

Mauthausen: relationships between Italian and foreign inmates by Eridano Bazzarelli

Perhaps this title is too broad, and should really read "my relationships with foreign prisoners". This is in fact simply another (maybe superfluous) addition to the already long list of recent, and not so recent, publications on the subject, some of which are excellent. I have always felt a little jealous of those companions capable of reconstructing and recounting in a clear and precise manner both their personal history of the camp, and that of other prisoners. Unfortunately, my own memories of these matters have always been, and still are, somewhat blurred, as if masked by fog or a sub-conscious need not to recall clearly, to preserve my memories indistinct. But I can remember nonetheless, and especially now at an advanced age, I remember maybe more than before. Hence this article, which is an eyewitness account, but also a consideration of the relationships between the prisoners in the Nazi camp, specifically between prisoners from different countries.

I do not know precisely how many countries were represented amongst the inmates, possibly twenty-odd (indeed many more if we count the individual nations that made up the USSR). The prisoners themselves, my companions in a terrible common fate, were made up of every social class, and every culture: we had artists, doctors, professors, labourers, skilled workers, students. There were Polish farmers, Jewish tailors from Warsaw and other Polish cities, an intellectual from Athens, and a Mongolian shepherd. And by definition, our cultural "worlds" were individual to each of us.

And so the "levels of evolution" (a concept I do not much care for) were also very different: the distance between an intellectual from Paris or Prague and a Polish farmer or an Eastern shepherd is clear and obvious. And so are differences in character: one was refined and polite, another direct and uncouth. I do not wish to offer a racial or "ethnic" explanation for these differences, I am sure that these examples of one or another culture were more or less as "civilised" as those of another. Our common reality of suffering, our shared experience of a blunt and obvious immorality (our own and that of others), effectively erased such differences of culture. Thus, despite everything - the horror, the violence and every conceivable type of humiliation, and the constant visible presence of death - a genuine community was formed, which we did not appreciate clearly then, but which without doubt existed, despite our hunger and degradation. This might yet still help to create the basis for a genuine European unity, and even from outside Europe (as there were some present from beyond Europe). A form of unity born of sadness and deep conviction based on a genuine hope for freedom and justice. Maybe our camp community was also born from confused feelings of reciprocal friendship. We had plenty of hopes in those days, maybe too many and too idealistic. The first was a immediate hope to return home, but there was also what we might now call a childish expectation of a better world to follow, more genuine, more humane. I remember an old poem by Franco Fortini called "Di là dal ponte" ("from across the bridge"). We were crossing a bridge under bombardment. But on the other side, everything would be beautiful. Unfortunately, across the bridge, things were not as we had dreamed them to be, because we had not taken account of history and its cruelties, and so we were simply yearning for impossible utopia. And our hopes were in fact in large part to be disappointed.

As a prisoner catapulted into a strange, absurd, ferocious world, I had a slight advantage; for many years, I had studied (in a haphazard but constant manner) Russian language and culture, to which I would dedicate myself in a systematic fashion after the war. This meant that I already knew some Russian, and in the camps, of course, I found myself amongst large numbers of Russians. This pleased me, as I thought it would give me the chance to improve my scant and stammering command of the language. And in fact as a result I quickly developed almost friendly relationships with a number of Russians, with whom I managed to express myself, and to discuss their literature, some of which I knew and which many of them, including the manual workers, were familiar with. And dropping the name Tolstoy meant that sometimes one of them would spontaneously offer me a piece of bread. The Russians, huge and strong as they were, often had the guts to steal some bread from the stores, and they usually got away with it. For someone like me, 25 lashes of the whip, or 25 blows from a club could have spelled my death, but these physically strong people who were used to enormous toil could put up with it much better.

