***The Midwife of Auschwitz* (*Położna z Auschwitz*) by Magda Knedler**

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Mum, now

She was looking at the new group of prisoners with a mixture of fear and compassion. About fifty women, Hungarian and Slovak Jews. Pregnant. She'd heard that a Hungarian doctor had intervened on their behalf; at her request, Lagerarzt Heinz Thilo had brought the prisoners out of the gas chamber. She'd also heard that prisoner Konieczna, also a doctor, had been ordered to 'fix up' the women's stomachs. They all knew what that really meant. Doctor Konieczna had refused. Stanisława was sure that the matter would not end there. Thilo didn't give in that easily, she'd often heard about the things he did, he liked to carry out selection among the patients in the sick room, he used prisoners as guinea pigs to practise cutting out fibroids and tumours of the reproductive organs, sometimes in a very brutal way, without any empathy for the patient and without respecting her dignity. 'First, do no harm'… He induced artificial miscarriages in the final months of pregnancy, after which the mothers usually died, and the children – dead or alive – ended up in the furnace. *Anus mundi*. Anus of the world. That's what he called the camp. Was she to believe that he had simply given these women life?

When the truth finally came out, no one was surprised. Doctor Keppich, a Hungarian, admitted that Lagerarzt Mengele had ordered her and several other prisoner doctors to give these women injections for fourteen days in a row to induce premature delivery. The pregnant women who did not give birth were sent to the gas chamber. Those who gave birth to live children had to kill them themselves. An order like many others in this camp.

A few women in labour were already lying on top of the furnace, wailing in pain. Stanisława was getting ready to take another child, another miracle of nature, into her arms. These were things she could not understand. She still couldn't awaken hatred inside herself, but she couldn't understand either. That children were so rarely given the right to live here. That this life disturbed someone, constituted a threat. What kind of threat? To world order, racial purity, the superiority of one nation over another? Wasn't all this happening purely in the name of pride? Hadn't it started from someone's belief that he was better than others for some reason? Or rather, from a sense of inferiority, from complexes that demanded a deeper

search for those more perfect, more noble qualities? If these traits didn't evolve from gaining knowledge, skills and experience, wisdom, sensitivity, talent, aroused empathy and a sense of justice, they must result from something completely different. Maybe it was race? Maybe blood? Maybe skin colour, and surname? So what if a Jew is more talented and has a better education, since, in the end, he is still only a Jew? So what if it's a Pole, a Gypsy? Blood, race. This counts. This is overriding, defining.

She thought with compassion of the men and women wearing uniforms. Every day, before her eyes, they carried out self-annihilation, plucked their own humanity from their hearts little by little, until they seemed completely devoid of human reflexes. And why? She didn't know. She still remembered those beautiful Jewish girls from Bałuty in Łódź, who visited her at home when she fell ill.

"Our rabbi is praying for you," they said.

Their words sounded constantly in Stanisława's ears, their resonant, kind voices. Although she believed in Christ the Saviour, although she often clasped a rosary in her hand, it would never have crossed her mind not to want the rabbi's prayer. She wanted it. She thought about it with joy and gratitude. She didn't feel she was better than anyone, not when she was combing her fair hair in front of the mirror, nor when people brought her bouquets of flowers to thank her for her commitment to her work and passion for helping others. She didn't do it in return for wealth or homage. She did it in the interests of a sincere love for people. People should love each other, after all. Otherwise, what was there to live for?

But now, here, the hardest thing was to love your enemies in the Christian way. She tried every day. Even when she looked at the Hungarian and Slovak Jewish women who had already given birth. And who were gazing at their babies with love, panic-stricken fear, and disbelief. That they had been ordered. They couldn't kill. Stanisława circled around them but said nothing. Even though she opened her mouth, she already had the sentence on the tip of her tongue, that it was not allowed, never. It didn't leave her throat, not for these women. They must decide for themselves. Each woman had to choose whose life she wanted to save – hers or her child's. It was an impossible, tragic choice.

They asked what would happen to them if they didn't kill. The staff made it clear. The women had a chance of survival, they would end up in the work squads and might make it through until the end of the war. Without their child. That was clear. They must understand.

