



4859

Numbers do not define you.

After the invasion of Poland, the Polish government and military went underground.

In one of these underground armies, Captain (Rotsmirtz) Witold Pilecki was prepared to do everything to fight back against the Nazi invaders.

In September of 1940, this included a possibly deadly mission. An infiltration of the concentration camp Auschwitz. The goal was to find out what happened inside the camp, escape, and report the results to the greater Allied force. Now under the false identity "Tomasz Serafinski", he was ready to begin his mission. Pilecki was tasked with going to Hell and back.

His story is one of great sacrifice, heroism, and determination in the face of the greatest evil of modern history.

21 SEPTEMBER 1940



We were quickly in-processed to Auschwitz.
A camp for political prisoners.

My ID number was
4859. The two
thirteens
convinced my
comrades
that I
would
die;

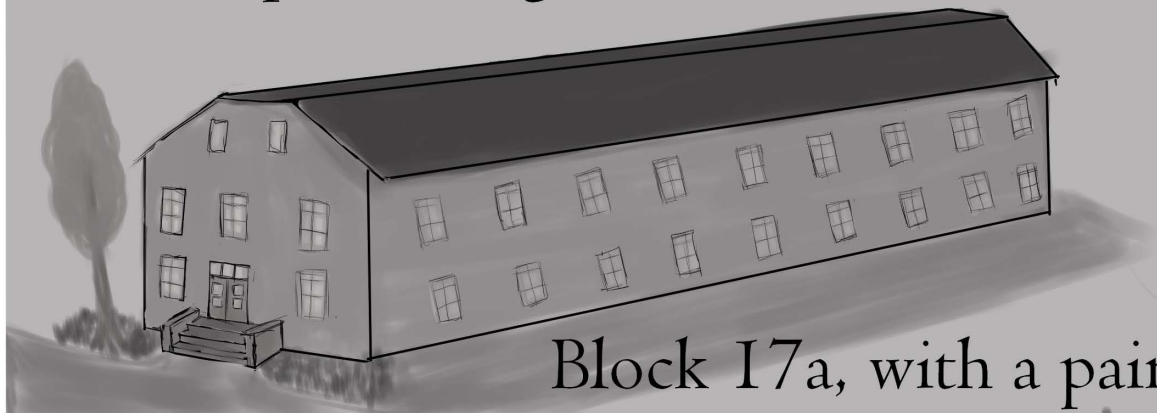
the numbers
cheered me
up

SS men used rifle butts to hurry us along.

The Kapos were just as cruel.
They were other prisoners who
volunteered as additional
guards.

They used
poles to beat us
into line. Jeering wildly
and exchanging jokes,
they killed off the
sick and weak.

After in-processing, our new home was here.

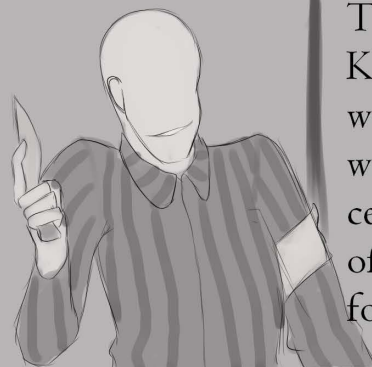


Block I7a, with a pair of sadists.

One Kapo was
Bloody Aloiz,
as we called him.
Fond of beating
inmates with
his club.

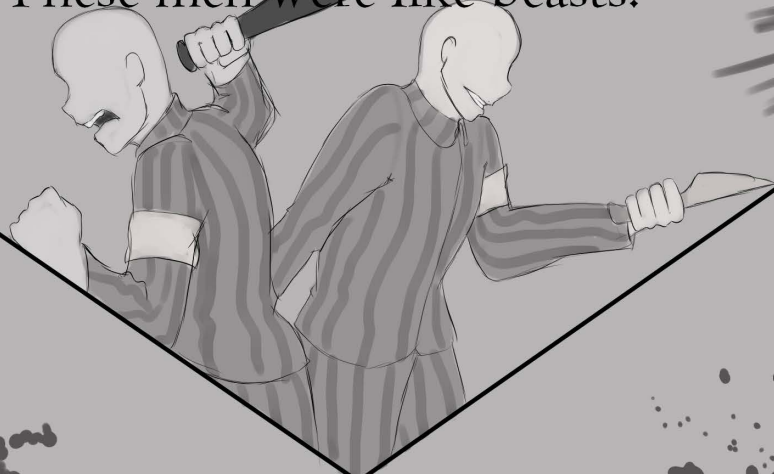


The overseer,
Krankenmann,
would stab anyone
who was a
centimeter out
of line in
formation.



These men were like beasts.

They
tried to
make us
like them



Offering
jobs with
better treatment,
but we had to
hurt our comrades.