The incident I remember most clearly, and with gratitude, is the day I found myself in the empty space between two barracks: I was half-dressed, wearing the miserable camp "pyjamas" (I was never able to "organise" myself, to "acquire" additional clothing, so I had nothing else heavier to wear), and I was shivering from the cold. One of my fellow inmates approached me, a Russian in fact, and offered me a sort of padded jacket (who knows how he was able to get hold of it). He said that he would ask for it back in April when the temperature rose, it was no use to him in that moment. He told me his name, maybe I understood it wrong, and that he was an English teacher in Moscow and was very interested in language. Years later, I tried to track him down during my repeated trips to Moscow (his family name, I recalled, was Purvar, who knows if that was his real surname), but without success. And yet I do know he managed to survive the camp. Whether I ever find him or not, I would like to express again my gratitude and my affection. Maybe that coat helped to save my life.

The Russian inmates were a complex and varied lot: aside those from Russia, the Ukraine and Belorussia, there were also prisoners from other Soviet republics, including those from the east. And the reasons they found themselves in the death camps were just as varied. Above all, they were prisoners-of-war: the Nazis refused to give Soviet prisoners-of-war the same treatment they gave to American, British or Scandinavian soldiers. They considered them an inferior race, that had no right to the same "rights" that so-called

superior races were entitled to. Hence they had landed in the camps alongside the Jews and political prisoners. One such case was a Soviet prisoner, an airman, whom I had got to know at Mauthausen who spent the day before his execution (the Nazis said he was a spy, I think) calmly playing draughts, with pawns he had scraped together from somewhere.

Other Russian prisoners had different stories to tell. Some, captured in Soviet territory occupied by the Nazis, had in principle agreed to work for the Germans (they were technically classed as civilian workers). But then they had broken some rule or other, or they were actually double-agents, and so they ended up in the death camps. Or perhaps they had not done anything, and were there simply because someone had decided that they should be. Naturally, there were Soviet Jews: in the Soviet zones they occupied, the Germans had deported thousands of Jews of Byelorussian, Ukrainian and other nationalities. Finally there were the "bandits", pure and simple.

None of the Russians ever exchanged a cross word with me (even though I was Italian, and Mussolini's Italy had invaded the USSR!), not even a bad look, violence or disrespect. As I have said, some of them were considered simple "bandits" (but the Italians were also considered "bandits" by the Germans, including the German civilian workers). One of these "bandits" was a strong Ukrainian, called Boris if I remember correctly. Even this individual, in his own way an extraordinary person, always showed me kindness and respect, and even taught me some tricks to avoid being beaten, as far as we could. Obviously there were squabbles and disputes between national groups, and how! But there were also other emotions, positive emotions, born of spontaneous human solidarity, though not brotherhood as such, that would be too much to claim. And it is on these moments that I want to concentrate in my "memoirs", which do not constitute historical documentation, but a record of emotions and memories.

And so we come to the Poles. Much has been said about the Polish prisoners in the camps, Mauthausen and Gusen alike. Some of them exercised positions of power, and this could make them cruel. I have a confused and almost terrifying memory of a Polish prisoner, called Hugo (I think), who was very cruel to his fellow inmates. For this, he was shot when the camp was liberated. And I can still remember his corpse, laid out on the deck of a barracks, still moving in his death spasms. I felt pity for Hugo, like all the other Poles. Brutally snatched from their homes by the ferocity of the Nazis, still very young men or even women, pitched into the middle of Hell itself, some of them could not avoid the "deformation" of their characters as a result. Many of them, too young for what was happening to them, would do almost anything for a piece of bread.

My relations with the Poles were cordial and sometimes friendly. Once, I don't remember when, while I was standing to attention with the rest of the prisoners at one of the interminable head-counts called by the SS in the roll-call square, I started to faint, I could feel myself falling away. I was already slipping to the ground when I became vaguely aware of someone catching me by the arm. On my left and right, there were two Polish prisoners who had seen what was happening and helped me stay on my feet, even if I was half-fainted. They saved my life: if I had fallen, a revolver or gun shot from an SS man would have been my certain fate, since that was standard practice in the camp. I don't know their names – I saw them a few times afterwards in the camp, but after that, I knew nothing more of them. Are they dead? Did they get back home? I tried to find them in Poland, but it was in vain, since I didn't know their names and barely remembered their faces. And yet, these unknown Poles demonstrated their humanity, a genuine sense of solidarity. And this is also how I remember the Polish doctor, a deported Jew, who had a treatment for scabies: he treated me when I had scabies from before my arrival in Mauthausen, at Bolzano. And so that doctor saved my life as well: scabies was proof of lice, and prisoners with lice (at Gusen and the other camps) were immediately killed. And similarly with many other Poles, with whom I had perfectly cordial relationships.

