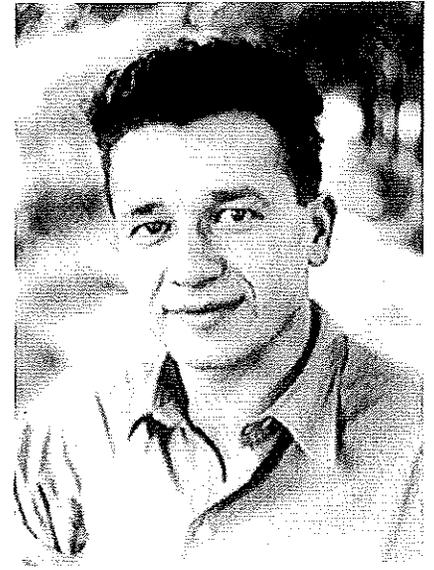


**Tadeusz Borowski** (1922-1951) was born in a Polish community in Soviet-controlled Ukraine after the bloody Russian Civil War concluded. When he was four, the Soviet authorities arrested his father and sent him to the gulag as a political prisoner; later that year, his mother was sent to a prison camp in Siberia.



In 1932, Borowski and his brother moved to Warsaw, Poland due to the efforts of the Polish Red Cross. Both parents were freed from prison in the early 1930s. Borowski received his secondary education at an underground school, graduating in 1940 in what was then German-occupied Poland. He began studying Polish language & literature at the underground Warsaw University, publishing his poems, stories, and novellas in underground newspapers & periodicals.

In 1943, Germans arrested Borowski. He served time in several concentration camps as a slave laborer—first in Auschwitz, then Natzweiler-Dautmergel, and finally at Dachau in southern Germany. Working in very harsh conditions, he witnessed the processing of new prisoners off a railway ramp, including many Jews who were sent directly to the gas chambers. After catching pneumonia at Auschwitz, he served as a helper in a Nazi medical experiment “hospital”.

Soon after liberation by the Red Army in 1945, Borowski lived briefly in Munich before returning to Poland in May 1946. His short stories following the war focused on his camp experiences. He also joined the Polish Worker’s Party (controlled by the Communists) and authored political tracts, initially believing that Communism was the only way to prevent another Auschwitz. However, after a close friend was tortured and imprisoned by Communist authorities, Borowski became completely disillusioned with politics. On July 1, 1951, he committed suicide by opening the valve of his gas stove. Tadeusz Borowski was 28 years old. On his arm was tattooed the serial number 119 198 from Auschwitz.

#### **QUESTIONS:**

- 1) What are your main impressions from reading the story “The Death of Schillinger”? How does historical context help gain a deeper understanding of this story?
- 2) What is the main point of “Silence”? Why does a grasp of history & the author’s life help the reader better appreciate this story?
- 3) What are some strengths & weaknesses of using these stories as historical sources? Explain.

THIS WAY FOR THE GAS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

'Ah, it's you! Want to buy anything? If you've got some apples...'

'No, I haven't any apples for you,' I replied affectionately. 'So, you're still alive, Abbie? And what's new with you?'

'Not much. Just gassed up a Czech transport.'

'That I know. I mean personally?'

'Personally? What sort of "personally" is there for me? The oven, the barracks, back to the oven... Have I got anybody around here? Well, if you really want to know what "personally"—we've figured out a new way to burn people. Want to hear about it?'

I indicated polite interest.

'Well then, you take four little kids with plenty of hair on their heads, then stick the heads together and light the hair. The rest burns by itself and in no time at all the whole business is *gemacht*.'

'Congratulations,' I said drily and with very little enthusiasm.

He burst out laughing and with a strange expression looked right into my eyes.

'Listen, doctor, here in Auschwitz we must entertain ourselves in every way we can. Otherwise, who could stand it?'

And putting his hands in his pockets he walked away without saying goodbye.

But this is a monstrous lie, a grotesque lie, like the whole camp, like the whole world.

## The Death of Schillinger

Until 1943, First Sergeant Schillinger performed the duties of Lagerführer, or chief commanding officer of labour sector 'D' at Birkenau, which was part of the enormous complex of large and small concentration camps, centrally administered from Auschwitz, but scattered throughout Upper Silesia.

Schillinger was a short, stocky man. He had a full, round face and very light blond hair, brushed flat against his head. His eyes were blue, always slightly narrowed, his lips tight, and his face was usually set in an impatient grimace. He cared little about personal appearance, and I have never heard of an incident involving his being bribed by any of the camp 'bigwigs'.

Schillinger reigned over sector 'D' with an iron hand. Never resting for a moment, he bicycled up and down the camp roads, always popping up unexpectedly where he was least wanted.

His arm could strike a blow as hard as a metal bar; he

#### THIS WAY FOR THE GAS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

could crack a jaw or crush the life out of a man with no apparent effort.

His vigilance was untiring. Each of his frequent visits to the other sectors of Birkenau spread panic among the women, the gypsies, or the 'aristocracy' of the *Effektenkammer*, Birkenau's wealthiest section, where the riches taken from the gas victims were stored. He also supervised the Kommandos working within the great circle of the watch-towers, and without warning he would inspect the prisoners' suits, the Kapos' shoes, or the S.S. guards' sacks. Furthermore, he visited the crematoria regularly and liked to watch people being shoved into the gas chambers. His name was usually linked with the names of Palitsch, Krannemann, and many other Auschwitz murderers who boasted that they had personally succeeded in killing with the fist, the club, or the revolver, at least ten thousand people each.

