

Translated excerpt

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***Der Fotograf von Auschwitz. Das Leben des  
Wilhelm Brasse***

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**Reiner Engelmann**  
***The Auschwitz Photographer: The Life of Wilhelm  
Brasse***

Translated by Allison Brown



## **Chapter 1:**

### **August 31, 1940**

The train stopped sometime in the late afternoon. How long had it been under way? Three hours? Or four? Wilhelm Brasse had no sense of the time. For him the trip was already excruciatingly long. Neither he nor anyone else would have boarded this train voluntarily. It was cattle cars that they were herded into. Cattle cars, as were commonly used for transports like the one this afternoon.

More than eighty men were pressed together in each of the cars. More than eighty men of varying ages.

It was a hot late summer day. The air in the overcrowded cars, which were locked from the outside, was stifling. The smell of sweat spread and soon mixed with the odor of urine and excrement, as there was no place for the occupants to relieve themselves. In fact, there was no place anywhere for anyone to move at all. They stood there wedged in; some fell to their knees in exhaustion, but had to quickly pull themselves back up, or else they were held up by those around them, in order not to be crushed or trampled to death. Once in place, no one was able to move or even to shift position.

They were all suffering from hunger, but after all the months of scant rations in prison they knew how to cope with that. More than the hunger was the thirst that took its toll, tormenting and draining them, and causing many of them to faint in the course of the journey. Once they had hoped they would be given some water. The train had slowed down. How long had they been en route? Long enough, in this closeness and with this heat, to have nothing but the thought of water in their heads.

Those standing along the outer walls tried to peak through the narrow slits to see where they were. Some thought it might be the Krakow station. But no one was certain. They just conjectured based on the little that could be seen through the slits.

The train stopped. They gathered hope, mustered yet again all the strength they could, and banged on the walls, shouting for water as loudly as their dry throats would permit. It must be possible for people to hear them. Someone out there had to take note of their distress!

But the stop was a short one and their calls, their pleading for water, were drowned out by dogs' barking and the shouts of guards who were prodding additional prisoners toward the train and forcing them into one of the cattle cars.

On top of the heat and the thirst, which was becoming increasingly unbearable, came fear. Where would they be brought? What would happen to them? Would they be transferred

somewhere? To a larger prison? They were in fact all prisoners who had spent the last few weeks and months in prison in Tarnów or in Sanok. There were more than four hundred men in all: political prisoners, Jews, clerics. Old and young men, fathers, sons. Men who wanted to live and have a future! Now, in this overcrowded train where they could barely breathe, their lives were nothing but the present.

One of them was Wilhelm Brasse, barely twenty-three years old. He had trained as a photographer and enjoyed working in Katowice in his uncle's photo studio. He had earned money, got together in his free time with friends, invited young women to go dancing or to a movie. He enjoyed life, but already before the summer of 1939 he had recognized the first dark clouds gathering on the horizon.

What would happen to him now?

Would he be put on trial? He was quite certain that he could rule that out. Too often in the past months was he aware of prisoners being arbitrarily taken out of their cells and shot. Wilhelm Brasse remembered their faces, and the fear you could see in them. But now he did not want to think about that, not in this situation of such uncertainty.

Would he be brought to a camp? Camps that the prisoners had heard of, but which no one knew any details about? Or else no one wanted to believe what they had heard because it was so inconceivable that it simply could not be true.

Wilhelm Brasse had the feeling the train was traveling westward. At some point he saw a sign at a station that read "Auschwitz."

The train was shunted to a side track and the doors of the cars were torn open. To the right Brasse saw two large buildings, one of which had barbed wire all around it. There were watchtowers at the corners. And two SS men with machine guns stood on each of the watchtowers. Behind it was the building of the Polish tobacco monopoly in Oświęcim. Wilhelm Brasse committed these first images to memory.

This is where the journey ended. A few hundred meters farther was the concentration camp. The main camp of Auschwitz.