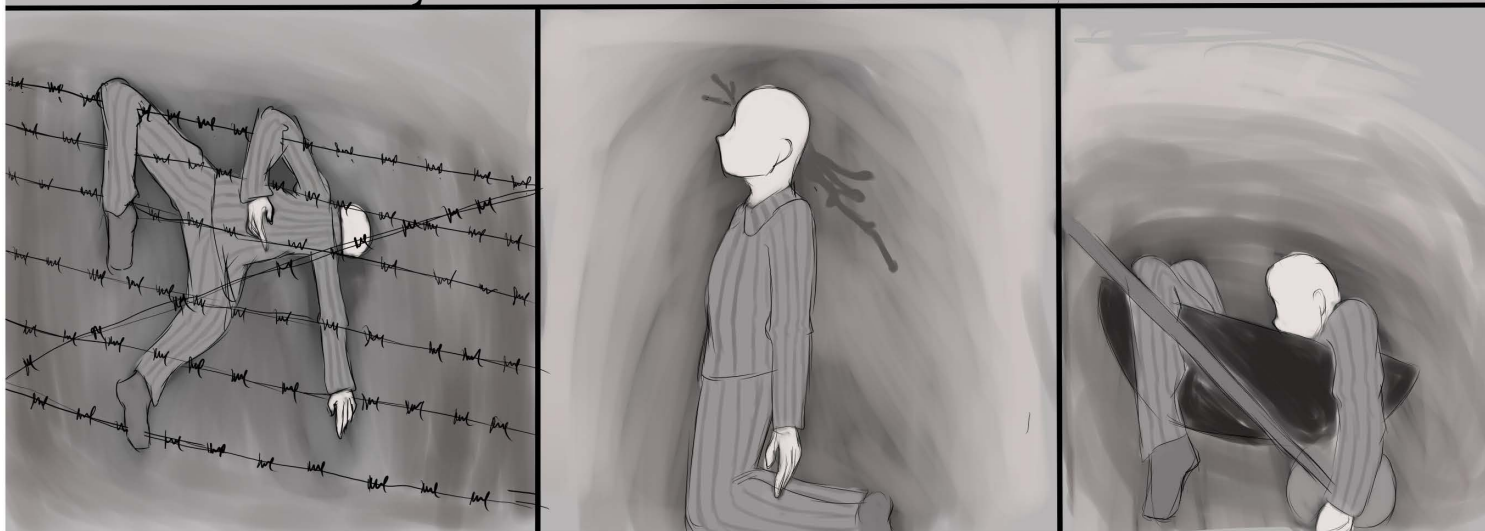
I
refused



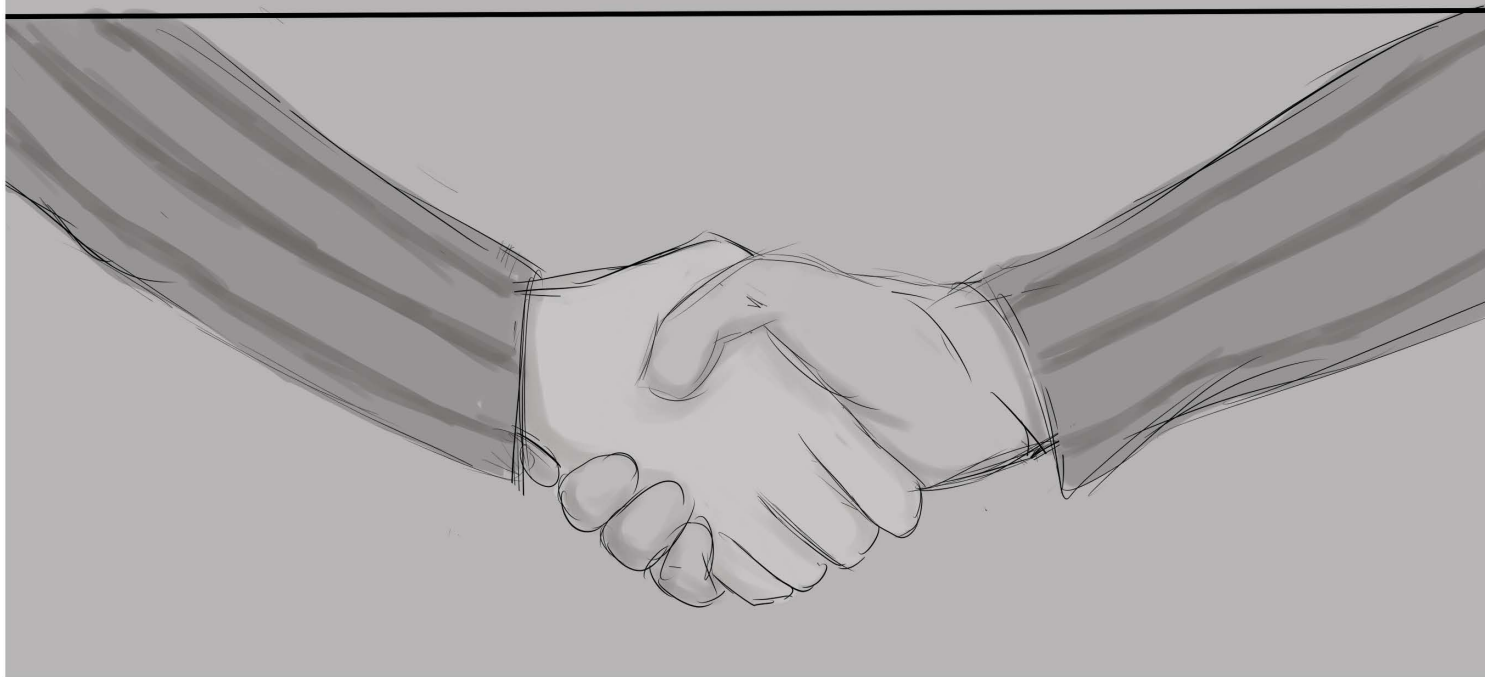
I was punished, but I would not be like them. Animalistic.



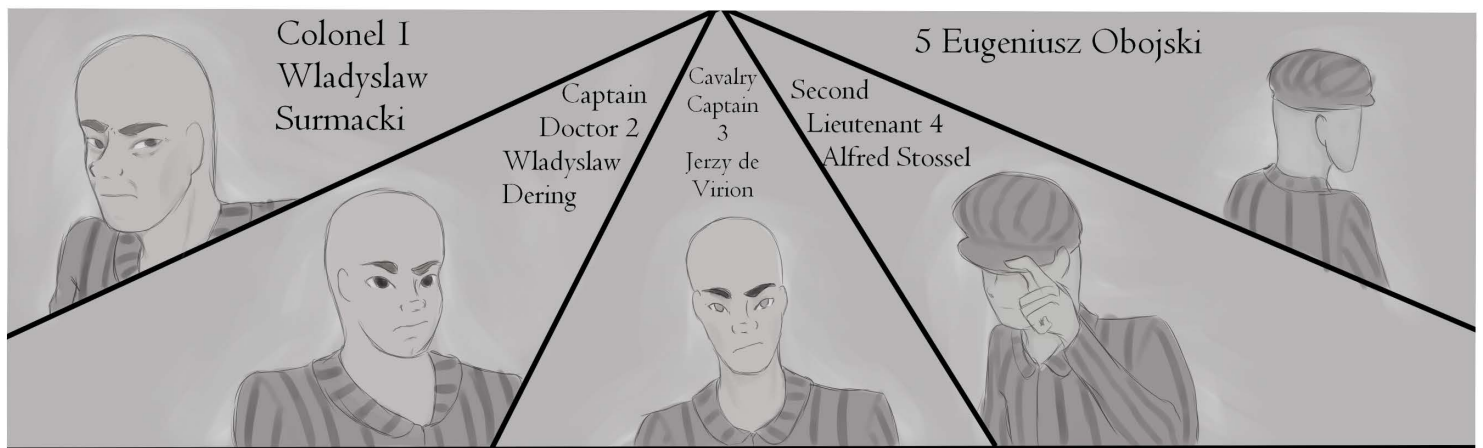
Every day at the camp meant more work, hard labor.
They didn't care if we lived or died.



Despite this hell, I had a mission. There was one thing I could do to help my Polish brothers.



I needed to build a resistance.



It started with the first "five"

The duty of the first "five", and the four other "fives" that followed, was to help extend and organize the resistance.



Meanwhile, I began to reach out



to the High Command in Warsaw.

We were starting small, but others took greater action.

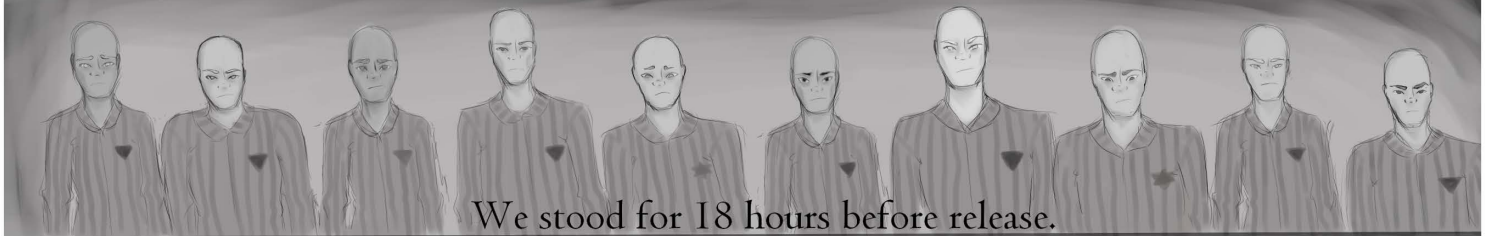


Tadeusz Wiejowski was the first man to escape from Auschwitz. He seemed to mock the Germans, Wiejowski meaning "runaway"



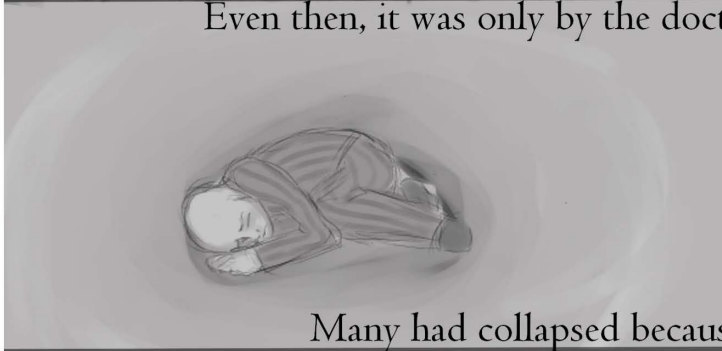
His success sent the camp into a frenzy.

