

# POLISH DEATH CAMP

BY JAN KARSKI

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM PACHNER

**A patriot disguised as a guard bribed his way into the Nazi execution grounds at Belzec. Here, for the first time, is his eyewitness story of the Nazis' systematic slaughter of Jews, based on his official report to London and Washington**

As a member of the underground, I was ordered to leave Warsaw and report to the Polish government and the Allied authorities about conditions in Poland. My orders came from the delegate of the Polish government acting somewhere in Poland and from the commander in chief of the underground army. Jewish leaders confided to me their written report but they insisted that in order to be able to tell the truth I should see with my own eyes what actually happened to the Jews in Poland. They arranged for me to visit one of the Jewish death camps.

The camp was near the town of Belzec, about 100 miles east of Warsaw, and was well known all over Poland because of the tales of horror that were circulated about it. The common report was that every Jew who reached it, without exception, was doomed to death.

I was to go on a day when executions were scheduled. Information was easy to obtain because many of the Estonian, Latvian and Ukrainian attendants who worked there under Gestapo supervision were in the service of the Jewish organizations—not from any humane or political consideration, but for money.

I was to wear the uniform of one of the Estonians, who would stay home while I went with his papers. I was assured that chaos, corruption and panic prevailed in the camp to such an extent that there was no chance of my disguise being penetrated. Moreover, the whole expedition was perfectly organized in advance. I would go through a door habitually guarded only by Germans and Ukrainians, for an Estonian might sense a stranger in me.

The Estonian uniform itself constituted a pass, so that my papers would probably not be inspected. To make the camouflage more foolproof, still another bribed Estonian militiaman would accompany me. Since I knew German, I could talk with the German guards if it became necessary; and they, too, could be bribed.

The plan seemed simple and flawless. I agreed without any hesitation and without the slightest fear of being caught.

Early in the morning I left Warsaw in the company of a Jew who worked outside the ghetto in the Jewish underground movement. We arrived in Belzec shortly after midday and went directly to the place where the Estonian was supposed to be waiting. It was a little grocery store that had once belonged to a Jew. The Jew had been killed and since then it was being run, with the permission of the German authorities, by a local farmer who was, of course, a member of the underground.

My Estonian uniform was there waiting for me, but the man to whom it belonged had evidently decided it was more prudent to remain away. However, he had left me a complete outfit: trousers, long boots, a belt, a tie and a cap. The idea of letting his personal papers be used had apparently given him qualms, too. Instead he had left me the papers of one of his colleagues who had probably returned to his native Estonia and had taken the opportunity to sell his papers. I was not surprised. Selling papers was an established business in Poland, not at all

frowned upon. The uniform and the shoes fitted me but the cap came down to my ears. I stuffed it with paper. Then I asked my companion how I looked. He said I looked like a model Estonian militiaman.

An hour or two later the Estonian who was to accompany me arrived. He confirmed that the camp was so disorganized, chaotic and indifferently managed that I could stroll about in perfect freedom. I was to stick to the place assigned me throughout the executions and in that way I would miss nothing. After the executions all the guards would be leaving the camp. I was to join them, mingling with the mob of mixed attendants but avoiding the Estonians. He reiterated the latter precaution solemnly, warning me that if I had any close contact with them it would be easy for them to recognize me as not "their man."

The camp was about a mile and a half from the store. We started walking rapidly, taking a side lane to avoid meeting people. It took about twenty minutes to get to the camp, but we became aware of its presence in less than half that time. About a mile away from the camp we began to hear shouts, shots and screams.

"What's happening?" I asked. "What's the meaning of all that noise?"

"The Jews are hot," he said, grinning as though he had said something witty.

I must have glared at him, for he changed his tone abruptly.

"What could it be?" He shrugged. "They are bringing in a 'batch' today."

I knew what he meant and did not inquire further. We walked on while the noise increased alarmingly. From time to time a series of long screams or a particularly inhuman groan would set the hair on my scalp bristling.

"What are the chances of anyone's escaping?" I asked my companion, hoping to hear an optimistic answer.