Next were the Spaniards. At the end of the civil war in Spain, and the destruction of the short-lived government in Barcelona, many Republican soldiers and politicians (including a group of anarchists) took refuge in France. Unfortunately, the war-time French government, under the dominion of the Nazis, handed them over to the Germans, who promptly imprisoned them in various camps. Amongst these, I got to know Angel Mejias y Samorano (I think that is the right spelling), who had maybe been an important (anarchist) figure in the Barcelona government, a brave fighter for the Spanish Republic. Angel became my friend, and I found a way to disappoint him. In the last few months, the Spanish prisoners started to receive some food parcels (I do not know where from, maybe the Red Cross): Angel gave me something to eat, and wanted (I think) to also put me to the test. He entrusted me with a packet of sugar, asking me to look after it. I failed this test of my resolve: one lick led to another, and soon I had eaten nearly all the sugar. I was ashamed of myself (and still am when I think of it today), but Angel didn't seem to mind too much. He told his comrades that I had entrusted the sugar to him, and he had eaten it. I do not know what happened to Angel Mejias. Obviously he could not return to Spain: I think some Mexican Anarchists came to collect him, not long after liberation. I do not know the fate of many of the Spanish prisoners in the camp, and what happened to them after liberation, since they could not return to Fascist Spain, and clearly they did not want to go back to France either, given the way the French had treated them. Destiny had been cruel to them, and we should not forget the genuine betrayal they suffered.

Aside from the Spaniards, I would like to know what happened to some of the other "ethnic" groups (to use the fashionable modern word), the other peoples who had the misfortune to form part of the history of the concentration camp. I think that so far the various national ex-prisoner associations, who have been in contact with each other, have not carried out much work in this area, to create a comparative history (including psychological considerations) of the various peoples who made up the camp's victims. As noted

previously, there was enormous cultural diversity: I knew people of tremendous civility, Greeks, French, people from Prague, Belgrade etc, and others who demonstrated a much "lower" level of culture. But the "mark" left by our common sufferings, our common fate and the prevalence of death, made us in a certain sense united, close to each other, consciously or otherwise aware of the fact that the fate of each was the same as the fate of the rest.

I consciously tried to be friendly and generous with many of the older prisoners, Italians or otherwise. I am still grateful to an older prisoner (Italian I think) who taught me many "tricks" for how to survive the camp. I had just arrived, and while waiting to be "registered", he learnt that I was a student: he told me not to mention it, and instead invent a profession for myself. This way, I could hope to avoid being assigned to the squads that worked with picks in the quarries. So I said that I was a painter. This served me well, as I was assigned to a painting work-detail. There were eight of us, including four Russians, and we worked in two shifts. I think the Russians, and two other Italians (one from Genoa and one from Anzola Emilia) were actually painters by trade. Angel Mejias thought that a quarter of our "kommando" had never painted anything in our lives. It was not a difficult job, not even very heavy work, apart from the fact that we were always covered in paint dust, and immersed in the smell of turpentine. This putrid atmosphere worked to our advantage, as it meant that the guards were reluctant to come and see what we were doing. And so, many times, one of us could keep watch while the others slept (this was extremely dangerous: prisoners caught sleeping would be hanged). We were in an underground work-area, and many fellow-inmates came to see us: amongst these was Enrico Chilò, who having claimed to be an electrician by trade, was now trying to be an electrician in reality.