They didn't understand.

When the Lagerarzt and the German Schwester arrived, Stanisława could do nothing. So she kept watching dark-haired, dark-eyed Estera, who leant over her child and covered it

with a blanket, and then pressed on the blanket. The child kicked and cried, and she threw back the blanket and hugged the baby, and this went on until morning, when she was covering and hugging only a little dead body. The other women looked at her with madness in their eyes. And yet, this had also happened here before. There was the Polish Jewish woman who tried to wait out her child's death in the washroom, and there was Zlatka, who couldn't kill her child, but also didn't want it to be fed. Estera fit the picture. Stanisława thought that someday, in the future, nobody would believe that such a scene occurred. Everyone will think that they all went crazy in this place.

Nobody will believe that in the now defunct Gypsy camp, the doctor ordered pregnant women to be infected with typhus to see if the disease would be passed on to the child or if the placenta would stop the infection. Nobody will believe Wierka, who gave birth a week ago and is hugging a live, healthy child to her breast as she tells the story of her neighbour Szura, a girl from the Leningrad District. Somehow, the doctor didn't look at Wierka's baby, but he took Szura's son and put some drops in his eyes. She was crying when the baby was brought back, screaming in pain, his swollen eyelids streaming with pus. The child suffered and grew feverish, but his eyes remained intact. The next child, a Polish woman's, wasn't so lucky. After the third round of drops, one eye came out. Nobody, perhaps, will believe her either. A mother deranged with pain, who wound up in the middle of hell. Because it couldn't have happened. That's what they'll say. It couldn't have.

Mum, before

Warsaw

When she lost herself in studying and working, she hardly thought about home. But home was in her. The voices of her husband and children, of the tenants from the floor below, music, everything that came from outside, the clap of weaving shuttles, the calls of Jewish merchants, the clucking of chickens. The church bell and singing from the synagogue. There were also her friends, beautiful and elegant girls who came to talk about fashion. Among them were young Jewish women. They laughed at how Stasia was like a rabbi. How she said something and everyone listened. She never took their words seriously. She was pleased, of course, but she thought they were exaggerating. She didn't think that there was anything special about her, that

she wanted to discover and exhibit it. And yet she enjoyed these visits. She allowed herself for a moment to be carefree, leafing through magazines and discussing ruffles and lace. Normally she wore simple dresses and combed her hair back smoothly, but she liked dressing up for special occasions. In fact, she dressed not just herself, but her whole family. She always smiled at the sight of smart children's clothes, tiny suits, dresses, white knee-high socks, miniature court shoes. Beautiful clothing involved aesthetic sensations, some kind of higher experience, similar to that of decorating the home.

Yes, she longed for them. She had discovered, however, that she could live with this longing, work with it, accept it. She didn't see her family often, just on holidays, once or twice a year. Then she saw how the children were changing, she thought that they were growing so fast, that perhaps they would learn to live without her. She asked herself what she was missing, not being in Łódź, and whether this time could be compensated for. Still, she was certain that she was doing the right thing and that everything happened for a reason.

The capital was beautiful, although it remained only a backdrop. On Sunday after mass, and when the weather was nice, Stanisława went for a walk; she never looked down at her feet, she always looked around her. Warsaw was the third city she had known – different from Łódź and Rio de Janeiro, but just like those living organisms, full of contrasts, pros and cons, enchanting and forbidding places. Young women in black bathing suits ran around the beach on the Vistula, joyful and free, with bare feet and short hair. Once, airships had appeared in the sky and everyone had raised their heads in unison. Ladies with prams strolled along in front of the Saxon Palace, there were street works on Chmielna. 'Kitchen Furniture', 'Hats. Caps', 'Franciszek's Fashion Store (in the yard)'. The columns of the Grand Theatre – which really did seem grand to her – and the square in front of it, the intersecting tram tracks, cars parked in a row. 'Henriette's' hats on Mazowiecka Street. All of it colourful, vibrant, provoking admiration and bewilderment – but still in the background. School came first.

