

Silence

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TADEUSZ BOROWSKI (1922-1951) Polish short story writer, poet, essayist, and journalist, was a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and Dachau. (published in 1959)

At last they seized him inside the German barracks, just as he was about to climb over the window ledge. In absolute silence they pulled him down to the floor and panting with hate dragged him into a dark alley. Here, closely surrounded by a silent mob, they began tearing at him with greedy hands.

Suddenly from the camp gate a whispered warning was passed from one mouth to another. A company of soldiers, their bodies leaning forward, their rifles on the ready, came running down the camp's main road, weaving between the clusters of men in stripes standing in the way. The crowd scattered and vanished inside the blocks. In the packed, noisy barracks the prisoners were cooking food pilfered during the night from neighbouring farmers. In the bunks and in the passageways between them, they were grinding grain in small flour-mills, slicing meat on heavy slabs of wood, peeling potatoes and throwing the peels on to the floor. They were playing cards for stolen cigars, stirring batter for pancakes, gulping down hot soup, and lazily killing fleas. A stifling odour of sweat hung in the air, mingled with the smell of food, with smoke and with steam that liquified along the ceiling beams and fell on the men, the bunks and the food in large, heavy drops, like autumn rain.

There was a stir at the door. A young American officer with a tin helmet on his head entered the block and looked with curiosity at the bunks and the tables. He wore a freshly pressed uniform; his revolver was hanging down, strapped in an open holster that dangled against his thigh. He was assisted by the translator who wore a yellow band reading 'interpreter' on the sleeve of his civilian coat, and by the chairman of the Prisoners' Committee, dressed in a white summer coat, a pair of tuxedo trousers, and tennis shoes. The men in the barracks fell silent. Leaning out of their bunks and lifting their eyes from the kettles, bowls and cups, they gazed attentively into the officer's face.

"Gentlemen," said the officer with a friendly smile, taking off his helmet-and the interpreter proceeded at once to translate sentence after sentence-"I know, of course, that after what you have gone through and after what you have seen, you must feel a deep hate for your tormentors. But we, the soldiers of America, and you, the people of Europe, have fought so that law should prevail over lawlessness. We must show our respect for the law. I assure you that the guilty will be punished, in this camp as well as in all the others. You have already seen, for example, that the S.S. men were made to bury the dead."

"... right, we could use the lot at the back of the hospital. A few of them are still around," whispered one of the men in a bottom bunk.

“... or one of the pits,” whispered another. He sat straddling the bunk, his fingers firmly clutching the blanket.

“Shut up! Can’t you wait a little longer?” Now listen to what the American has to say,” a third man, stretched across the foot of the same bunk, spoke in an angry whisper. The American officer was now hidden from their view behind the thick crowd gathered at the other end of the block.

“Comrades, our new Kommandant gives you his word of honour that all the criminals of the S.S. as well as among the prisoners will be punished,” said the translator. The men in the bunks broke into applause and shouts. In smiles and gestures they tried to convey their friendly approval of the young man from across the ocean.

“And so the Kommandant requests,” went on the translator, his voice turning somewhat hoarse, “that you try to be patient and do not commit lawless deeds, which may only lead to trouble, and please pass the sons of bitches over to the camp guards. How about it, men?”

The block answered with a prolonged shout. The American thanked the translator and wished the prisoners a good rest and an early reunion with their dear ones. Accompanied by a friendly hum of voices, he left the block and proceeded to the next.

Not until after he had visited all the blocks and returned with the soldiers to his headquarters did we pull our man off the bunk-where covered with blankets and half smothered with the weight of our bodies he lay gagged, his face buried in the straw mattress-and dragged him on to the cement floor under the stove, where the entire block, grunting and growling with hatred, trampled him to death.

tr. Barbara Vedder

(The Schutzstaffel (SS) or “Defense Squad” was the elite Nazi military corps. Created in 1925 as Hitler’s bodyguards, the SS, or Black Shirts, controlled German security, including the Gestapo (secret state police) and concentration camp guards.)

Answer each of the following questions in complete, grammatically correct sentences. After you have answered the questions, follow the essay instructions given at the end of this page.

1. What is the narrative point of view of “Silence”? How is the point of view suited to the ideas expressed in the story?
2. In what way does the behavior of the prisoners change when the American officer arrives? How do you account for this change?
3. How do the prisoners react to the American officer’s speech? What is their opinion of him? How do we know?
4. Does the narrator make any judgments about the prisoners’ treatment of the guard? How does the flat style of the narration contribute to the central theme of the story?
5. What elements in the story reinforce its central theme?