The "Kapo" of our group (or boss, if we want to call him such) was a German from Nuremberg, sent to the camp for being a socialist (I will say more about him later). He must have known what we were doing, but he never reported us. Our "productivity" was very poor: we were supposed to be painting airplane doors, and we never managed to finish many. I do not know how come no-one ever realised that we could paint many more during our shifts than we actually did. In any case, once those airplanes (made by Messerschmidt) left the underground hangers, they were promptly destroyed by Allies bombing raids.

I would like to recount a curious encounter. One day, while I was polishing one of the doors with something or other (which would then be painted blue), a soldier came in, one of our guards. I don't know whether he has with the SS or the Wehrmacht. The man, who was quite old, sat himself down next to me, and started watching me work. Naturally I pretended to work at a solid pace. Then he began talking to me: he said he was Lithuanian, and told me that the Russians had surrounded Berlin. We never knew what to say in those kind of situations: he could have been a provocateur. But he wasn't, he was just a desperate man who knew that he had made the wrong decision (or maybe he had been forced to make it?), and who knew now that death was his likely reward, given that the war was nearly over for Germany and her allies. I knew some Lithuanian from my studies of the Slav lands and the Baltic, including a poem that I could partially remember. I recited it to him. He was evidently overcome with emotion, took an apple out of his pocket and gave it to me. Then he went: that apple is an important memory of my times in the camp.

Before discussing the "Jewish people" who made up a large part of the camp population, and maybe in memory of my Lithuanian, I cannot avoid recounting an episode that I still remember clearly, and that sometimes I see in my dreams. One morning (we were in a barracks in the main camp at Mauthausen), the guards brought a large group of children in. They were very young, maybe 5-7 years old, and so they did not understand where they were and what awaited them. Suddenly they started doing ring-a-ring-roses, and began to spin round, singing a song that I think was in Lithuanian (although I cannot be sure). Then they were taken out again: maybe they sent straight to the gas chambers and then the oven? Maybe they were Lithuanian Jews (or Polish Jews), all deported from the same village or the same nursery or the same school. I don't know, but I would like those who know more about this "transport" to talk about and write about it. I can still hear, almost obsessively, the silvery voices of those children, their incomprehensible song, and their total innocence and unawareness of where they were. They experienced a moment of joy and pleasure before death.

The camp was for Jews, Russians and political prisoners. I remember above all a Hungarian Jew, who sometimes shared my bunk. This prisoner, who had a serious and cultured manner, was one of the few who prayed in a showy way. Often he would put one of our caps on his head, or some rag, and start to pray fervently. But certainly there were many who prayed silently, or who considered religious and spiritual matters, if only to psychologically escape the reality of the camp for a while. In this regard, I want to remember a kind unforgettable lawyer, Gaetano De Martino, who was not with us, but was imprisoned instead at Ebensee. As he himself told me, when we met after liberation, he would pray in his own way, using his own "mental channels". I was his guest later in via Rovelli in Milan before staying with my friend Aldo Boniti. De Martino was a theosophist, secretary of a theosophist group in Milan, and also head of the theosophist publishing house "Alaya". He did not pray for himself, but for his persecutors, for those who would beat him or break his legs. He was a very intelligent man of great sensitivity and faith, who believed, according to theosophist teaching, that by "sending" messages of peace and pardon to those who beat and persecuted him (whose "aura" must have been a dreadful colour), his torturers would mend their ways, by reflecting on their conduct and maybe even feeling pity as a result. Unfortunately, it seemed at times as if a cruel god was deliberately working against the "good people" in the camp, of whom De Martino was definitely one (he also produced one of the first eye-witness accounts of the camp "From San Vittore to the camps"). I do not remember if other Jews in the camp prayed, but I did not: even though I had had an important religious experience before the camp (I was an evangelical Protestant), I never once prayed in captivity. Prayer did not seem part of the world of the camp, almost a prayer said in

hell itself, or maybe simply a futile demonstration of weakness. I do not know, but I can still remember that Hungarian Jews who prayed daily, seeking a relationship with God. I don't know for sure what happened to him, but given his age and physical condition, I doubt that he survived his imprisonment.