Stasia quickly grew fond of her white apron and cap. Even more so, perhaps, of the wooden benches – also white – from which she observed charts showing the internal organs of the human, the skeletal system, a cross-section of the brain. In the corner, attached to a frame, hung a human skeleton, and on the table next to it were specimens for scientific purposes. Two boards, chalk, a cleaning cloth. An elderly midwife in a dark dress was always standing by the wall, her hair neatly combed, holding a long pointer.

Internships at the hospital on Karowa Street. The future midwives floated amongst the patients like white, quiet butterflies. The room was quite large, the cots were positioned by the mothers' beds. A table under the window, on it a sizeable pot plant. Windows high and wide,

with a lot of light coming in. Gleaming floor, snow-white bedding, an extra dark blanket on every bed. Everything here was fascinating, new, everything needed to be observed and analysed. Stanisława heard that some changes were coming in the future. Among other things, this room was to be modified. After giving birth, mothers should rest, sleep a lot and eat. During that time, the children would be looked after by nurses and brought to the women when it was time to feed. Stanisława thought about this project for a long time, comparing it with the present situation, which in her opinion was better. The room with the large beds, and the tiny beds for the babies next to them, delighted her. But it would be even better if these small cots were not standing at the foot of the larger beds, but at the side, so that the mother could reach out and touch her child at any time. Feed when the little one needed it. The mother could respond to the child, and the child to her. They could cuddle whenever they wanted. A child needs nothing besides love and food, besides warmth and a sense of security.

Newborns were attended to with special care at Karowa. The weaker and more sickly were warmed up with hot water bottles placed inside their nappies. Work was also underway to introduce a more efficient method: incubators. As a result, premature and low birth weight babies would have a better chance of survival. The midwives also taught young mothers how to properly care for newborns, how to feed, bathe and change them. Stanisława liked this kind of interaction the best, especially if it was her patient's first child. She watched with pleasure as the fear gradually disappeared from the young mother's face, the muscles of the arms cuddling the child relaxed, and the hand supporting the little head stopped trembling. She understood that this was often how it was – the mother is afraid of her child, that small organism suddenly detached from her, which can no longer be taken care of only by taking care of herself. An organism that has its own needs and is wholly absorbing. There, in this relationship, there was always fear, a lack of readiness, awkwardness, distance, and at the same time immense love, but the kind that had to be learned, chaotic and difficult, full of beauty, but also self-doubt.

Stanisława understood that too. She deciphered the emotions of each of these women. She wanted them not to feel bad about themselves, to look at themselves and their child as a great miracle. She wiped tears, washed bloodied thighs, wiped sweat from foreheads and plaited braids or combed short curls. The doctors at Karowa were men, but the real heroes here were always the women. Their effort, their courage and their strength. No man will ever understand that. Mother Nature. There was great power in this expression, and great truth. The whole world functioned thanks to mothers.

It finally came. Fulfilment. In the evenings, when she closed her textbooks and got into bed, she was engulfed in peace. She had taken her own path, and not even a trace remained of that feeling of emptiness. She was not afraid of how she would reconcile work with raising children, whether Bronek would be pleased with what she was doing, whether he would accept her absence from home and take over some of her duties. And yet, that was what had to happen. She had no doubts or remorse. Her children would understand too. They would accept her love for other children, for all children. And for those women, their mothers, who need only a sense of security and the care of a trusted friend.

When she returned home two years later, her midwifery diploma in her suitcase, she was happy. Warsaw disappeared, the contours of Łódź became sharper. When she got off the train and greeted her family, she was her old self, and at the same time someone completely different.

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Mum, now

Was she right to cast reproachful glances their way? Should she be surprised that they called Maria Mandel a 'cow'? After all, this was actually one of the milder terms she'd heard here.