Once they found out at roll call, we were made to stand at attention until he was found.

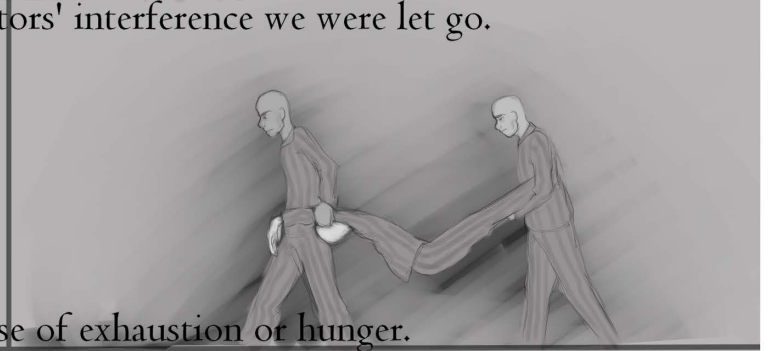


We stood for 18 hours before release.

Even then, it was only by the doctors' interference we were let go.



Many had collapsed because of exhaustion or hunger.

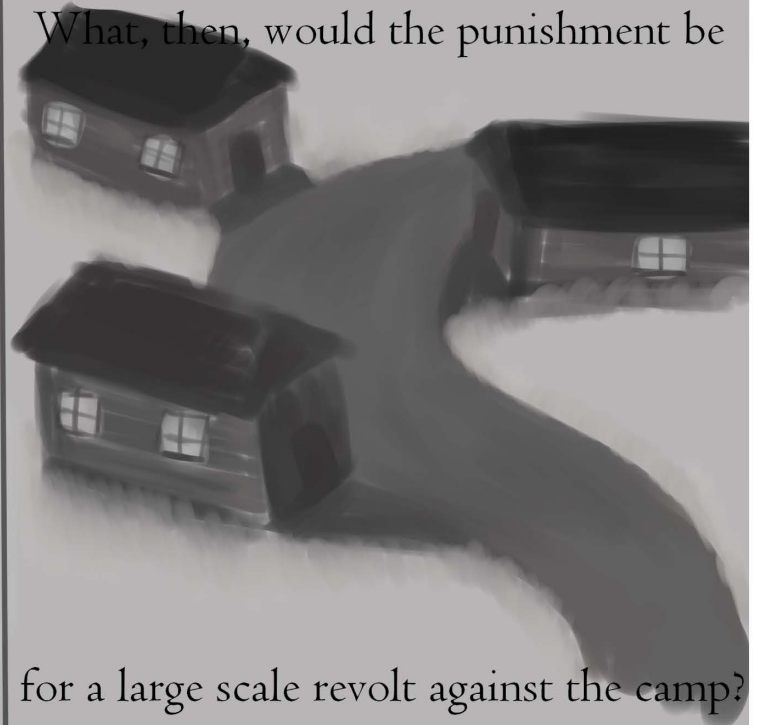


This highlighted something to me,



resistance meant collective punishment.

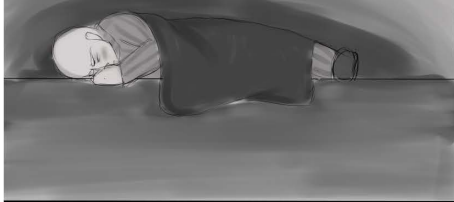
What, then, would the punishment be



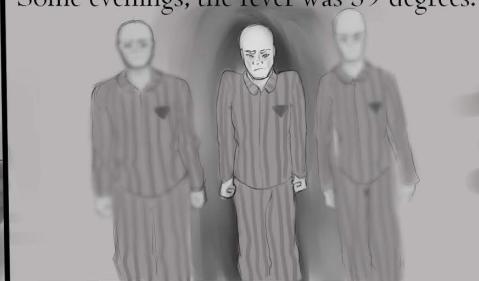
for a large scale revolt against the camp?

It was that winter, in the beginning of 1941, I contracted an illness.

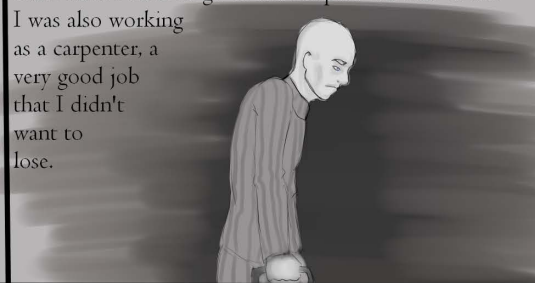
I was half dead. This was to be my personal hell.



Some evenings, the fever was 39 degrees.



But I didn't want to go to the hospital for fear of lice I was also working as a carpenter, a very good job that I didn't want to lose.



One night I succumbed. They carried me, almost unconscious, to the hospital.



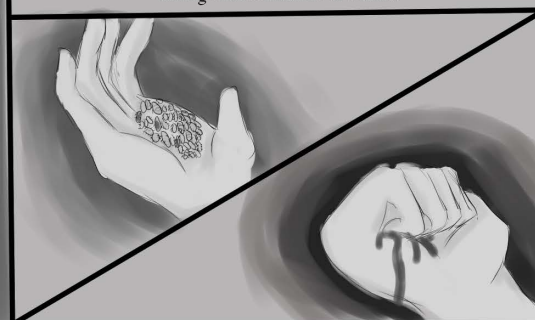
I lay on the cramped, drafty, louse-ridden floor.

The man on my right had a face encrusted with motionless lice of all sizes.

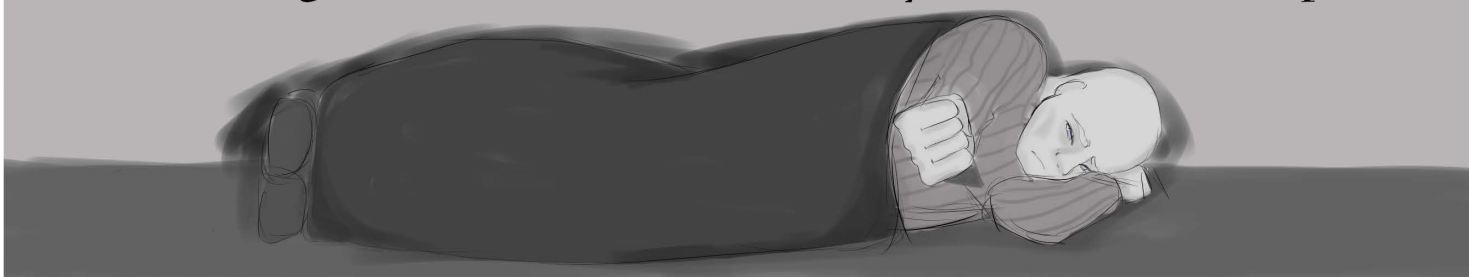


The man on my left was dead, his blanket pulled over his head, awaiting a stretcher.

