

The Holocaust Historiography Project

Remarkable Nonsense about the Holocaust

The Murderer as Artist

The Earth Times

BOOK REVIEW

New book tries to illustrate the horrors of the Auschwitz camps

By ERIN TROWBRIDGE(c) Earth Times News Service

Witness: Images of Auschwitz Illustrations by David Oler
Text by Alexandre Oler
WestWind Press
North Richland Hills, Texas, 1998
112 pages
\$36.00 hardcover

Those who survived the Holocaust say that to even attempt to describe or convey the absolute horror of Nazi Germany's treatment of European Jews is impossible. The terror defies words and pictures. Yet few question the necessity of documenting the histories in whatever medium possible so that the ones who died will not be forgotten, the ones who killed will not think themselves absolved and the ones who survived will not feel that their life is without meaning.

"Witness: Images of Auschwitz" is David Oler and Alexandre Oler's contribution to the growing catalogue of Holocaust testimony. David Oler was one of a handful of prisoners to survive the war who actually worked in the crematoria and gas chambers of Auschwitz. These workers, called Sonderkommando, endured one of the cruelest forms of punishment: collecting and disposing of the collapsed bodies of those who had been gassed in the Auschwitz "showers." The typical life-span of the Sonderkommando ranged from a few hours to a few weeks.

David Oler, a Jewish artist from Poland, was arrested in 1943 in France and sent to Auschwitz for two years, until the war's end in 1945. **The 48 illustrations in "Witness" constitute the only known visual record of what actually went on within the crematoria and other places that no photographer entered until after the war.** The text has been carefully recreated by Alexandre Oler, the illustrator's son, based on his father's experiences.

"David Oler is the only artist in the world who survived working in the crematorium of Auschwitz-Birkenau with the will and talent to deliver a visual and accurate testimony," writes Serge Klarsfeld, a war-crimes investigator, in the foreword to "Witness." He adds that the artist's son "offers his altogether realistic and poetic comments about his father's work."

[...]

The illustrations, in their absolute accuracy, defy reason in their impact. A painfully despondent blue drawing of men sitting, heads bowed, packing long tresses of blonde curls into sacks is shot through with a white light emanating from a **window** behind the prisoners, assuring the reader that this illustration in its dark, murky colors is not a nightmare imagined. The reality, the light of day, bears down upon their bowed heads. Gruesome pictures showing the grotesque experiments prisoners were subjected to by Nazi doctors leave little doubt as to the absolute barbarity of Mengele and his cohorts.

"Witness: Images of Auschwitz" is not an easy book. Its contents demand consideration of the darkest or, perhaps, most banal characteristics of humanity that allowed the Nazis to kill, the Jews to die and the millions to stand by silently without raising a word of protest. Though the reality the book imparts is nothing less than brutal, it bears terrifying witness to one of the most extreme experiences suffered through the Holocaust. It may not let the reader sleep peacefully, but it ensures that the memory of the six million slain Jews will also not be easily forgotten. Perhaps accomplishing the most crucial and traumatic task a survivor could be asked to carry out. "Witness," above all else, bespeaks courage in its telling.

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