She herself remembered another scene, from autumn last year. She remembered Mandel directing the selection. Mandel, who that day had been throwing children into a truck. She tore them away from their mothers, treating them so brutally that the children were injured, bleeding, even broke arms and legs. Their cries were piercing, different from the way even the most miserable children usually cry in the normal world. You could hear their desperate pleas for mum to come to the rescue. Because mum always comes to the rescue, blocks threats with her body, blows on cuts, cuddles, wipes tears, feeds. So why doesn't she come now? Where is she, when the child is flung by Mandel into the truck and hurts his face, gets a black eye, feels a burning pain in his battered limbs. Where is she? Meanwhile, mum is struggling with Mandel, who beats her and kicks her. One mother doesn't get up after the struggle, she lies in the mud, from where she ascends, there, where her child will soon join her. The second mother that Stanisława sees is stronger, she does not fall, but kneels and spits out her teeth one by one. They pull her away, someone helps her up. Was that mother also thinking that Mandel was a

‘cow’? Or perhaps she was imagining her death – revenge carried out calmly, so that it hurt, so that Mandel experienced it slowly and consciously. That mother must have been thinking that way, because her child had been ripped from her arms and she could hear him crying.

And Stanisława cried then. She thought of the strength of women, the courage and determination with which nature had equipped them, and at the same time of their greatest weakness. A woman can be hurt most severely by inflicting suffering on her child.

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Hela is in block 32 and Sara is in block 22. Two pregnant Polish Jewish women. Stanisława heard about them from a prisoner, a doctor who had been forced to perform abortions. The abortion itself was not a tragedy for all women. Many of them admitted that they didn’t want to give birth in these conditions, in this place, and it would be better for the children if they were not born, and not forced to die in suffering. Except that there were many advanced pregnancies there. Seventh, eighth, even ninth month. In addition, the procedure was risky. The women were given an injection and later the pregnancy was terminated by curettage. Women who were further along were just given an injection to induce premature delivery. In the buttocks, arms and thighs. Sometimes, the patients felt bad afterwards. There were also those who very much wanted to give birth. The doctor remembered two in particular. Hela and Sara. Sara still had a chance, she hadn’t been called for an abortion yet. Hela had been given several injections in the breast six days ago and had then been operated on without anaesthesia. She was seven months pregnant and the baby reportedly lived for a short time. The baby was taken away, the mother wasn’t allowed to look.

The doctor told these stories in a monotonous, hoarse voice with an undertone of resignation. Her eyes were completely dry, her gaze vacant.

“I wanted you to know. I’m not sure why,” she added at the end.

“What happened to Hela? Do you know?”

“After the abortion, she was haemorrhaging for two days, but then it stopped. So she was discharged and sent to work in excavations.”

“And Sara?”

“I’ll come and see you again and tell you how she is. She wants to give birth. Each day that goes by increases the chances.”

Yes, it increases the chances of a normal delivery, Stanisława thought. Not necessarily of any kind of future.

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Maria Mandel, Sara, Hela. Other women, other names.

And them, the boys from the Sonderkommando.

She'd heard about one of them from a prisoner who had arrived in the maternity room a few days ago. Stanisława was expecting her to deliver at any moment, but nothing had happened yet. With her high belly, Alina had worked right up until her first contraction in a road-building commando. She lifted heavy stones, chafed her hands until they bled. Her figure was hunched, her shoulders rounded. Stanisława couldn't even imagine how Alina coped in that commando. But she didn't seem defeated or exhausted in the least. There was a strange determination on her face.

"When we were working on that road, in front of the gate," she said, "the boys from the Sonderkommando would bribe the guards with cigarettes. Because of that, from time to time, we approached the gate – carrying our stones, of course – and received parcels from them. And so on, taking turns. We'd go to the gate, as if we were working there in that specific place, and they'd go to the gate, just by chance. The guards would look the other way and everything would go smoothly. We got a lot of good, decent things from them. Clothes, shoes, food, cigarettes, medicines. I have some for you as well. Here, it'll come in handy for something."

Stanisława glanced at the package, which contained a few pieces of underwear, a decent blanket and four boxes of cigarettes. The underwear and blanket were real treasures here, they would soon find a suitable use. And the cigarettes could be used as currency. Everything really would come in handy.