The lice crawled from the body to me. I did constant battle, killing them handfuls at a time.



These nights were the hardest of my time at the camp.



I was exhausted. I questioned...

Could I keep fighting?

Was it worth it?



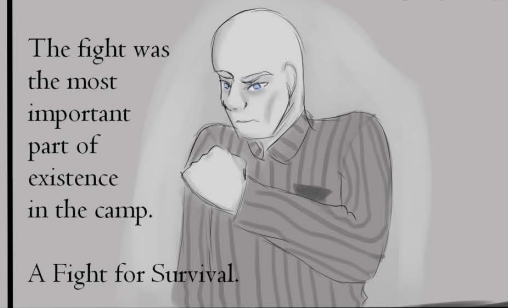
I couldn't let these parasites destroy me.



I made the conscious decision to keep fighting.

The fight was the most important part of existence in the camp.

A Fight for Survival.

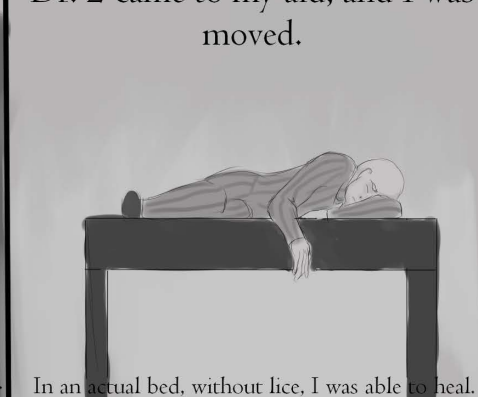


Relief came in the form of a new neighbor, Edek.



He kept guard from the left, letting me get some sleep.

Dr. 2 came to my aid, and I was moved.



In an actual bed, without lice, I was able to heal.

After about a month, I was sent back to the camp, but with renewed vigor.



After all that I have witnessed and experienced,
I take a moment now to reflect on the events that had unfolded...
I had seen with my own eyes...



The old numbers were scarce now. Killed in cruelty by a "civilized" race.



There were beasts of all kinds in Oswiecim

Predator...



... and prey

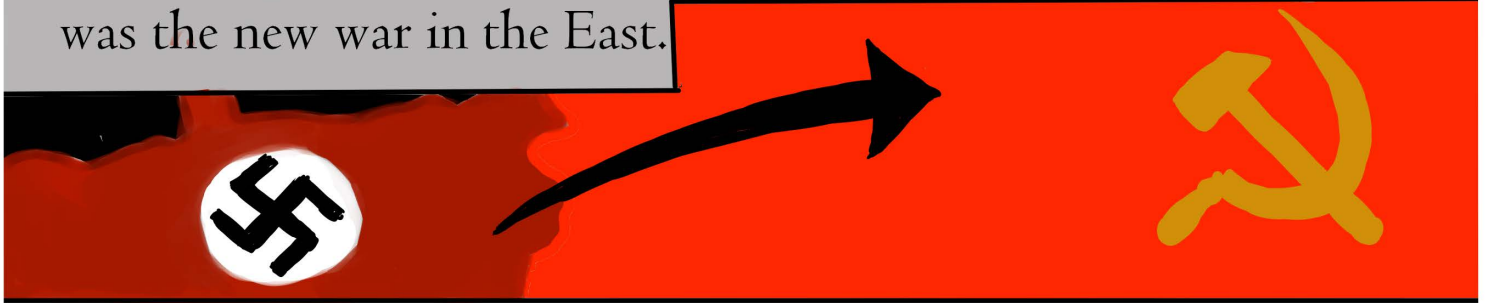


This place changed us all. In this progressive 20th century,



somehow we had become less than beasts.

As we waged our war of Resistance, steadily growing, so waged was the new war in the East.

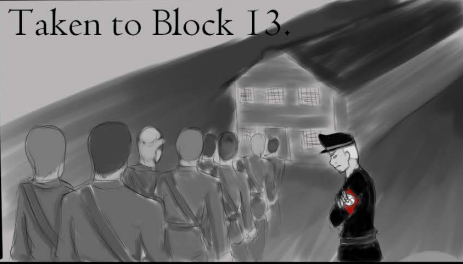


We knew nothing except that the war had begun. Then prisoners arrived.

First it was just officers.



Taken to Block 13.



They were sealed in like sardines.



Germans came. Officers, and officials with gas masks. Those who saw the bodies afterwards describe a scene of macabre.

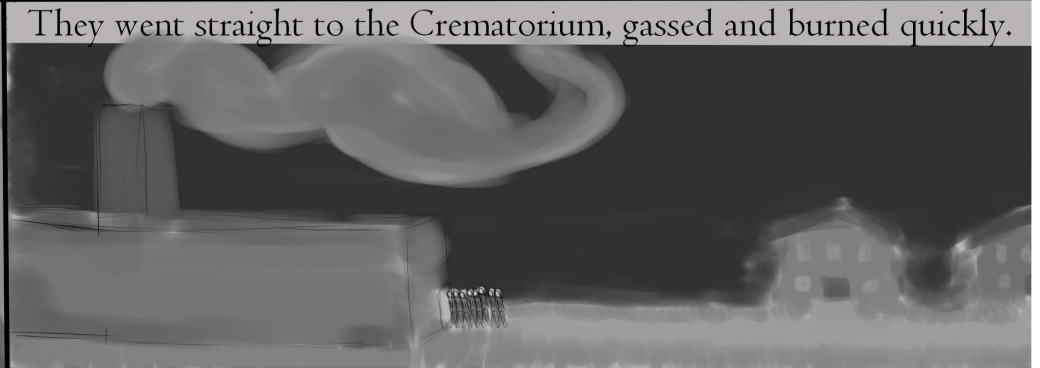


We were not fooled. This was an experiment. But I didn't want to believe it could be us next.

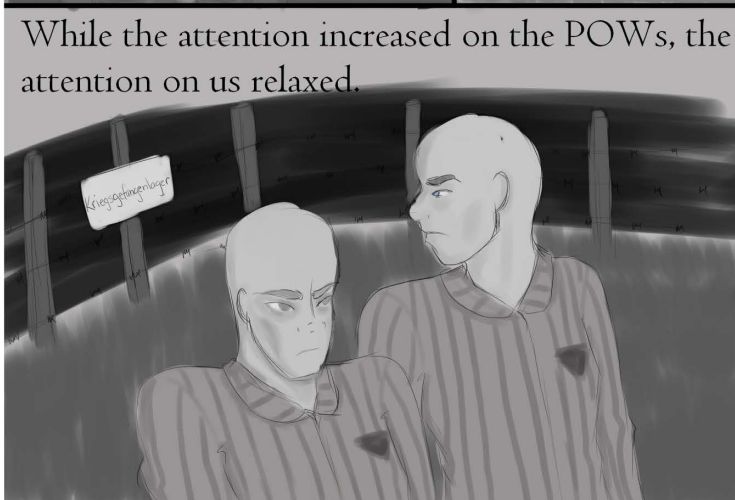
More POWs arrived.



