



ART, HEALING & HELL

MARIAN KOLODZIEJ,
AUSCHWITZ PRISONER #432



ABOVE: *Marian Kolodziej, (left) with his wife.*

MARIAN KOLODZIEJ, 82, RENOWNED AND STILL ACTIVE

SET DESIGNER AND ARTIST in Poland, now residing in Gdansk, was prisoner #432 at Auschwitz concentration camp from its first day of existence, June 14, 1940. He remained silent about his experience there for 50 years, until the mid 1990's, when he became seriously ill and, as part of a healing process, was at last moved to express in art the haunted nightmares he had carried within him for half a century. He produced an enormous body of work over the course of just a few years, now on display in a small, eerie museum housed in a Franciscan monastery not far from Auschwitz. Eerie, because it is dark, underground, and designed to look like the interior of a concentration camp bunker. The sign on the door is mounted beneath smashed glass. A note declares: "This is not an exhibition, nor art. These are not pictures. These are words locked in drawings...I propose a journey by way of this labyrinth marked by the experience of the fabric of death...this expresses my disagreement with the world as it is today...It is a rendering of honor to all those who have vanished in ashes."

Some wounds are way too deep and damaging and permanent to lightly speak of healing. For when I asked Marian if he felt his creative outpouring had in fact repaired his spirit at long last, he was silent for a moment, and then answered in one, mournful word: "No." This is his story:

"I built Auschwitz, because I arrived there in the first transport. It is also true that for almost 50 years I did not speak about Auschwitz. Nevertheless, throughout that entire time, Auschwitz was present in everything I did, but not in a literal sense. One can understand my work in the theatre as a protest against what I experienced there....I did not trust literalness. One cannot speak of the camp in literal terms...for the camp is not just beatings, nor just death from work beyond human endurance, nor just a slow physical death, not constant hunger nor lice. It is also a silent, interior 'no,' a rebellion with the limits set, an endurance to spite them all."

"I don't know if I would have ever gone back to Auschwitz if it hadn't been for my illness. My drawings stem from my illness. Drawing became a battle for life. I wanted to get away from the illness, even if only for a while. At my age,

ONE CANNOT SPEAK OF THE CAMP IN LITERAL TERMS...FOR THE CAMP IS NOT JUST BEATINGS, NOR JUST DEATH FROM WORK BEYOND HUMAN ENDURANCE, NOR JUST A SLOW PHYSICAL DEATH, NOT CONSTANT HUNGER NOR LICE. IT IS ALSO A SILENT, INTERIOR "NO," A REBELLION WITH THE LIMITS SET, AN ENDURANCE TO SPITE THEM ALL.



you never really recover your health. In other words, there was no great plan, just an attempt to save myself. Afterwards, feelings of duty came into play. There was a chance to do what I had promised my friends when we were in the camp, my friends who died and who imposed on me the duty of letting people know what had gone on there... So, first came my illness, then the memory of camp, and then I really don't know what because I stopped being in control of what happened afterwards... Of my own free will I shut myself up in the camp once more.



“While drawing, I returned to the experiences of a teenage boy growing up among thousands of men, placed in extreme situations, in a world in which everything could happen, in which people’s reactions were unpredictable. Here one person curses his death, while Kolbe* goes to his death in place of another. Polar opposites. I remember the violinist, an old Jew, who tried to give me a shovel while begging me to finish him off with it. He didn’t want to live any longer. That’s the way it was.

“The loaf of camp bread, always the same shape, was supposed to be cut into four pieces, one for each prisoner. It was never that way. We never got more than one slice. All the rest vanished on the way to us. Many hands grabbed their share as the bread rations were distributed to us: the kitchen kapo and company, the barrack kapo with his court, the room supervisor and his pals. Only at the end of the line, we, the prisoners, with our primitive scales made with a stick weighed those slices, and even then we divided up the breadcrumbs so that everything was equal. That was our internal justice.