In August 1943, we heard the news that Schillinger had died suddenly in some very unusual circumstances. Various allegedly truthful but in fact conflicting versions of the incident circulated around the camp. I myself was inclined to believe the *Sonderkommando* foreman who, sitting on my bunk one afternoon while waiting for a shipment of evaporated milk to come in from the gypsy camp warehouses, told me the following story about the death of First Sergeant Schillinger:

'On Sunday, after the midday roll-call, Schillinger came to the cremo courtyard to visit our chief. The chief was busy, as the first truckloads of the Bedzin transport had just been brought over from the loading ramp.

'Surely you realize, my friend, that to unload a transport, to see that everyone gets undressed and then to drive them inside the gas chamber, is hard work that requires, if I may say so, a great deal of tact. Anybody knows that until the people are safely inside, with the doors bolted, you

#### THE DEATH OF SCHILLINGER

musn't gape at their junk, or rummage through it, or much less paw the nude women. The very fact, you see, that the women are made to strip naked alongside the men is a considerable shock to the new arrivals. Therefore you work with systematic haste, emphasizing the pressure of duties which supposedly must be performed inside the false bath-houses. And, in fact, you really do have to make it snappy if you're to gas one transport and clean away the corpses before the next one arrives.'

The foreman raised himself a bit, propped a pillow under his rear-end, threw his legs over the side of the bunk, and lighting a cigarette went on:

'So, if you get the picture, my friend, we had the Bedzin transport on our hands. These Jews, they knew very well what was coming. The *Sonderkommando* boys were pretty nervous too; some of them came from those parts. There have been cases of meeting relatives or friends. I myself had...'

'I didn't know you came from around there... Can't tell by the way you talk.'

'I once took a teacher's training course in Warsaw. About fifteen years ago, I reckon. Then I taught at the Bedzin school. I had an offer to go abroad, but I didn't want to go. Family and all that. So there you are...'

'So there you are.'

'It was a restless transport—these weren't the traders from Holland or France who only thought of how they'd start doing business with the Auschwitz rich. Our Polish Jews knew what was up. And so the whole place swarmed with S.S., and Schillinger, seeing what was going on, drew his revolver. But everything would have gone smoothly except that Schillinger had taken a fancy to a certain body—and, indeed, she had a classic figure. That's what he had come to see the chief about, I suppose. So he walked up to the woman and took her by the hand. But the naked

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woman bent down suddenly, scooped up a handful of gravel and threw it in his face, and when Schillinger cried out in pain and dropped his revolver, the woman snatched it up and fired several shots into his abdomen. The whole place went wild. The naked crowd turned on us, screaming. The woman fired once again, this time at the chief, wounding his face. Then the chief as well as the S.S. men made off, leaving us quite alone. But we managed, thank God. We drove them all right into the chamber with clubs, boled the doors and called the S.S. to administer Cyclone B. After all, we've had time to acquire some experience.'

'Well, ja, naturally.'

'Schillinger was lying face down, clawing the dirt in pain with his fingers. We lifted him off the ground and carried him—not too gently—to a car. On the way he kept groaning through clenched teeth: "O Gott, mein Gott, was hab' ich getan, dass ich so leiden muss?", which means—O God, my God, what have I done to deserve such suffering?'

'That man didn't understand even to the very end,' I said, shaking my head. 'What strange irony of fate.'

'What strange irony of fate,' repeated the foreman thoughtfully.

True, what strange irony of fate. When, shortly before the camp was evacuated, the same *Sonderkommando*, anticipating liquidation, staged a revolt in the crematoria, set fire to the buildings and, snipping the barbed-wire, ran for the open fields, several S.S. guards turned the machine guns on them and killed every one—without exception.

#### The Man with the Package

Our *Schreiber* was a Jew from Lublin who came to Auschwitz an already experienced prisoner with a few years at Majdanek behind him. Finding a close friend in the *Sonderkommando* (a tremendously influential group in the camp because it had access to the riches at the crematoria), he immediately started playing sick and had no trouble at all getting into the K.B. *zwei*—our name for Birkenau's hospital section, an abbreviation of *Krankenbau II*, and there he obtained the excellent position of *Schreiber*. A *Schreiber*, instead of bending over a spade all day, or hauling sacks of cement on an empty stomach, did clerical work. He was the object of everybody's envy and his job was competed for by the 'bigwigs' who were always trying to secure good spots for their own people. A *Schreiber* escorted patients in and out of the hospital, supervised the block's roll-call, kept the patients' records, and took part indirectly in the selection of the Jews destined for the gas chamber, which in the autumn of 1943 took place

THIS WAY FOR THE GAS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

He rested comfortably against the pillow and kept bouncing the tomato from one hand to the other.

~~You may have my coffee if you like; I'm not allowed to drink it anyway; he said after a short hesitation. But don't tell me any more stories.~~

~~He threw the tomato on my blanket, moved the coffee closer to me, and tipping his head to one side watched in fascination as I gazed my lips to the edge of the cup.~~

## Silence

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

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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 pifs,' whispered another. He sat straddling the bunk, his fingers firmly clutching the blanket.  
'Shut up! Can't you wait a little longer? Now listen

SILENCE

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.