And so to the Jews: Jews from all across the continent, captured by the Nazis, very often betrayed by informers of all types, and now waiting for the Final Solution. French, Greek, Italian, German, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Czech, all were represented. Mainly, or possibly all of them, were "the little people": the rich Jews, the financiers etc, seemed to manage to save themselves. There were no Bulgarian Jews in the camp: the king of Bulgaria was protecting them. King Boris was a strange person who enjoyed driving trains, and who married one of the daughters of our King Vittorio Emanuele III, Giovanna (another daughter, Mafalda, married to a German prince, ended up in a German camp, where I think she died). Boris was allied to the Nazis, but nonetheless he refused to send "his" Jews to the Germans. A similar thing happened with another European king, that of Denmark, who wanted to wear the yellow Star of David on his jacket in solidarity with the Jews in his small country who were required to do by their Nazi occupiers.

Us non-Jews were therefore "submerged" in the martyred Jewish population. Many of us could at least find a "reason" for our presence in Mauthausen: we had defied or fought the Nazis. But the only fault of the Jews was that they were Jews, just as the only fault of the Roma was that they were Roma. I think around 100,000 Roma were murdered by the Nazis, also victims of the Nazi paranoia, despite the fact that they spoke an Indo-European ("aryan") language. Just as in Italy today, so in Germany there was a genuine disgust and horror of diversity, of nomadic people, the ultimate "race of thieves", an easy scapegoat to blame for everything that went wrong, just like the Jews. I do not think I had direct relations with the Roma in the camp.

I doubt that the obscene, grovelling activity of Holocaust "deniers" and "revisionists" (including some celebrated and less celebrated history professors), usually passed off as the result of "historical" research, will be able to erase this deep physical and historical wound in the heart of European civilisation, that is the Final Solution. I would like these "deniers" and "revisionists", especially the academics amongst them, to walk (as we did) the camp paths littered with piles of corpses (the crematorium could not always cope with the huge numbers of dead). The Jewish holocaust was not the first such event of the twentieth century... before there had been the massacres of the Armenians in 1915 when, just as the Ottoman Empire was on the point of collapse, the Turkish minister of war, Enver Pasha, decided on "the end of the Armenian question", i.e. the end of the Armenian population of the Empire. Apart from massacres that took place on Armenian territory (including the famous mountain Musa Dagh, which was the location for a courageous and frenzied even if unsuccessful resistance by the Armenians), there were also fearful deportations of Armenians into Syrian Armenia. They were forced to walk - men, women, children, old people - across mountains and deserts, leaving a horrifying trail of dead along the way. We might not be able to compare the Armenian genocide to that of the Jews in terms of the numbers of victims involved, but the motivations are similar: the decision of a Government, a State, a nation, to exterminate a population, a population of its own citizens (the Armenians had been Turkish subjects for centuries). But the decision to exterminate the Armenians arose not out of the old politics of the Turkish Empire (which had allowed them to live there for so long), but from a new politics based on nationalism. Which is the same concept that underpinned the Nazi massacres of their own citizens, before extending the mass killings to Jews from countries they had invaded.

In the camp, as in others, there was a "hierarchy". The most dirty or back-breaking jobs (such as carrying the very heavy, huge basins that contained our soup made of sour turnip and potato peelings, or cleaning the latrines, or moving thousands of dead bodies) would be given to the Jews. Next in line were the Italians, considered to be both Badoglio traitors (a reference to Marshal Badoglio, head of the Italian government after Mussolini was deposed in July 1943, who made peace with the Allies and declared war on Germany - *English translator's note*) and Communist bandits. It was also clear that the older inmates - especially the German ones who could communicate directly with their guards - were generally able to avoid the most back-breaking work.

