroism, and the gray zone in the story
- What happens when the goal of moral being is not virtue but staying alive?
- How the will to survive will override compassion, even maternal love; what human beings will do to endure the unendurable
- Morality determined by diet: how hungry are you?
- Narrator’s sense that dead Jews have paid for his survival
- How may we judge? Should we judge? With what value system?

Questions of humanity:

- Multilayered view of human nature
- Human strength and weakness
- Apparent human necessity to justify existence, to tolerate misery, and to “turn against someone weaker.”
- Henri’s point of view vs. Tadek’s
- What keeps the workers alive? Is it possible to both survive and remain human?
- Projections into the future: clues to whether Tadek will survive; clues to whether Tadek will survive his liberation: doing the unthinkable in the name of survival only to succeed and then be left to think about what you’ve done for the rest of your life.

Questions of student response:

- How does the knowledge that Borowski himself was in a concentration camp affect our reading of the story?
- How does Borowski break down the reader's resistance to horror?
- Art and empathy: how does Borowski lead us to identify with Tadek?
- Dealing with unease: Unusual to experience testimony in which the behavior and participation of the camp inmates is questioned.
- Helping students realize that they cannot judge the actions of characters with their customary value system; "pre-Auschwitz" and "post-Auschwitz" realities and sensibilities
- Symbol and metaphor as a means to connect Planet Auschwitz with the experiences of the reader
- Emotion as an invitation for students to enter into the event
- Literature as a means to move students from bystanders to witnesses
- Helping students lose their innocence

Demonstration: close reading of opening and selected paragraphs

All of us walk around naked. The delousing is finally over, and our striped suits are back from the tanks of Cyclone B solution, an efficient killer of lice in clothing and of men in gas chambers. Only the inmates in the blocks cut off from ours by the "Spanish goats" (crossed wooden beams wrapped in barbed wire) still have nothing to wear. But all the same, all of us walk around naked: the heat is unbearable. The camp has been sealed off tight. Not a single prisoner, not one solitary louse, can sneak through the gate. The labor Kommandos have stopped working. All day, thousands of naked men shuffle up and down the roads, cluster around the squares, or lie against the walls and on top of the roofs. We have been sleeping on plain boards, since our mattresses and blankets are still being disinfected. From the rear Blockhouses we have a view of the FKL — *Frauenkonzentrationslager*; there too the delousing is in full swing. Twenty-eight thousand women have been stripped naked and driven out of the barracks. Now they swarm around the large yard between the Blockhouses.

The heat rises, the hours are endless. We are without even our usual diversion: the wide roads leading to the crematoria are empty. For several days now, no new transports have come in. Part of Canada has been liquidated and detailed to a labor Kommando — one of the very toughest — at Harmenz. For there exists in the camp a special brand of justice based on envy: when the rich and mighty fall, their friends see to it that they fall to the very bottom. And Canada, our Canada, which smells not of maple forests but of French perfume, has amassed great fortunes in diamonds and currency from all over Europe.

Several of us sit on the top bunk, our legs dangling over the edge. We slice the neat loaves of crisp, crunchy bread. It is a bit coarse to the taste, the kind that stays fresh for days. Sent all the way from Warsaw — only a week ago my mother held this white loaf in her hands — dear Lord, dear Lord.

We unwrap the bacon, the onion, we open a can of evaporated milk. Henri, the fat Frenchman, dreams aloud of the French wine brought by the transports from Strasbourg, Paris, Marseille... Sweat streams down his body.

.....
 “Patience, patience. When the new transports come, I’ll bring all you want. We’ll be going on the ramp again!”

“And what if there aren’t any more cremo transports?” I say spitefully. “Can’t you see how much easier life is becoming around here: no limit on packages, no more beatings? You even write letters home... One hears all kind of talk, and, dammit, they’ll run out of people!”

“Stop talking nonsense.” Henri’s serious fat face moves rhythmically, his mouth is full of sardines. We have been friends for a long time, but I do not even know his last name. “Stop talking nonsense,” he repeats, swallowing with effort. “They can’t run out of people, or we’ll starve to death in this blasted camp. All of us live on what they bring.”

.....
[Henri takes Tadek out on the ramp with him for the first time.]

We march fast, almost at a run. There are guards all around, young men with automatics. We pass camp II B, then some deserted barracks and a clump of unfamiliar green — apple and pear trees. We cross the circle of watchtowers and, running, burst on to the highway. We have arrived. Just a few more yards. There, surrounded by trees, is the ramp.