"One of those boys gave me a secret message," Alina continued. "In Hungarian. I had to ask around my friends for someone to translate it. Eventually, I found someone. There was nothing special there. Just a few words, saying that I'm pretty and I look nice. And that if we'd met somewhere else, he'd have invited me to a cafe. He didn't care that I was going to have a child. He didn't ask about my husband. Somehow, he must have guessed that there was no husband anymore. His name is Andras. I probably won't see him again."

Alina continued her story, she talked about Andras, about building the road, about intercepting parcels. She described the boy as tall, well-built, strong. She knew what happened here with men who looked like that. She had seen a few before, but never close up. She had never heard their voices. He was a Hungarian Jew. She didn't actually hear his voice either, because he only handed her the package, and the message was in the package. And she thought

then that she would also like to meet him in another place, at another time, she would like to go to a cafe with him, and for a walk, she would like to have a shared history with him. And yet, they would never have met were it not for the camp. There wouldn't have been anything, not even that message. At least now she could think about him. Feel a faint warmth in her heart, have this one small thing to hold on to.

"Who knows? Maybe you will see each other again," said Stanisława quietly.

"No, we won't. Soon you'll see why."

Stanisława grew weak all of a sudden and had to go outside for a moment. The unventilated block was stuffy, the air was always saturated with the stench of unwashed bodies, blood, urine and faeces. Outside, she was bombarded again by the sickening smell that the wind blew from the crematoria. But at least it was cool. Stanisława could feel her dress sticking to her back and her collar chafing the skin around her neck. She was losing strength. She should eat something. Some pregnant women had recently arrived at the block, three of whom were emaciated after their stay in prison, which was where they'd got pregnant, a few from the uprising in Warsaw, and two Hungarian women, whose shoes had been stolen on the loading ramp. Footwear was obtained for them in exchange for bread. Stanisława would try to get medicines and wadding in exchange for cigarettes. Later, everything would have to be divided, distributed and made the best use of. The tiredness had finally hit her. She never gave in to it, but this time it turned out to be far too strong. It made her seek out the cold, the night sky, the stars that shone, despite everything.

She had to go back. Her duties were waiting for her.

Alina would never see Andras again, and soon she would know why. That's what she'd said, and Stanisława guessed that she should be gearing up for something, that there would be some kind of attempt. She didn't think it had a chance of succeeding. And she was afraid that those who were involved would face punishment.

Reluctantly, she looked away from the stars and glanced at the sick room barracks, the swamp underfoot, the smoking chimneys and the fog that often enveloped Birkenau late at night and in the morning, as if it wanted to conceal the camp from the entire outside world.

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She was right. It began on the seventh of October. Perhaps the final straw came that spring, with the numerous transportations of Jews from Hungary and the Łódź ghetto. Perhaps they had understood that they faced exactly the same as their predecessors, that the system of

recruitment and replacement could never be changed. Now the news spread slowly around the camp. Stanisława didn't know whether to believe in everything she heard, but that was all she had – secret messages and silent phone calls. She couldn't verify anything, she couldn't ask anything. So she passed on the message just as she had received it.

The boys from the Sonderkommando had heard an announcement. Three hundred of them were to report to assist Otto Moll, an SS-Hauptscharführer who had recently been appointed commander of the Gleiwitz sub-camp. It must be a ruse. The situation developed for a long time, and the boys from the Sonderkommando decided to fight. Just before two in the afternoon, the boys broke into Crematorium IV, attacked the guards and blew up the building. The alerted prisoners from Crematorium II also revolted, started on the SS officers and – so she heard – threw them alive into the furnaces.

Another delivery was just beginning in the maternity room.

The women were stuck in their bunks or lying on the furnace, separated from the Sonderkommando rebellion and the chaos it was causing among the guards. Some even remained unaware of the events unfolding nearby. Stanisława looked at this one, at Alina. The girl was strangely calm, indifferent. She said nothing, showed neither enthusiasm nor fear. So Stanisława focused on two other women. A photographer from Warsaw and her new companion Dina. She suffered when she heard what they were saying, but she was starting to understand that it was possible – here and now – to think this way.

Now she was hearing that many Sonderkommando prisoners had managed to escape to the forest. She waited for what would come next.