“One day we had a German lesson, that really was a lesson in following orders and reporting. The bored officer, seeing that his lesson wasn’t getting through to us very well, ordered us—as a punishment—to climb a tree, and as we climbed we had to shout out correctly a hundred times the way of reporting he had taught us: “Nummer 432 meldet gehorsam!” (Number 432 reports respectfully!) Along with

* Father Maximilian Kolbe was a Polish priest who died as prisoner #16770 in Auschwitz-Birkenau on August 14, 1941. When a prisoner escaped from the camp, the Gestapo declared that 10 others would be sent to starvation cells to die as punishment for the one who got away. When one of the 10 began to protest, “My wife! My children! I will never see them again!” Kolbe stepped forward and asked to die in his place. His request was granted. Ironically, the fugitive prisoner was later found drowned in a camp latrine. The cell where Kolbe died is now a shrine, in the basement of Building 13 at Auschwitz. He was beatified as Confessor by Paul VI in 1970, and canonized as a Martyr by Pope John Paul II in 1981.

POEM ABOUT A HERRING

by Abraham Sutzkever, Warsaw 1946

Right at the open lime pit
a child broke into tears:
Mameh, I’m hungry, something to eat!
So his mother momentarily forgot where
she was
—or she was forgotten
by Him,
God Who snatches time right from under
our feet—
and she quickly opened her satchel
and gave her child this herring to eat.

As if it were some silver bounty
the young teeth
grabbed the herring with pleasure.
But quietly as though a nightingale
suddenly burst into song
from far away across blue waters
a fiery string of notes
of a sudden
gave his head such a jolt.
And out of the broken circle
the naked child
slid punctured into a pit.

Frozen and grotesque
this picture holds like a frieze:
a child with a bloody herring in his mouth
on a certain summer’s morning.
And I search for that herring’s salt
and still can not
find its taste on my lips.

From *Burnt Pearls: Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever*.
Translated by Seymour Mayne. Copyright © 1981 by
Seymour Mayne. Reprinted by permission of Mosaic
Press/Valley Editions, Oakville, Ontario, Canada.



dozens of shrieking companions, I clambered as high as I could to get away from the frantic, snapping dogs below us. Behind me was the sound of breaking branches, the wild howling of the Alsatians, the laughter of the amused soldiers and kapos, and the wailing of those who were falling.

“On the parade ground there was a bell. The bell is also in my drawings. The bell summoned us every day...often for the execution of hostages which we were all forced to witness. You never knew if it was only the call for the daily count, or if it was the announcement of death. Today I see in it a summons to the Last Judgment. It was Krankenmann who rang the bell. That was the name of the man who was for me the worst of all the Germans in the camp, a kapo we nicknamed ‘Sick Man’ in German. When the bell rang, we







THE BELL SUMMONED US EVERY DAY...OFTEN FOR THE EXECUTION OF HOSTAGES WHICH WE WERE ALL FORCED TO WITNESS. YOU NEVER KNEW IF IT WAS ONLY THE CALL FOR THE DAILY COUNT, OR IF IT WAS THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF DEATH.



came out naked, stripped of our clothes and our names, our heads shaven, doused with Lysol. We were already just numbers. And then they degraded us even lower than that.

“The Apocalypse is a kind of dream. It is a picture that a teenage boy saw in a dream...During the first years we slept on the floor crammed tightly together in an unimaginable fashion. Everyone in the entire room had to lie on his left side because that’s the way the first man laid down. If the first man laid down on his right side, then everyone had to lie on his right side. The head of the man in the second row was on our knees, and in that way you got 500 to sleep in one stinking room. By the door was a latrine bucket filled to the brim with urine and excrement. And I’m there too.

“I sleep and see the massive attack of the many-headed Beast, of horses, dragons and reptiles—it is the whole cruelty of the day untied with the loathsomeness of the night. There are the kapos, criminals, degenerate murderers, executioners, sadists. It’s the everyday life of the camp. It’s like in the Bible: the Four Horsemen, the Whore of Babylon, plagues from the sky. Everything is according to the verses of the Apocalypse of St. John, but all crammed into the camp, into its reality. We made this Apocalypse in ourselves, for ourselves. And today I dream in the same way and I dream the same things.”