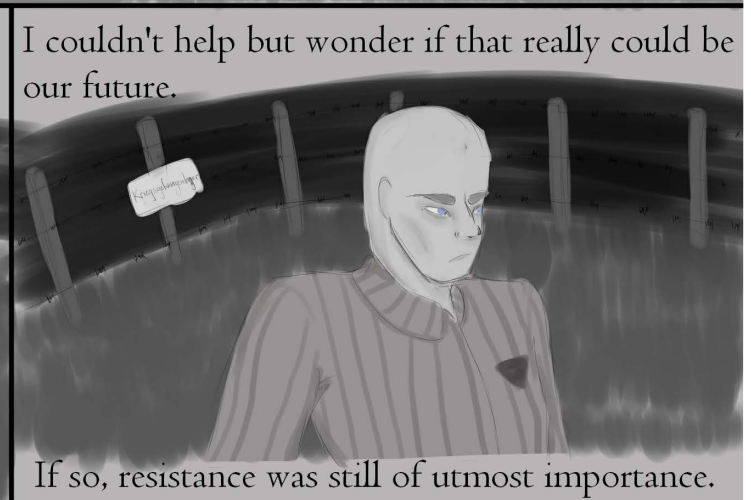
They went straight to the Crematorium, gassed and burned quickly.



While the attention increased on the POWs, the attention on us relaxed.

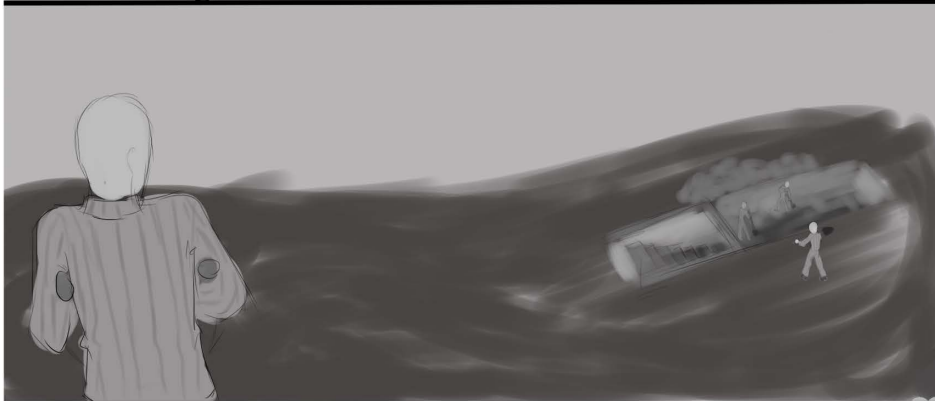


I couldn't help but wonder if that really could be our future.

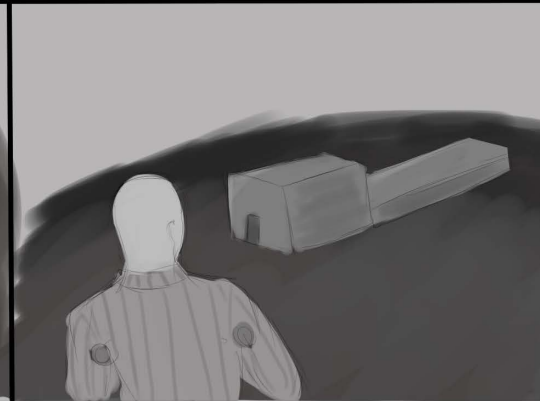


If so, resistance was still of utmost importance.

With the introduction of Russian POWs and the gas, there was now a shift in the camp.



Gas chambers were being created in Birkenau.



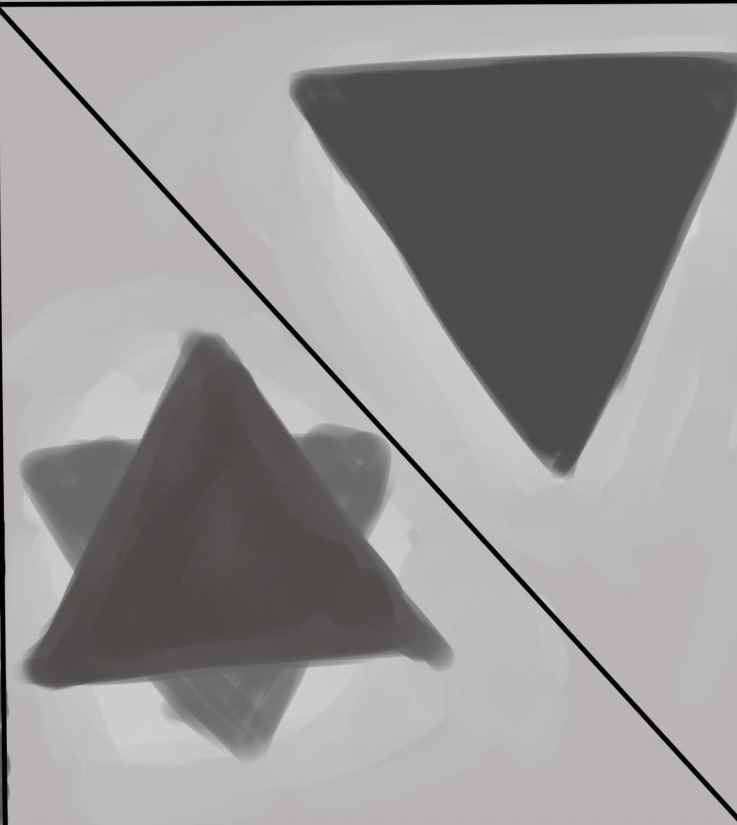
We now understood the full extent of Nazi evil.



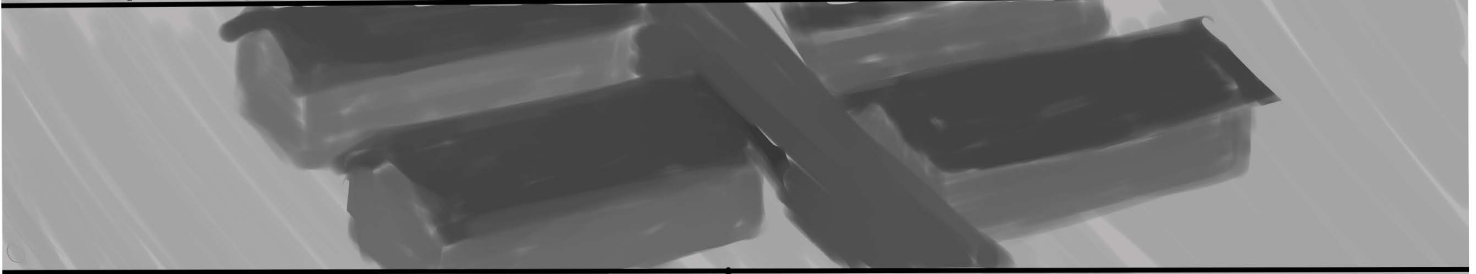
An efficient killing system.

We could hardly believe what we were seeing.