When he heard them speak, Brasse could tell that the guards were Germans. German *kapos*.\*

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\* [This term is listed in the glossary] Kapo: The origin of the term is unclear. It is often euphemistically thought to mean "**K**ameradschaftspolizei" (English "Comrade-Police"). It more likely comes from Italian, in which *il capo* ("the head") refers to the leader or commander. Kapos were prisoner functionaries in concentration camps, who were assigned to work for the camp leadership by overseeing other prisoners. For this position the SS selected prisoners known to be particularly brutal to others. In return they received certain privileges, such as better rations, and they themselves were spared physical abuse. They believed that by obeying the SS they could

This is where he saw them for the first time. People in prisoners' uniforms. But they did not act the same way as the prisoners with whom he had shared his cell in the previous months. He did not see any human traits whatsoever in their behavior. He noticed that in the very first moments, when they were dragged out of the train cars.

"Move, hurry up, you dirty pigs" or "Go faster, you Polish swine! Come on! Move it!" With commands like that the kapos forced the prisoners out of the cars. And they also struck them with wooden clubs. Without any regard at all, they whacked the heads and backs and legs of the prisoners.

"Why?"

Ever since he arrived in Auschwitz, almost all of Wilhelm Brasse's questions began with that word.

"Why are people being humiliated and treated so poorly here?"

"Why are they being beaten?"

"Why does no one intervene?"

"Why are we being so victimized here?"

"Why have the perpetrators evidently forgotten that they are human beings? But are they still human? The way they are acting?!"

Wilhelm Brasse could not comprehend what was happening to him and, before his eyes, to the other prisoners. Was this what people alluded to but no one wanted to believe? Here it had evidently become reality and he, Wilhelm Brasse, was right in the thick of it.

They were herded like animals through the streets to the nearby camp; shouting and blows accompanied them with every step. Above the camp gate that they had to walk through, Wilhelm Brasse saw for the first time the sign that read *Arbeit macht frei*, "Work makes you free."

They were led down the still unpaved street of the camp to Block 26. Here were the showers. All newcomers had to hand over their street clothes, their underwear, any valuables they had with them, their identity papers, and everything they were carrying. All they were allowed to keep was a handkerchief and a belt. Everything they handed over was placed in the so-called *personal effects room*<sup>\*</sup>, but no one received a receipt for their belongings. This block was called "Canada," as

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assure their own survival in the camp. Most important for the SS was to have their orders carried out rigorously. Kapos could be recognized in daily camp life by their armbands and the stick or whip that they carried. They oversaw the work crews. Each kapo was generally in charge of a hundred prisoners. Kapos who beat prisoners to death during their "work" shifts were not punished by the camp administration.

<sup>\*</sup> [This term is listed in the glossary] Personal effects room: The Nazis referred to the property they

Wilhelm Brasse learned during his incarceration.

Like the other prisoners who arrived on August 31, 1940, he too had nothing else with him but the clothes on his back. That was all.

After showering he was given camp clothing. A prisoner's uniform, underwear, a cap, and a pair of wooden clogs that he had to become accustomed to in order to walk. And like everyone else, he was given a number, his camp number.

"I am no longer a Brasse," was his first thought after receiving his number. "I am nothing but Prisoner No. 3444." And he was right.



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[caption, p. 18]:

Entrance gate to the Auschwitz main camp. The prisoners were led through this gate in the morning when they were brought to their respective work sites. To the right of the gate, the camp orchestra had to play marching music and the prisoners were to march in step.

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stole from the prisoners in the concentration camps as their "personal effects" (German: *Effekten*). They were stored in rooms and warehouses and then sorted and packed by prisoner work crews. The belongings were then sent to Germany, where the clothing and other property was distributed to Germans as relief aid for the winter or Christmas. In camp jargon the personal effects room was called "Canada," since Canada was considered a wealthy country.

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### Chapter 3: Welcome to Auschwitz

It was very early in the morning on September 1, 1940. Not yet dawn, the prisoners who had arrived the previous day were awakened. They were brought to the group toilet, a room with toilet bowls lined up in a row without any doors or walls separating them, guarded by a kapo. They had only a short time, maybe two minutes, to relieve themselves, and were then given breakfast that consisted of a dark liquid, which no one could identify as either coffee or tea or just lukewarm water colored with something. And some bread.