"None at all," he answered, dashing my hopes to the ground. "Once they get this far, their goose is cooked."

"You mean there isn't a single chance of anybody's escaping from the camp, even with the way things are there?"

"Well, from the camp itself, maybe. But not alone. With a guard like me helping, it can be done. But it's a terrible risk," he said, wagging his head solemnly. "The Jew and I could both get killed."

We trudged on, the Estonian watching me out of the corner of his eye.

## Dealer in Human Flesh

"Of course," he said craftily, "if a Jew pays well—very well—it can be done. But it is very risky, it has to be handled right . . ."

"How can they pay? They don't have any money on them, do they?"

"Say, we don't try to get money out of them. We ain't so dumb. We get paid in advance. It's strictly a cash proposition. We don't even deal with those in the camp"—he gestured contemptuously in the direction of the noise—"we do business with people on the outside, like you. If somebody comes to me and tells me that such and such a Jew is going to arrive and that he wants him 'cheated out'—well, if he is willing to fork out plenty of hard cash in advance, then I do what I can."

"Have you saved many Jews so far?" I asked.

"Not as many as I'd like, but a few, anyhow."

"Are there many more good men like you there who are so willing to save the Jews?"

"Save them? Say, who wants to save them?" He looked at me in bewilderment as though I were talking unheard-of nonsense. "But if they pay, that's a different story. We can all use some money."

I did not venture to disagree. It would

have been hopeless to try to persuade him of anything different. I looked at his heavy, rather good-natured face and wondered how the war had come to develop such cruel habits in him. From what I had seen he seemed to be a simple, average man, not particularly good or bad. His hands were the calloused but supple hands of a good farmer. In normal times that was what he probably was—and a good father, a family man and a churchgoer besides. Now, under the pressure of the Gestapo and the cajoleries of the Nazis, with everyone about him engaged in a greedy competition that knew no limits, he had been changed into a professional butcher of human beings. He had caught onto his trade well and discussed its niceties, used its professional jargon as coolly as a carpenter discussing his craft.

"And what are you here for?" The question was both shrewd and innocent.

"I'd like to 'save' some Jews too," I said with an air of conspiracy. "With your help, of course. That's why I've come to the camp, to see how everything works."

"Well, don't you go trying to do anything without us."

"Don't be silly. Why should I work without you? We both want to make money and we can help each other. We would be foolish to work against each other."

This satisfied him and I now had the status of a younger colleague.

## The Approach to Horror

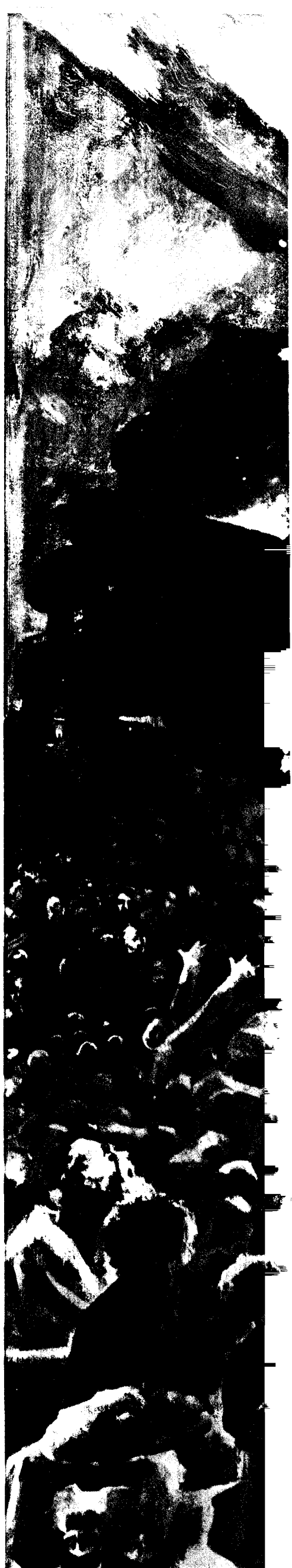
As we approached to within a few hundred yards of the camp, the shouts, cries and shots cut off further conversation. I noticed an unpleasant stench that seemed to have come from decomposing bodies mixed with horse manure. This may have been an illusion. The Estonian was, in any case, completely impervious to it. He even began to hum some sort of folk tune to himself. We passed through a small grove of decrepit-looking trees and emerged directly in front of the loud, sobbing, reeking camp of death.

