

A Late Surprise

On January 18, 1945, the Czeszochowa labor camp, a munitions factory in Poland, was at last liberated from the Germans. The liberators, however, were met with a horrific sight: Prisoners had been kept like animals by the Nazi guards. Among the figures leaving the camp on that cold and snowy winter day was a thirteen-year-old girl with a shaved head named Edyta. She was covered in filth, with her hair full of lice. Suffering from tuberculosis, she could hardly stand from hunger and exhaustion. She'd patched one open wound with a scrap of bread. Helpful men lifted the trembling, skeletal child onto the waiting train. The train stopped between Czeszochowa and Krakow, and the liberated prisoners were told to get off. Edyta dragged herself into the waiting area of the provincial railway station and collapsed in a corner, exhausted. She didn't care anymore. She couldn't go on.

Suddenly, a young man appeared, apparently a priest. Edyta reflexively recoiled, but the young man posed no threat. He kindly saw to her and offered her tea and bread. Edyta was so weak she could hardly eat. The young man kept trying to speak to her, but Edyta did not respond. After a moment, he promptly lifted Edyta onto his shoulders and carried her away. Edyta only remembered it taking a long time. The young priest was strong and athletic, and Edyta didn't weigh much—just a bundle of skin and bones, really. He carried her for miles through the snow to another station, another train car. There she saw familiar faces, other refugees waiting to be transported farther on. The young man talked to them, but he also saw that these shivering figures needed heat more than anything heat. He tracked down an old metal drum and some combustible materials. Before long, a crackling fire was flickering in the barrel. The former camp inmates began to come to life. People warmed their hands; some even laughed.

Edyta could stand up again. Leaning against the side of the train car, she watched her rescuer. She asked him

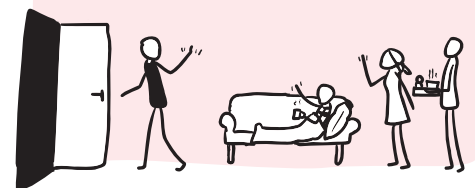
his name. The young priest told her a bit about himself: He was twenty-four years old and had lost his parents. He had a simple Polish name, easy to remember. Edyta committed it to memory. Eventually, the train started taking them toward Krakow. Suddenly, Edyta was overcome with fear again. What did this priest have in store for her? Was he going to put her in a convent? No, her reassured her with a laugh: He would take her to stay with his aunt, where she would be warm and well looked after, in an apartment "filled with cats and cushions".

Edyta Zierer ended up making it. She lived for years in a sanatorium in the French Pyrenees, getting her health back. Then, in 1951, she emigrated to Israel. On the ship there, she met her future husband. They went on to have children and a happy marriage. In all those years, she never forgot the name of the young Polish man to whom she owed her life. He was still fresh in her mind one fine day in 1978, as she sat in her apartment in Israel leafing through a magazine. The front-page headline stopped her cold: a Polish cardinal, she read, had been elected pope. Poland! She knew the country of her childhood well. She read on—and then her eyes fell on a name that made the blood rush to her head. Edyta Zierer knew those five syllables better than almost anything else: Karol Wojtyła.

Bernard Meuser, Sternstunden (Fontis Verlag, 2016), 71ff.



KRAKÓW - CZĘSTOCHOWA



REFLECT

Read this story out loud. Why does it feel good to do something for someone else, even if you don't get anything in return? Have you experienced something similar or done something like this yourself?