There were often transports that would arrive from other camps: transports of Jews. And when they arrived, they were already in bad physical condition, bearing the scars of those horrifying journeys in cattle-trucks, often without food or water for days on end. I do not know, and I would like to know, if the Jews created any resistance structures to offer at least some defiance to their tormentors.

Who chose the "numbers" of the prisoners (each of us had a number) to be sent to the gas chamber? Except in special circumstances, I think the SS periodically asked for a certain "quantity" of Jews or other prisoners to be killed, without specifying names. Who chose the "numbers" of the victims? Was there some Kafkaesque-office that decreed who would be murdered? I honestly do not know, but it would not be a bad thing to know precisely how these choices were made.

All that separated the Jews from the other prisoners was the yellow star sewn onto their uniform, and the harsher persecution they suffered in the midst of the persecution we all experienced. I have already suggested that the Jews did not openly express their faith: many books have been written on the question of the existence of God before or during Auschwitz, and afterwards, and some of them have considered the question deeply. This of course is a senseless question for those without faith, and maybe even for some believers. We could consider God to be a vital metaphor for many inmates. I think that the Jehovah's Witnesses in the camp, sent there in no small numbers for refusing to renounce their faith, tried to make God into a real presence in the camps. But for me, God was genuinely dead in the camps. I can also accept the idea that maybe the no small number of examples of genuine humanity, some

of which I have recounted and which probably helped me to survive, may have "saved" God. This question is particularly disturbing for Jews who, whether they believe or not, have a tradition of a profound relationship with their god. The endlessly-posed question "Why did god permit this to happen?" (which obviously does not interest atheists) has been a constant in Jewish thought for thousands of years, from the time of Job to modern times. This is clear for instance today in the work of Moni Ovadia, in his play "Joss Rakover si rivolge a Dio", about a ghetto resistance fighter, who just before his death holds a conversation – effectively a monologue – with god. I for one do not intend to answer the questions "why did I survive? Why was I saved? Why didn't I go under?". These are banal questions that end with an equally banal answer, questions that maybe forced one of the most important writers of our times, Primo Levi, to a desperate suicide.

Few of the Jews, I think, were "politicised": they were, for the most part, simple people, terrorised, dispersed and overwhelmed by events. Brutally snatched from their homes, their loved ones, their daily lives, they were simply caught up in the hellish and criminal nets of racist politics. Those who were not immediately liquidated and instead were sent to the camps as slave labour, simply tried to survive as best they could. Obviously, you could say the same for us, but we had not been "automatically" sentenced to death, by law, if you like, as the Jews had been. Our deaths would not arise from deliberate extermination, but from hunger, tiredness, and the punitive nature of the camps. For the most part, the prisoners tried to survive without resorting to unworthy behaviour, and so they also sought to save what could be saved of their own humanity and dignity, in the face of their general degradation. How can you preserve your humanity, your human dignity, when you are suffering from a fatal diarrhoea? Prisoners with a strong political or religious identity undoubtedly were better equipped for the challenge.

The Jews were like us, and we were like the Jew: our common suffering helped bring us together, regardless of religious or political affiliation: then and now, none of us, christian, buddhist, non-believer, whatever you like, cannot feel "jewish" in his soul. There were naturally many German and Austrian Jews in the camps, especially Germans (although not as many as the Polish Jews"). There were also many criminals, common German inmates (who wore the "black triangle"); there were homosexuals (issued with the "Pink triangle"), sent to the camps in an effort to "purify Germany". Privileged by having a common language with their captors, they were often (though not always) to be found in advantageous positions in the camps. They could for instance be "Kapo", or otherwise members of the "Prominenten" - the camp "elite" who enjoyed better food and housing. Some even had the right to "visit" the camp brothel (the women were deported Poles forced to work as prostitutes in return for their lives). The "official" language of the camp was naturally German, and I remember that, for a long time afterwards, I could not listen to even one word of German without becoming very upset. But in order to work on my research after the war, I had to read many books in German, given that the Germans have bequeathed not just Dachau, Mauthausen and Auschwitz to the world, but also much, much more in the most varied fields of science and the arts.