It was on a large, flat plain and occupied about a square mile. It was surrounded on all sides by a formidable barbed-wire fence, nearly two yards in height and in good repair. Inside the fence, at intervals of about fifteen yards, guards were standing, holding rifles with bayonets ready for use. Around the outside of the fence, militiamen circulated on constant patrol. The camp itself contained a few small sheds or barracks. The rest of the area was completely covered by a dense, pulsating, throbbing, noisy human mass—starved, stinking, gesticulating, insane human beings in constant agitated motion. Through them, forcing paths if necessary with their rifle butts, walked the German police and the militiamen. They walked in silence, their faces bored and indifferent. They looked like shepherds bringing in a flock to the market. They had the tired, vaguely disgusted appearance of men doing a routine, tedious job.

Into the fence a few passages had been cut, and gates made of poles tied together with barbed wire swung back to make an entrance. Each gate was guarded by two men who slouched about carelessly. We stopped for a moment to collect ourselves. I noticed off to my left the railroad tracks which passed about a hundred yards from the camp. From the camp to the track a sort of raised passage had been built from old boards. On the track a dusty freight train waited, motionless.

The Estonian followed my gaze with the

"The cars were now crammed to bursting with human flesh, and the entire camp reverberated with a tremendous volume of groans, screams and shots"





interest of a person seeing what kind of an impression his home made on a visitor. He proceeded eagerly to enlighten me:

"That's the train they'll load them on. You'll see it all."

We came to a gate. Two German noncoms were standing there talking. I could hear snatches of their conversation. They seemed to be talking about a night they had spent in a near-by town. I hung back a bit. The Estonian seemed to think I was losing my nerve.

"Go ahead," he whispered impatiently into my ear. "Don't be afraid. They won't even inspect your papers. They don't care about the likes of you."

We walked up to the gate and saluted the noncoms vigorously. They returned the salute indifferently and we passed through.

"Follow me," he said, quite loudly. "I'll take you to a good spot."

We passed an old Jew, a man of about sixty, sitting on the ground without a stitch of clothing on him. I was not sure whether his clothes had been torn off or whether he, himself, had thrown them away in a fit of madness. Silent, motionless, he sat on the ground, no one paying him the slightest attention. Not a muscle or fiber in his whole body moved except for his preternaturally animated eyes, which blinked rapidly and incessantly. Not far from him a small child, clad in a few rags, was lying on the ground. He was all alone and crouched quivering on the ground, staring up with the large, frightened eyes of a rabbit. No one paid any attention to him, either.

The Jewish mass vibrated, trembled and moved to and fro as if united in a single, insane rhythmic trance. They waved their hands, shouted, quarreled, cursed and spat at one another. Hunger, thirst, fear and exhaustion had driven them all insane. I had been told that they were usually left in the camp for three or four days without food or a drop of water. They were all former inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto.

#### The Ultimate in Misery

There was no organization or order of any kind. None of them could possibly help or share with one another and they soon lost any self-control or any sense whatsoever except the bare instinct of self-preservation. They had become, at this stage, completely dehumanized. It was, moreover, typical autumn weather, cold, raw and rainy. The sheds could not accommodate more than two to three thousand people and every "batch" included more than five thousand. This meant that there were always two to three thousand men, women and children scattered about in the open, suffering exposure as well as everything else.