Who would be next to feed the machine?



They brought more women now, and separated them from the men by a wall.



They arrived into the care of prostitutes and criminals.



All had their heads and bodies shaved, except for the Germans.



They experienced the same conditions.



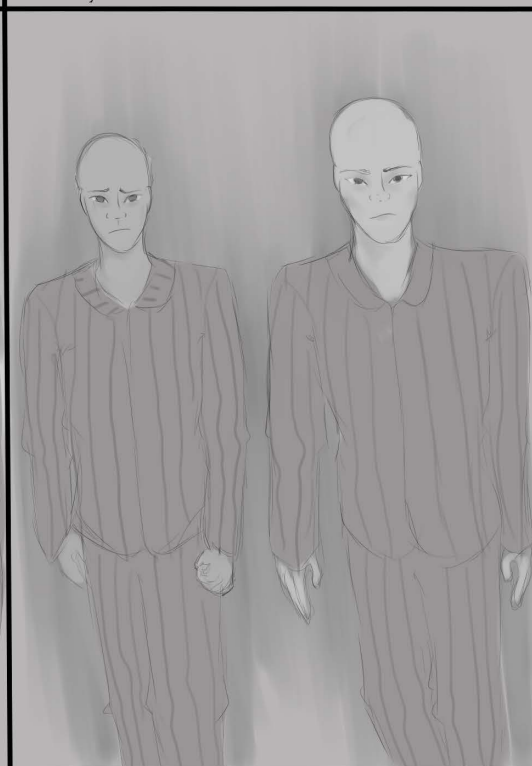
Our camp had changed, but they continued to die in open air.



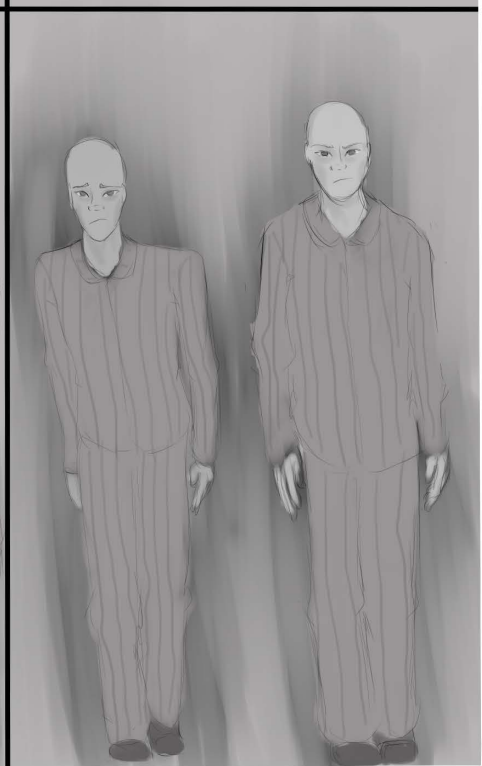
We saw them going to work every day.



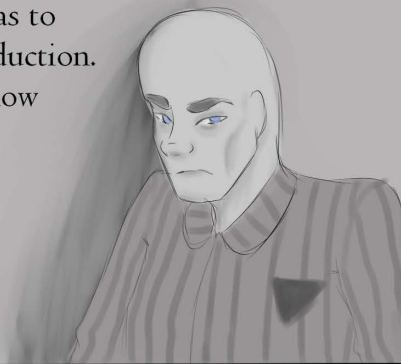
They became more and more lifeless.



It was sad to watch.



The new year, 1942, was to be a year of great... production. Large transports were now arriving at Birkenau. Thousands of Jews from all over Europe.



They went straight to the crematoria.



Where they were burned by the thousands every day.

They came because they were told they would be safe if they went to work for the Reich.



They were selected right off the train cars.

The left immediately went to the gas.



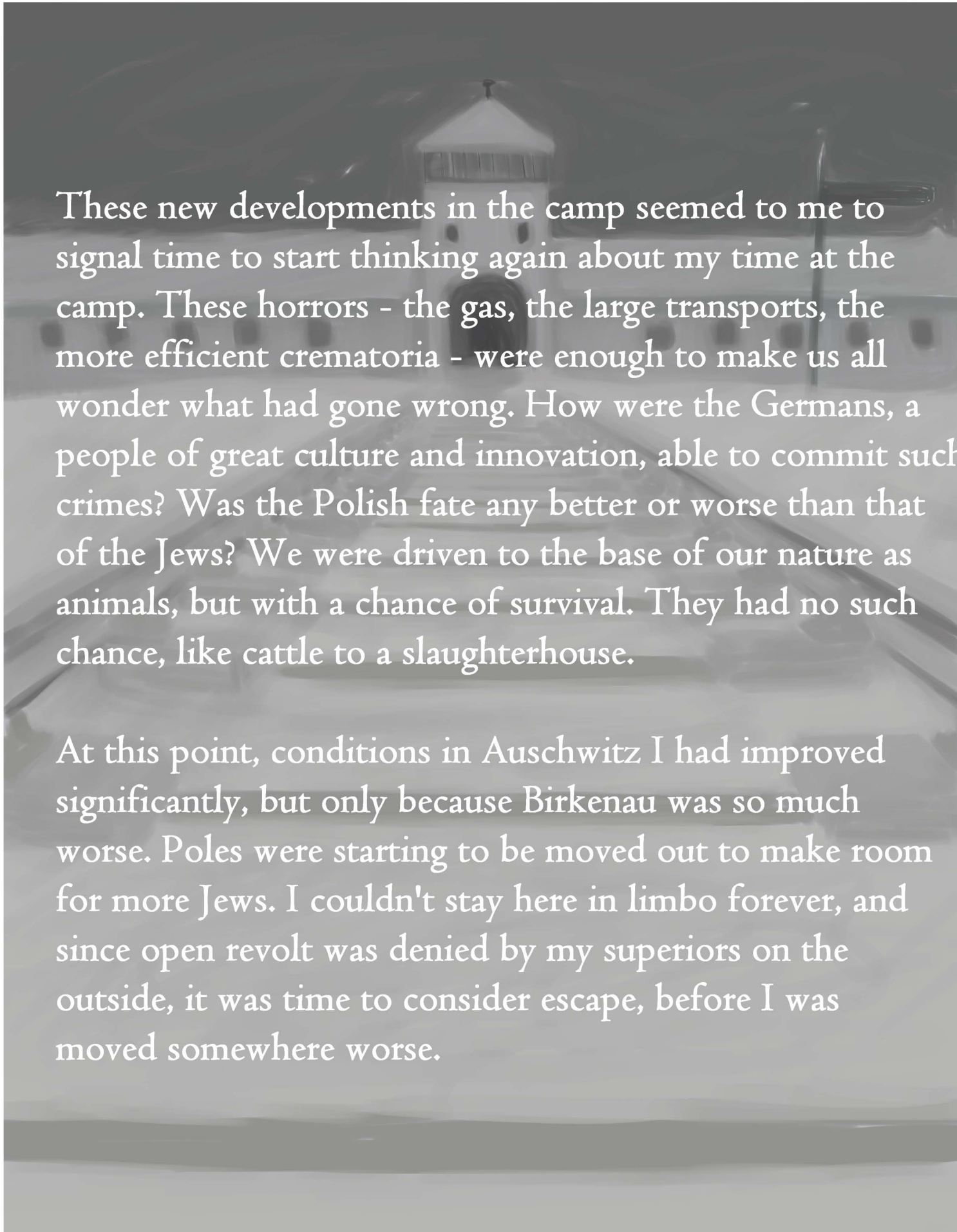
The right lived for the moment.