I remember a brief discussion I had once with the "kapo" of our painting work-detail, a socialist prisoner originally from Nuremberg, who I have mentioned before and whose name I have completely forgotten. I could no longer contain myself, and asked him to explain how the German people, who had produced so many artists, musicians, scientists, poets, philosophers, could also produce the machinery of death in the concentration camps. This was certainly a naïve and simplistic question, but after the war, it formed the basis for many books and much research. The German conscience continues to torture itself in the attempt to furnish an answer. But at that time, I was inside that machinery, and certainly lacked the tools needed to analyse it. So I can still picture the anguish in the eyes of my German Kapo at my question, and his gesture: he shrugged his shoulders, as if to say that he could not understand it, not even as a German; to be fair, he was a victim of the Nazis, having actively opposed them, and so could maybe represent the non-negative side of his country.

I never had direct relationships with the Germans in the camp: once, carelessly, I bumped into a huge "black triangle", from the seedier parts of some city like Hamburg perhaps – he knocked me to the ground with one blow, and then went off his own way. Not all the "kapos" were cruel or sadistic. Some, maybe because they knew the war was nearly over, maybe because they were clever, behaved almost civilly. The Kapo of our block did not want to, and did not try to escape, as did so many of the "Prominenten" a few days before the Americans arrived. The camp, Gusen II, remained "unclaimed" for a few days after the US trucks had simply vanished (the zone was under the command of General Patton), and therefore also subject to some chaos and confusion. Some prisoners, mainly Russians, set up a "people's tribunal" to try the "Prominenten" who had been captured. The accused was made to stand on a table, and the people, i.e. us (or at least those of us still capable of understanding and thinking straight) would remember what he had done, and would judge his actions accordingly. The "kapo" I mentioned above was acquitted. Anyone who was found guilty was immediately shot, those cleared would be set free. I do not know how this functioned in other camps, I am recounting what I was able to see, and my memory is somewhat unclear.

There is little to say of the Italians: few of us had any "command" positions within the camp, and I don't think that any of us resorted to underhand tactics. I must refer here to my comrades and friends (many of whom have already died), such as Elli, Parisio, Luigi and others, who found me lying flat out on a road outside the camp, half-dead: they picked me up, and put me in ambulance organised by a priest in Milan that took me to the Italian military hospital in Linz.

I hope not to have written some fairy-tale, that was not my intention. My purpose was to demonstrate that there were not just

hatreds and enmities between the various national groups in the prisoner population. There were also friendships and brotherhood, to use once more this word, which is maybe exaggerated. There was also human solidarity and a minimum level of "humanity". And it seems to me right to remember, once more, those who, maybe only with a small act but often with demonstrably brave behaviour, managed to help their comrades in a bitter common fate, whom we might term the "righteous men of Sodom". The Catholic Church has recently beatified a Polish priest deported to Auschwitz, father Kolbe.

Of course, the Jews, the Protestants, Jehovahs' Witnesses and the Orthodox do not have the tradition of beatifying their "witnesses". However, just to offer an example, it would be just to beatify an Orthodox nun, Mother Maria, who died in Ravensbruck after swopping her prisoner registration number with that of a young Jew destined for the gas chamber. Born Elizaveta Jur'evna Kuzminà Karavaeva Skobcova, a Russian poet who wrote mainly religious verses, who in early youth fell hopelessly (but vainly) in love with the great poet Alessandro Blok, then emigrated, and after various matrimonial vicissitudes, became a nun. During the German occupation of Paris, she threw herself into helping escaped Russian prisoners and resistance fighters, until she was captured with her son. Both died in the camp. Her actions allow us perhaps to be a little less pessimistic about the maybe not-completely hopeless state of our humanity.

I hope that this discussion, with all the digressions I have included in it, served to open, or re-open, a genuine consideration of the relationships between the various peoples who made up the varied and constantly changing inmate population (changing since so many died in the process).

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