The chaos, the squalor, the hideousness of it all were simply indescribable. There was a suffocating stench of sweat, filth, decay, damp straw and excrement. To get to my post we had to squeeze our way through this mob. It was a ghastly ordeal. I had to push foot by foot through the crowd and step over the limbs of those who were lying prone. It was like forcing my way through a mass of death and decomposition made even more horrible by its agonized pulsations. My companion had the skill of long practice, evading the bodies on the ground and winding his way through the mass with the ease of a contortionist. Distracted and clumsy, I would brush against people or step on a figure that reacted like an animal; quickly, often with a moan or a yelp. Each time this occurred I would be seized by a fit of nausea and come to a stop. But my guide kept urging and hustling me along.

In this way we crossed the entire camp and finally stopped about twenty yards from the gate which opened on the passage leading to the train. It was a comparatively uncrowded spot. I felt immeasurably relieved

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Jan Karski was a liaison officer between the political and military authorities in the Polish underground and this article is from his book *Courier from Poland, the Story of a Secret State*, to be published in late October, 1944, by Houghton Mifflin





# CONGRESSIONAL GADFLY

BY WALTER DAVENPORT

In Congress they call him a stooge for Joe Stalin. At home, in East Harlem, they call him blessed and tell him their woes. He is the nominee of the Democratic, the Republican and the American Labor parties. He's the Honorable Vito Marcantonio, Member of Congress from New York. What he is going to be—who knows?

FOR an hour before the Honorable Vito Marcantonio trots into the F. H. La Guardia Political Club in East Harlem, New York City, the hall reeks with woe. But not hopeless woe. Marc will listen. Marc will know the answers.

Marc will get that pension, that rent reduced, that club charter, that son out of the Army. Marc will write that letter—hah, soooch a letter! Marc will fetch the body of that dead husband back from France, get that taxicab out of alimony court, restore that lost license, reclaim that erring daughter. Marc will call on the phone and get that cop broke for beating my brother until he is sick in bed with the teeth knocked out. Marc will see to it that that Frankie marries our Angelina. Sure, Marc he fix. Marc, he fix it good.

In at least six languages the crowd compares troubles. They swap them, declaim them, defy comparison, beseech you to listen. They roar them in one another's faces. They

scoff, when they listen at all, at the tribulations of a neighbor. So you call that a trouble, hah? So listen to me. They shout, they weep, they call upon heaven to witness, they beat their breasts, they jab one another in the chest.

They fill the air with such clamor that Mr. Marcantonio's aides, preparing the way for his arrival, bawl for order. And all in Italian, Spanish, Polish, Yiddish, Hungarian and English—the latter in a wide assortment of dialects: Irish, native Negro, West Indian Negro, New York. But before Mr. Marcantonio, the tense, scowling zealot who represents East Harlem in Congress arrives, suppose we find what it's all about.

When we say he represents East Harlem, we're not messing around with figures of speech. This year, as in 1942, he has won nomination by the Democratic and Republican parties as well as by his own American Labor Party. Politically he's a radical left winger but denies vehemently that he's a Communist. Ever since he has been able to raise his voice to a mob-mobilizing pitch (and that was when he was still in his teens), he has been haranguing East Harlem, wherein he was born on December 10, 1902.

At home, what is left of the Tammany tiger fawns against his leg like a friendly alley cat. The Republicans, who failed spectacularly to gerrymander him out of Congress have stopped trying to do anything about him. The American Labor Party (state organization) once tried to excommunicate him, vowing to purge itself of Communists. This, as it turned out, was like cutting your throat to get out of shaving. The New York County branch of the ALP told the state organization to go fly a kite, retained

Mr. Marcantonio as its chairman and, lo and behold, Mr. Marcantonio soon became the pride of the whole ALP, his friend Mr. Sidney Hillman capturing the state chairmanship.

To find a place for Mr. Marcantonio in the national scene requires sharp eyes. At present he is one of the most pestiferous gadflies that Congress has ever slapped at. If you're an earnest pessimist, bound to conjure up dark-brown pictures of postwar depression, you may behold Mr. Marcantonio exhorting mobs, ballyhooing for Communism, lashing capitalism and even leading marches on Washington. But it takes imagination. At the moment his thin arms are flung across the shoulders of both philosophies—Right and Left.