Afterwards they all had to gather for the *Morgenappell*, the morning assembly. What should they expect? No one knew anything, but they might have guessed that they would each be assigned to work.

After they had assembled in rank and file one behind the other, SS Hauptsturmführer Karl Fritzsch stood up before them. He was also the camp commander, and held a short “welcome speech,” as Wilhelm Brasse called it. It was not more than a few sentences long, but he’d never it.

“This is not a sanatorium,” Fritzsch shouted to the prisoners, “It is a German concentration camp! Here a Jew survives two weeks, a preacher survives three weeks, and an ordinary prisoner can live here for three months!” Fritzsch took a short pause, looking at those around him, perhaps to check the impact of his words. Then he added another sentence to his speech. “The only way to leave the concentration camp is through the chimney!”

Wilhelm Brasse and the other prisoners got frightened. They did not want to believe or accept what they heard, or else they could not fathom the words. They knew how many men were assembled there. In the short time they were in the camp they had already seen other prisoners, though they could not estimate how many there were. Were they all to die? Inconceivable! And what did the phrase “through the chimney” mean? Was it an idiom? Something said without thinking?

This SS Hauptsturmführer Fritzsch was not the kind of man who let anyone doubt anything he said. His tone of voice was far too dominating.

Some of the prisoners, including Wilhelm Brasse, were still thinking about what was meant by what they had just heard, when Fritzsch shouted out the order for all Jews from the transport to step forward.

He could not believe what then happened. The SS man evidently wanted to demonstrate his power and that he would follow-up his words with actions.

German kapos who had been standing there all along, making sure that everyone remained standing in straight rows, stormed up to the Jewish prisoners with heavy wooden clubs and started beating them. The prisoners screamed and tried to evade the blows, protecting themselves with their hands and arms as best they could. Blood was spurting from the wounds on their heads and bodies, and the sight of their helplessness spurred the kapos to strike them with even greater force and rage.

It was a short action that had taken place there, just one scene lasting perhaps a few minutes. When Wilhelm Brasse noticed that the violence had come to an end, he saw six men lying dead on the ground.

Many of the other Jewish prisoners were murdered over the next five days. Wilhelm Brasse had recognized some of them as having been beaten by kapos. Later he saw their corpses.

## Chapter 19:

### Czeslawa Kwoka

For days or even weeks, Wilhelm Brasse was haunted by the sight of this girl. There were many images that preoccupied him, lodging themselves in his thoughts, but the image of this girl would just not go away. He knew that he had to control his feelings for the people he had to photograph. Otherwise he would not be able to stand it.

On December 13, 1942, Czeslawa Kwoka was brought to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp along with her mother. They came from a village in southeastern Poland.

Czeslawa was photographed in the identification department of the Auschwitz main camp, as were most of the other prisoners in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. A woman—a female kapo—brought a group of girls and women to the photo studio. One after another they were called out by number in order to be photographed by Wilhelm Brasse.

Czeslawa did not understand what she was being told, when her number was called out. She didn't understand the language since the guard spoke German and Czeslawa understood only Polish. When Czeslawa did not respond, the guard hit her right in the middle of her face with a stick. Tears mixed with the blood that flowed out of her split lips.

Wilhelm Brasse looked at her. She was so young. She was so terrified. She seemed so innocent.

Before he took the photographs, he gave Czeslawa a chance to dry her tears and wipe the blood from her lips.

He would have liked to have done more for her, but he could not intervene. This kapo woman was very strict and he did not know how she would react. One false comment and he probably would have had to pay for it with his life.

But the blow to Czeslawa's face made him feel as if he himself had been struck.

Czeslawa Kwoka was murdered on March 12, 1943, in Auschwitz-Birkenau; her mother suffered the same fate a few weeks earlier.