They left behind piles of belongings. I pitied them, but my biggest concern...



was the other Poles.



These new developments in the camp seemed to me to signal time to start thinking again about my time at the camp. These horrors - the gas, the large transports, the more efficient crematoria - were enough to make us all wonder what had gone wrong. How were the Germans, a people of great culture and innovation, able to commit such crimes? Was the Polish fate any better or worse than that of the Jews? We were driven to the base of our nature as animals, but with a chance of survival. They had no such chance, like cattle to a slaughterhouse.

At this point, conditions in Auschwitz I had improved significantly, but only because Birkenau was so much worse. Poles were starting to be moved out to make room for more Jews. I couldn't stay here in limbo forever, and since open revolt was denied by my superiors on the outside, it was time to consider escape, before I was moved somewhere worse.

We saw the gypsies on occasion.



They didn't work and were kept separate.



Family groups stayed together.

It reminded me of my own family.



My son, Andrezej, was 8
when I last saw him.



My daughter, Zofia, was 7.



The gypsies' time came as everyone's did.
The men went to the gas,
done away with
in the "Auschwitz fashion".

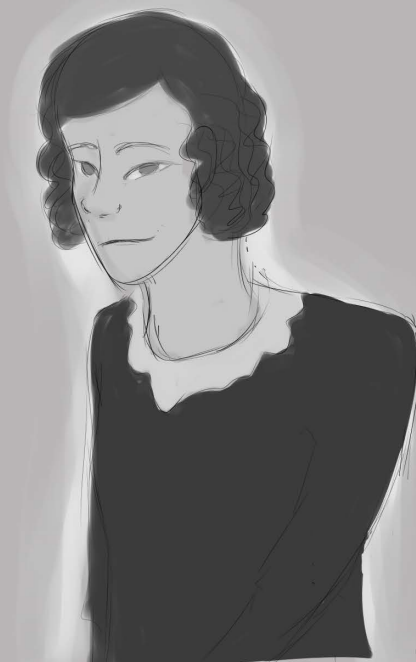


As I watched families



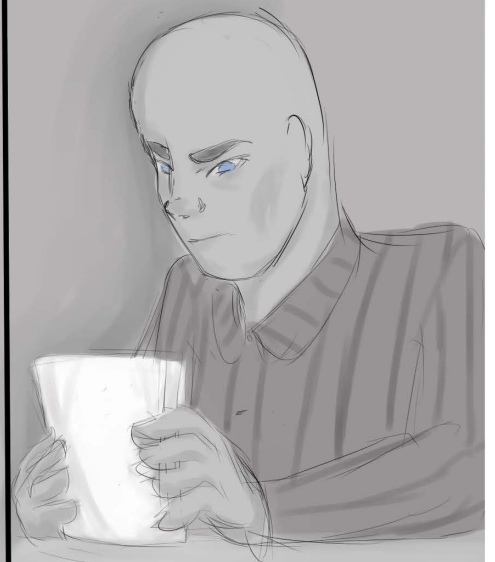
separated, starved...

I reaffirmed to myself



my will to succeed and survive.

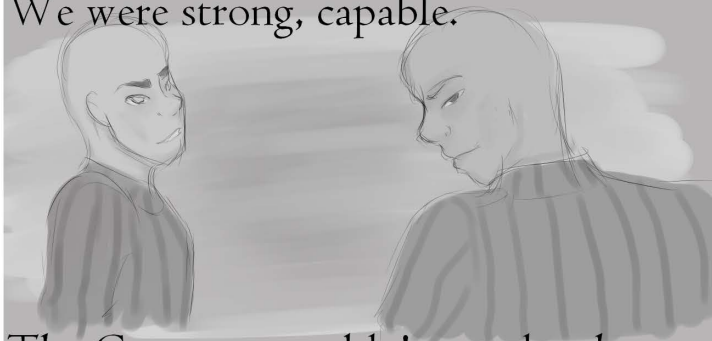
These crimes would not



be disregarded. Forgotten.

Our conspiracy was going strong, but open rebellion was dangerous.

We were strong, capable.



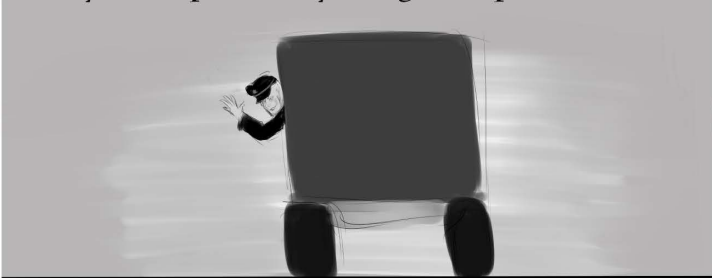
The Germans wouldn't stand a chance.

Despite our individual strength,



we continued to lose numbers.

And yet despite everything, escapes continued.



But we received no word from Warsaw.



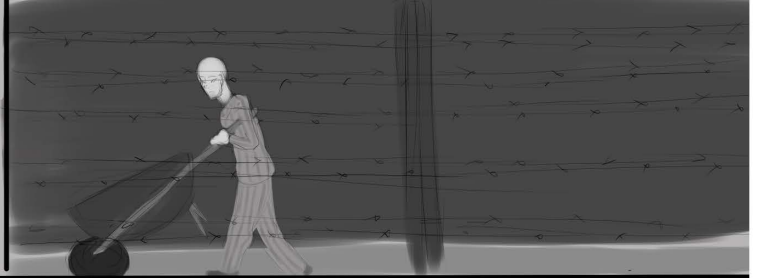
And we were afraid of repercussions on family.

Sometimes to illness, sometimes to the gas...



Sometimes both.

Some were successful, which brought hope to us.



But now there was other news.



Due to our strength as workers, Poles were being removed from Auschwitz.

Soon, the numbers of Poles for transport were announced to the blocks.

6471 1559 4859 4618

I was on the list, but I decided, with difficulty, I could not leave yet.



Though I was in very good health, I faked a hernia. I had more work to do.



Despite escaping transport, I realized I could no longer stay in Auschwitz. Much of the organization was gone.

I was going to have to



start from Ground Zero.

With a comrade, Jasiek, a plan for escape was contrived.



With Jasiek and one more, Edek, by the night of Easter Monday we were ready.

We took a night shift in the bakery outside the camp. We anxiously awaited an opportunity

Batches of bread came in and out of the ovens.



An SS-man watched our escape route. Time was running short.

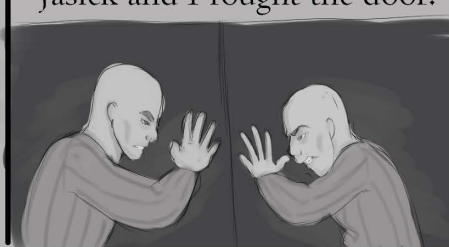
Jasiek undid the lock, and our time came.