He's the political dictator of East Harlem, and if you don't believe it, go up and ask. As the boss of the American Labor Party, he has four or five New York City congressmen ringing his doorbell. He won't deny that, in the back of his long, narrow head, he has an ambition to be mayor of New York. However, he is none too sanguine. New York City, as a whole, will have to be a great deal more like East Harlem, he thinks, before he will fill the job occupied now by his political discoverer and mentor, Fiorello H. La Guardia. He admits that he'd relish being United States senator but says that the State of New York would have to change quite a lot before going that far.

He's a smallish, intense, all but frail man who is constantly on fire about something. He protests that he is anxious to escape the statesman category, an anxiety which many of his enemies in Congress characterize as unwarranted. He says that a statesman is merely a tired politician. Nor does he want any truck with diplomats who, he says, are guys who are paid big wages by the people for ignoring them. He's as unpredictable as a Bulgarian election, and his constituents, who are apt to be quite disappointed when any sort of gathering disperses without at least a little bloodshed, never fail to rally around in large numbers when Mr. Marcantonio and his political godfather Mayor La Guardia meet.

Actually, these two terrificos are extremely fond of each other, although they frequently disagree at the top of their voices. Their meetings are quite likely to wind up with the mayor fat-legging it off to his car in a torrential rage, or appealing, limp-handed and shrugging, to the highly inflammable crowd and murmuring, "Vito, Vito, my erring son." And Mr. Marcantonio will have turned his back upon Mr. La Guardia, contorting his face into a ferocious scowl, and filling the heavens with avowals that the people of his congressional district never, never shall be slaves.

## A Strike Organizer at Eighteen

In 1920 when Mr. Marcantonio was eighteen, a law student in New York University, he helped to organize the Harlem Tenants' League. The depression which was to follow the first World War was playing a tryout in the tenements. The residents of the district, most of whom are never more than a butterfly's jump from financial catastrophe, decided that they were paying too much rent and that they wouldn't pay it, anyway.

Mr. Marcantonio who, they say, was studying law that he might have an additional reason for talking, could no more have kept out of this than Mr. La Guardia can ignore a three-alarm fire. He managed the strike of the tenants against their landlords with such intelligence that Mr. La Guardia, then offering himself for Congress with no takers, lost no time in enlisting the lad into the F. H. La Guardia Political Club, which was then laughed off by still healthy Tammany and its stooge, the local Republican racket, as the Gibonis, or the Wops.

Lashed into scalding frenzy by the taunt, to say nothing of the unsettling oratory of Mr. La Guardia, Mr. Marcantonio and other tornadoes, the despised Gibonis lost little time in becoming the political machine which was presently to send Mr. La Guardia to Congress (deafeningly managed by Mr. Marcantonio), reduce Tammany's influence in the district to a cold cinder, and eventually to become all Mr. Marcantonio's, Mr. La Guardia going to City Hall. Mr. Marcantonio has added several cylinders and jet propulsion to the machine. Today anyone seeking public office in East Harlem without his blessing is in very great danger of being arrested as a person too foolish to be at large.

In 1934, Mr. La Guardia having become mayor, Mr. Marcantonio was elected to Congress as a Republican by the unconvincing margin of 247 votes. He lost no time in becoming such a vociferous New Dealer that even such ardent Rooseveltians as Harry Hopkins, Harold Ickes, Louis Howe and Henry Wallace were a little embarrassed. Back in New York, the Republicans apologized to the world at large and promised to retire Mr. Marcantonio in 1936. The Gibonis, having discovered that they were being represented by a fellow who could irritate the conventional even more than Mr. La Guardia could, supported him, but he was defeated in 1936.

Why he wasn't elected is still a wrangle in East Harlem. But Tammany slipped its man through while the district was shredded by Fascists, anti-Fascists, Reds, Pinks and local dissensions. Mr. Marcantonio got lost in the general free-for-all. But he did get into several elegant riots, being arrested once (quickly released), lost a flock of teeth (never replaced), and learned a good lesson (Continued on page 68)