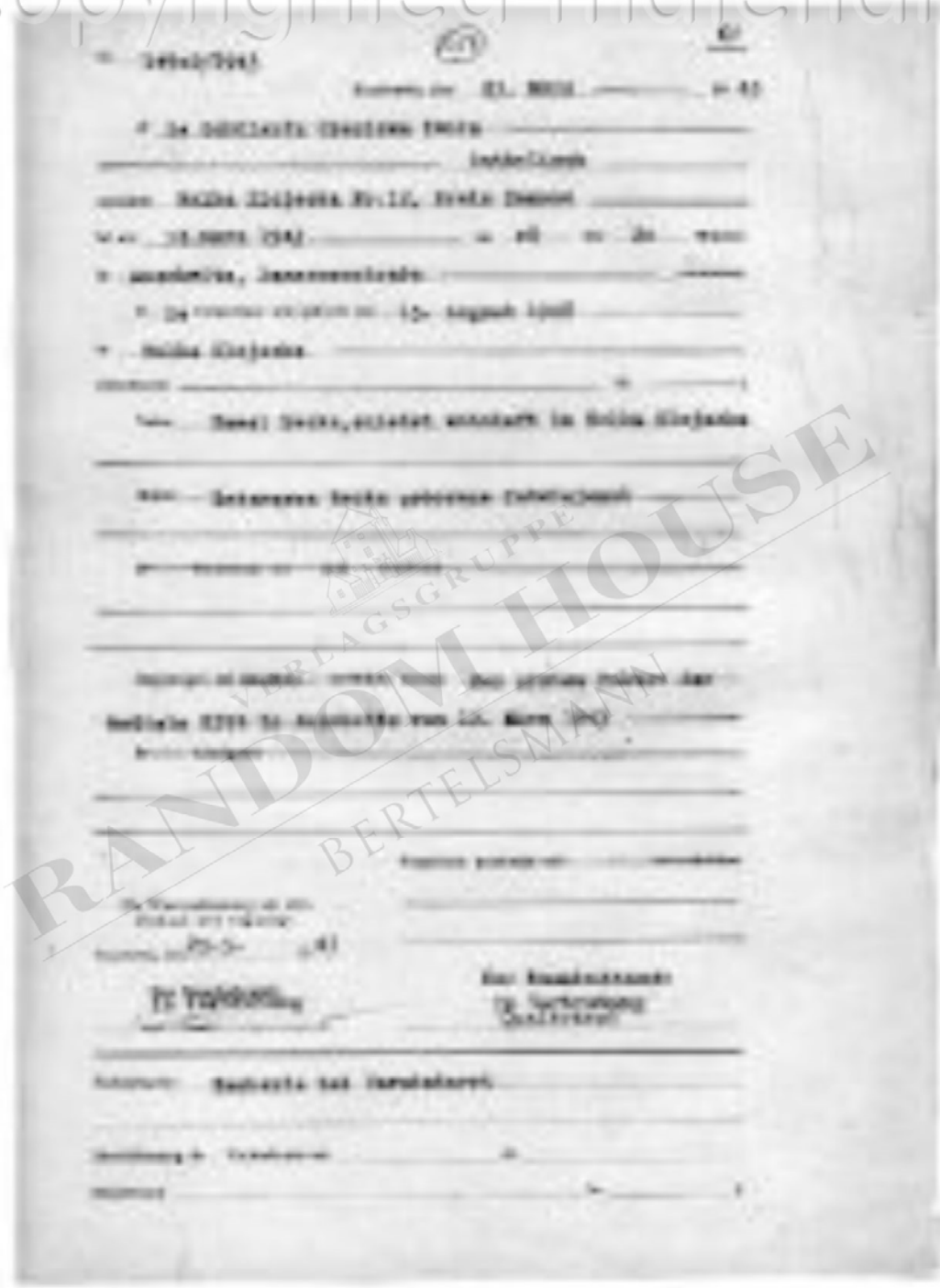


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Caption, page 95:

This photograph of Czeslawa Kwoka was taken by Wilhelm Brasse in mid-December 1942 in the identification department of the Auschwitz main camp.

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Caption, page 96:  
Czeslawa Kwoka’s actual cause of death is not known. While it can be ruled out that she died of natural causes, when “registering a departure” (*Abgang*), as it was called in the camp jargon, a natural cause of death had to be recorded.