

Boris Pahor
NECROPOLIS

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world of the camps'

Sunday Times



• THE CANONS •

An extract from

NECROPOLIS
BORIS PAHOR

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL BIGGINS



CANONGATE

Our shift leader was Peter, who although he had a green triangle sewn onto his uniform under his number, as did all German criminals, did not mistreat the workers. They said he held up a bank or embezzled money, but his relationship to us was earnest and well-intentioned. He never hurried the crowd as it gathered before leaving camp, people jostling to get near me so I could excuse them from work. 'Me! Me!' they called in every language. 'Look at me! Look at me!' One forced his way forward, unbuttoning his trousers until they slipped to his ankles. His withered thighs looked as if they were covered with coffee grounds, as did his scaly calves. I gave him a hospital pass, certain that I would see him in my ward by evening. Then I filled out a pass for a man with fleshy hooves instead of feet; he forced his way past several prisoners who were struggling not to fall amid the surge of bodies and voices. I stuck a thermometer under one person's arm while I filled out a pass for another, and another. A choppy sea assailing me from all sides. 'Look at me! Look at me!' This went on until the front door opened and Kapo Peter got us marching in place. '*Links, zwei, drei, vier. Links, zwei, drei, vier.*' Outside the guardhouse an officer counted us. He strutted around like a stiff rooster. I approached him with my wooden medicine kit, pleased as a lawyer is pleased when he's just proven the innocence of his client, and handed him the fifteen passes, an attempt to outwit death. One could argue that this attempt was irrelevant, since my passes delayed death only by a day or two. Who knows, though, maybe one or two people would survive. Even that small hope is worth an entire life's work.

A pale sun shone over the trampled snow. Two houses stood by the roadside. Not a soul anywhere, except for a small child, probably standing on a footstool, his face pressed against a window pane. He smiled as if watching a parade of circus clowns, his smile as out of place and time as the sun above. Someone lit a brownish cigarette butt and offered it to me. In the mingling of European languages and in the snow, the Russian steppe joined with the French plains and the Dutch lowlands to create an illuminated image of salvation. This image was even more vivid as we walked through Niedersachswerfen, with Ukrainian families hitching their horses to big sleighs outside their wooden barracks and children sledding down the hillsides. Add to it our hobbling procession, our rags and clogs, and you have a Brueghel winter scene. The ranks then began to fill up the Krupp carts, elbows latching onto edges and legs searching for support. A woman at the window of a house across the way watched. She didn't wipe her eyes like the Alsatian women in Markirch. The look in her face was surprised, almost bewildered, as though she couldn't comprehend the reality of so many ruined males.

The sun hadn't set and the cold was bearable. Several guards sat on a wooden cart between the rows of steel bins. Unlike an ordinary flat cart, this one had a trapezoid-shaped arch running down the middle, forming a narrow space with two ledges on which the SS men could sit and rest their feet. Their rifles wedged between their legs, they ground the snow with their feet and stared ahead like hunters with no imagination. This is how the pair would sit in the barracks when the shift left for

the tunnels. Perched on a bench near the stove, they watched as I bandaged the wound of a returnee. They would be bored, of course, but it was better to huddle by the fire of smooth briquettes than to stand for eight hours in the drafts of the tunnels with compressors roaring and explosions going off. Once or twice the Kapo stopped in to chat, but not for long, and left them to stare out the window at the network of small-gauge tracks that covered the plain and eventually vanished into the tunnels. Only at the sound of a major detonation would they flinch, barely raising their backsides off the bench. The camp siren wailed frequently. I went on bandaging a gangrenous limb, and then the hand of a fellow who was covered with dust, as if he had come out of a flour mill. The fingers of his right hand were missing the knuckles. He sharpened the bit for the compressor, he explained, holding the hand outstretched as though it wasn't his. He even smiled, because the hand was so cold it didn't hurt, and he was grateful for the wound, which brought him into the warmth of the barracks. The dysentery cases sat in the corner, stunned by exertion, hunger, and the warm air that smelled of urine.

When Peter flew into a fury because of a German engineer, things grew lively for a while. The engineer was young and fair-haired and wore a leather jacket. He burst into the barracks like a whirlwind and began strutting in front of the patients sitting on the bench. One of them had gangrene, another had feet like two heads of cabbage, and a third was caked with excrement. But the engineer shrieked that they were all fakers

and slackers and they had better get moving. 'Outside, on the double!' he shouted. Instead of looking at him, they turned to me, their orderly, and stayed quietly seated. I told the engineer that I couldn't assume responsibility for the prisoners and that he should talk to Kapo Peter. Then I took a paper bandage, knelt down before a patient sitting on the bench with his trouser leg rolled up, and started to dress his wound. The engineer stormed off, slamming the door behind him, and for a moment I felt as though I were in a mountain lodge enveloped in snow and alpinists were congratulating me for a bold rescue. I had used the word responsibility, as though someone was responsible for what happened to these shattered bodies. It was a word tyrants would have to reckon with to the end of their days. Even the SS men sensed the change in the air; their faces seemed to be coming apart in the warmth, as their power was coming apart. When Peter came back and reprimanded them, the two stared at him pleadingly goggle-eyed. '*Er hat hier nicht verloren!*' Peter yelled, his black hair covering his square forehead, his heavysset legs stomping in the middle of the barracks floor. 'Let him come here when I'm here,' he shouted, 'and I'll show him the way out.' An incident so unusual as to be almost dreamlike. I began to think that my medic's calling made some sense.

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Canongate Books Ltd,
14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

Originally published in Slovenian as *Nekropola* by Založba Obzorja Maribor, 1967

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1

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 83885 229 0

Typeset in Goudy Oldstyle Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