A cheerful little station, very much like any other provincial railway stop: a small square framed by tall chestnuts and paved with yellow gravel. Not far off, beside the road, squats a tiny wooden shed, uglier and more flimsy than the ugliest and flimsiest railway shack; farther along lie stacks of old rails, heaps of wooden beams barracks parts, bricks, paving stones. This is where they load freight for Birkenau: supplies for the construction of the camp, and people for the gas chambers. Trucks drive around, load up lumber, cement, people — a regular daily routine.

[Tadek describes activities on the ramp. A guard gives the two a drink “on credit.”]

We drink the water, lukewarm and tasteless. It will be paid for by the people who have not yet arrived.

.....
 Around us sit the Greeks, their jaws working greedily, like huge human insects. They munch on stale lumps of bread. They are restless, wondering what will happen next. The sight of the large beams and the stacks of rails has them worried. They dislike carrying heavy loads.

“Was wir arbeiten?” they ask.

“Niks. Transport kommen, alles Krematorium, compris?”

“Alles verstehen,” they answer in crematorium Esperanto. All is well — they will not have to move the heavy rails or carry the beams.

[“The ramp has become increasingly alive with activity...” The SS arrive.]

. They greet each other in the state-approved way, raising an arm Roman fashion, then shake hands cordially, exchange warm smiles, discuss mail from home, their children, their families. Some stroll majestically on the ramp. The silver squares on their collars glitter, the gravel crunches under their boots, their bamboo whips snap impatiently.

We lie against the rails in the narrow streaks of shade, breathe unevenly, occasionally exchange a few words in our various tongues, and gaze listlessly at the majestic men in green uniforms, at the close, yet unattainable, green trees, and at the steeple of a distant church from which a belated “Angelus” has just sounded.

“The transport is coming,” somebody says. We spring to our feet, all eyes turn in one direction. Around the bend, one after another, the cattle cars begin rolling in. The train backs into the station, a conductor leans out, waves his hand, blows a whistle. The locomotive whistles back with a shrieking noise, puffs, the train rolls slowly alongside the ramp. In the tiny barred windows appear pale, wilted, exhausted human faces, terror-stricken women with tangled hair, unshaven men. They gaze at the station in silence. And then, suddenly, there is a stir inside the cars and a pounding against the wooden boards.

“Water! Air!” — weary, desperate cries.

Heads push through the windows, mouths gasp frantically for air. They draw a few breaths, then disappear; others come in their place, then also disappear. The cries and moans grow louder.

[After being warned by an S.S. about what is permissible, Canada “eagerly” waits to begin.]

The bolts crack, the doors fall open. A wave of fresh air rushes inside the train. People... inhumanly crammed, buried under incredible heaps of luggage, suitcases, trunks, packages, crates, bundles of every description (everything that had been their past and was to start their future). Monstrously squeezed together, they have fainted from heat, suffocated, crushed one another. Now they push towards the opened doors, breathing like fish cast out on the sand.

.....
“Where are you people from?”

“Sosnowiec-Będzin. Sir, what’s going to happen to us?” They repeat the question stubbornly, gazing into our tired eyes.

“I don’t know, I don’t understand Polish.”

It is the camp law: people going to their death must be deceived to the very end. This is the only permissible form of charity. The heat is tremendous. The sun hangs directly over our heads, the white, hot sky quivers, the air vibrates, an occasional breeze feels like a sizzling blast from a furnace. Our lips are parched, the mouth fills with the salty taste of blood, the body is weak and heavy from lying in the sun. Water!

A huge, multicolored wave of people loaded down with luggage pours from the train like a blind, mad river trying to find a new bed. But before they have a chance to recover, before they can draw a breath of fresh air and look at the sky, bundles are snatched from their hands, coats ripped off their backs, their purses and umbrellas taken away.

“But please, sir, it’s for the sun, I cannot...”

“*Verboten!*” one of us barks through clenched teeth. There is an SS man standing behind your back, calm, efficient, watchful.

“*Meine Herrschaften*, this way, ladies and gentlemen, try not to throw your things around, please. Show some goodwill,” he says courteously, his restless hands playing with the slender whip.....