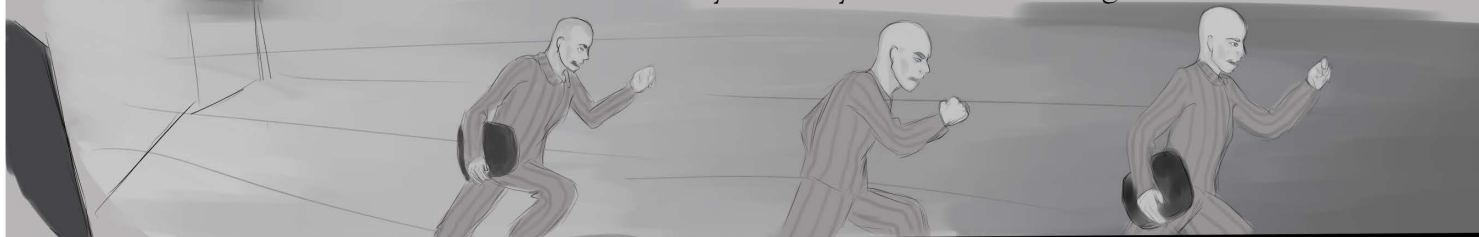
Edek slashed the telephone wire.



Jasiek and I fought the door.



Edek arrived. The SS man was 9 meters away. Finally, we burst through. Bullets followed us.



We ran cross country, crossing the Vistula, changing clothes along the way,



We walked for four days, sleeping in the wild and, eventually, under the hospitality of kind Poles.

We covered many kilometers of terrain, but our troubles were not finished.

skirting the edge of Buna, and heading into the forest.

As we walked, we crossed a bridge and on the other side was a field and farm house.

Boldly, we assumed no one was there.



A soldier came out towards us from the yard.

HALT!



We pretended not to notice him, calmly walking forward.

HALT!



We turned, calmly, as another came from the shed. The first lowered his weapon.

Ja, ja, alles gut.



This was our chance.

RUN FOR IT LADS!



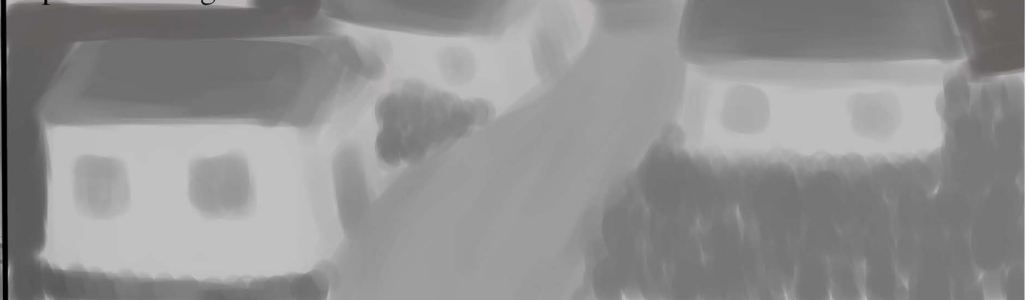
We scattered, and the Germans started shooting after they recovered from their shock.



Edek and I stayed together. We collected ourselves on a fallen tree. I was wounded. We didn't know what happened to Jasiek.



We made our way to the town of our destination, and good folk put us up for the night.



May 2nd, we finally arrived at our destination, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Obora.



They let us in without questions. Inside, we reunited with Jasiek.

We talked about our experiences...



I asked to see the
Commander in the
area

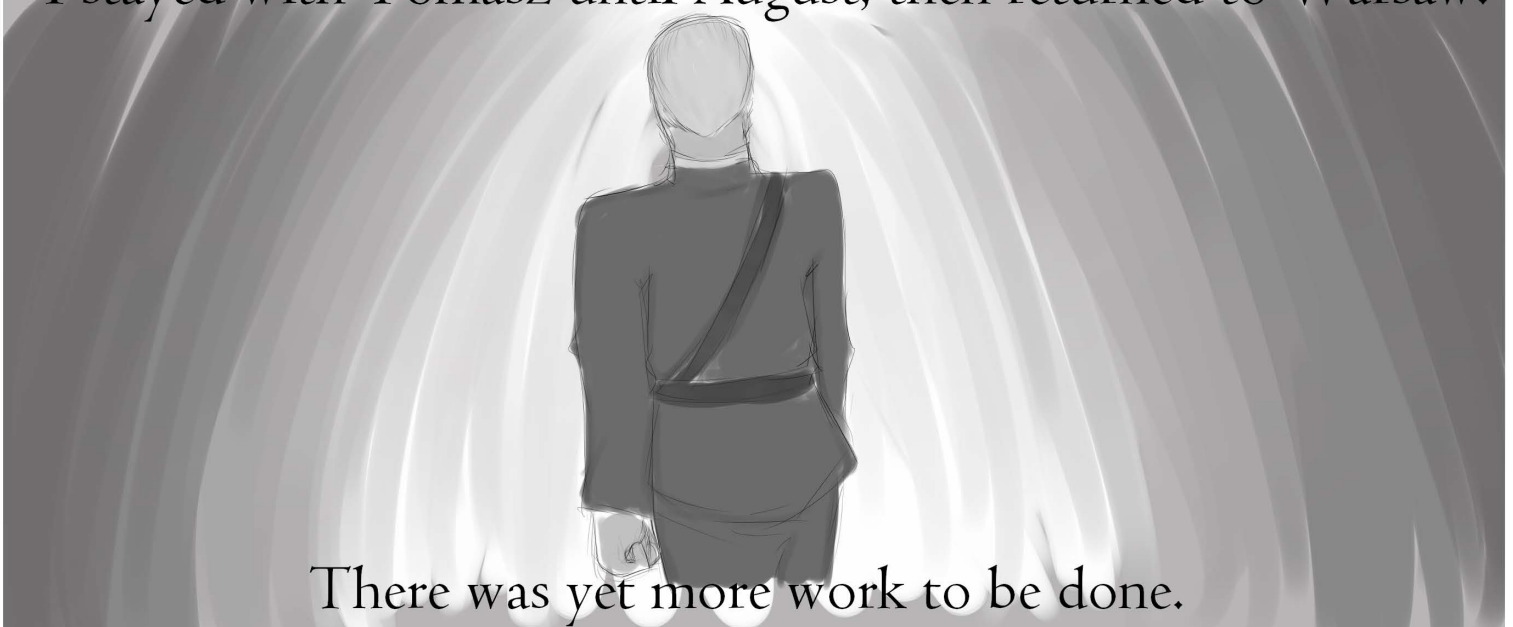


I was taken to a man named Tomasz Serafinski...



Whose name I had used in Auschwitz.

I stayed with Tomasz until August, then returned to Warsaw.



There was yet more work to be done.

After his escape, Pilecki continued to work tirelessly for the Polish Underground. He provided support for families of those still in the camp and of those who had died.

In August 1944, Pilecki took part in the Warsaw Uprising, continuously fighting for his country. After the war, Poland became part of the Soviet Union. Pilecki refused to pledge allegiance to the new government, his allegiance still lay with the government in exile.

Witold Pilecki was arrested in 1947 by Stalin's secret police for espionage. He was executed after a show trial in 1948 in Mokotow Prison in Warsaw.

Records of his work and of his execution were kept secret by the government until the fall of the Communist regime in 1989.

May his sacrifices and bravery not be forgotten.