The heaps grow. Suitcases, bundles, blankets, coats, handbags that open as they fall, spilling coins, gold, watches; mountains of bread pile up at the exits, heaps of marmalade, jams, masses of meat, sausages; sugar spills on the gravel. Trucks, loaded with people, start up with a deafening roar and drive off amidst the wailing and screaming of the women separated from their children, and the stupefied silence of the men left behind. They are the ones who had been ordered to step to the right — the healthy and the young who will go to the camp. In the end, they too will not escape death, but first they must work.

Trucks leave and return, without interruption, as on a monstrous conveyor belt. A Red Cross van drives back and forth, back and forth, incessantly: it transports the gas that will kill these people. The enormous cross on the hood, red as blood, seems to dissolve in the sun.

The Canada men at the trucks cannot stop for a single moment, even to catch their breath. They shove the people up the steps, pack them in tightly, sixty per truck, more or less. Nearby stands a young, clean-shaven “gentleman,” an SS officer with a notebook in his hand. For each departing truck he enters a mark; sixteen gone means one thousand people, more or less. The gentleman is calm, precise. No truck can leave without a signal from him, or a mark in his notebook:

Ordnung muss sein. The marks swell into thousands, the thousands into whole transports, which afterwards we shall simply call “from Salonica,” “from Strasbourg,” “from Rotterdam.” This one will be called “Sosnowiec-Będzin.” The new prisoners from Sosnowiec-Będzin will receive serial numbers 131—2 — thousand, of course, though afterwards we shall simply say 131—2, for short.

The transports swell into weeks, months, years. When the war is over, they will count up the marks in their notebooks — all four and a half million of them. The bloodiest battle of the war, the greatest victory of the strong, united Germany. *Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer* — and four crematoria.

The train has been emptied. A thin, pock-marked SS man peers inside, shakes his head in disgust and motions to our group, pointing his finger at the door.

“Rein. Clean it up!”

We climb inside. In the corners amid human excrement and abandoned wrist-watches lie squashed, trampled infants, naked little monsters with enormous heads and bloated bellies. We carry them out like chickens, holding several in each hand.

“Don’t take them to the trucks, pass them on to the women, says the SS man, lighting a cigarette. His cigarette lighter is not working properly; he examines it carefully.

“Take them, for God’s sake!” I explode as the women run from me in horror, covering their eyes.

The name of God sounds strangely pointless, since the women and the infants will go on the trucks, every one of them, without exception. We all know what this means, and we look at each other with hate and horror.

“What, you don’t want to take them?” asks the pockmarked SS man with a note of surprise and reproach in his voice, and reaches for his revolver.

“You mustn’t shoot, I’ll carry them.” A tall, gray-haired woman takes the little corpses out of my hands and for an instant gazes straight into my eyes.

“My poor boy,” she whispers and smiles at me. Then she walks away, staggering along the path. I lean against the side of the train. I am terribly tired. Someone pulls at my sleeve.

“En avant, to the rails, come on!”

I look up, but the face swims before my eyes, dissolves, huge and transparent, melts into the motionless trees and the sea of people... I blink rapidly: Henri.

“Listen, Henri, are we good people?”

“That’s stupid. Why do you ask?”

“You see, my friend, you see, I don’t know why, but I am furious, simply furious with these people — furious because I must be here because of them. I feel no pity. I am not sorry they’re going to the gas chamber. Damn them all! I could throw myself at them, beat them with my fists. It must be pathological, I just can’t understand...”

“Ah, on the contrary, it is natural, predictable, calculated. The ramp exhausts you, you rebel — and the easiest way to relieve your hate is to turn against someone weaker. Why, I’d even call it healthy. It’s simple logic, *compris?*”

.....
[Henri and Tadek get back to work.]

....But just as the last truck disappears behind the trees and we walk, finally, to rest in the shade, a shrill whistle sounds around the bend. Slowly, terribly slowly, a train rolls in, the engine whistles back with a deafening shriek. Again weary, pale faces at the windows, flat as though cut out of paper, with huge, feverishly burning eyes. Already trucks are pulling up, already the composed gentleman with the notebook is at his post, and the SS men emerge from the commissary carrying briefcases for the gold and money. We unseal the train doors.

It is impossible to control oneself any longer. Brutally we tear suitcases from their hands, impatiently pull off their coats. Go on, go on, vanish! They go, they vanish. Men, women, children. Some of them know.

Here is a woman — she walks quickly, but tries to appear calm. A small child with a pink cherub's face runs after her and, unable to keep up, stretches out his little arms and cries: "Mama! Mama!"

"Pick up your child, woman!"

"It's not mine, sir, not mine!" she shouts hysterically and runs on, covering her face with her hands. She wants to hide, she wants to reach those who will not ride the trucks, those who will go on foot, those who will stay alive. She is young, healthy, good-looking, she wants to live.

But the child runs after her, wailing loudly: "Mama, mama, don't leave me!"

"It's not mine, not mine, no!"

Andrzej, a sailor from Sevastopol, grabs hold of her. His eyes are glassy from vodka and the heat. With one powerful blow he knocks her off her feet, then, as she falls, takes her by the hair and pulls her up again. His face twitches with rage.

"Ah, you bloody Jewess! So you're running from your own child! I'll show you, you whore!" His huge hand chokes her, he lifts her in the air and heaves her on to the truck like a heavy sack of grain.

"Here! And take this with you, bitch!" and he throws the child at her feet.

"*Gut gemacht*, good work. That's the way to deal with degenerate mothers," says the SS man standing at the foot of the truck. "*Gut, gut, Russki.*"

"Shut your mouth," growls Andrzej through clenched teeth, and walks away. From under a pile of rags he pulls out a canteen unscrews the cork, takes a few deep swallows, passes it to me. The strong vodka burns the throat. My head swims, my legs are shaky, again I feel like throwing up.

[“A girl appears.” Their encounter.... The work of Kanada continues.]

I go back inside the train; I carry out dead infants; I unload luggage. I touch corpses, but I cannot overcome the mounting, uncontrollable terror. I try to escape from the corpses, but they are everywhere: lined up on the gravel, on the cement edge of the ramp, inside the cattle cars. Babies, hideous naked women, men twisted by convulsions. I run off as far as I can go, but immediately a whip slashes across my back. Out of the corner of my eye I see an SS man, swearing profusely. I stagger forward and run, lose myself in the Canada group. Now, at last, I can once more rest against the stack of rails. The sun has leaned low over the horizon and illuminates the ramp with a reddish glow, the shadows of the trees have become elongated, ghostlike. In the silence that settles over nature at this time of day, the human cries seem to rise all the way to the sky.

.....
[“Another whistle, another transport. Terrible events are described. Tadek eventually “staggers away.”]

. My heart pounds, jumps up to my throat. I can no longer control the nausea. Hunched under the train I begin to vomit. Then, like a drunk, I weave over to the stack of rails.

I lie against the cool, kind metal and dream about returning to the camp, about my bunk, on which there is no mattress, about sleep among comrades who are not going to the gas tonight. Suddenly I see the camp as a haven of peace. It is true, others maybe dying, but one is somehow still alive, one has enough food, enough strength to work...

The lights on the ramp flicker with a spectral glow, the wave of people — feverish, agitated, stupefied people — flows on and on, endlessly.

[Description of events continues.]

It is almost over. The dead are being cleared off the ramp and piled into the last truck. The Canada men, weighed down under a load of bread, marmalade and sugar, and smelling of perfume and fresh linen, line up to go. For several days the entire camp will live off this transport. For several days the entire camp will talk about “Sosnowiec-Będzin.” That was a good, rich transport.

The stars are already beginning to pale as we walk back to the camp. The sky grows translucent and opens high above our heads — it is getting light.

Great columns of smoke rise from the crematoria and merge up above into a huge black river which very slowly floats across the sky over Birkenau and disappears beyond the forests in the direction of Trzebinia. The “Sosnowiec-Będzin” transport is already burning.

We pass a heavily armed SS detachment on its way to change guard. The men march briskly, in step, shoulder to shoulder, one mass, one will.

“Und morgen die ganze Welt...” they sing at the top of their lungs.

“*Rechts ran!* To the right march!” snaps a command from up front. We move out of their way.

Appendix: from Primo Levi, The Drowned and the Saved

(Vintage International paperback edition)

“...The hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary...is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.” (42)

“...It is not enough to relegate them to marginal tasks; the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they can no longer turn back....” (43)

“...In reality, in the vast majority of cases, their behavior was rigidly preordained. In the space of a few weeks or months the deprivations to which they were subjected led them to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold, fatigue, and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero....” (50)

“...the gray band, that zone of ambiguity which radiates out from regimes based on terror and obsequiousness.” (58)