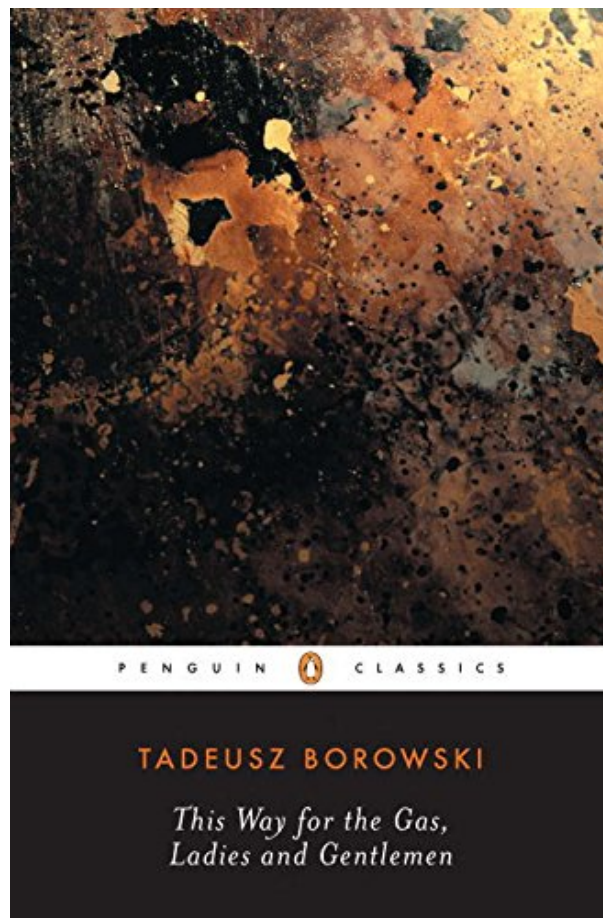



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GENTLEMEN (PENGUIN CLASSICS) BY
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*This Way for the Gas,
Ladies and Gentlemen*

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Text: English (translation)

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About the Author

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Tadeusz Borowski's concentration camp stories were based on his own experiences surviving Auschwitz and Dachau. In spare, brutal prose he describes a world where where the will to survive overrides compassion and prisoners eat, work and sleep a few yards from where others are murdered; where the difference between human beings is reduced to a second bowl of soup, an extra blanket or the luxury of a pair of shoes with thick soles; and where the line between normality and abnormality vanishes. Published in Poland after the Second World War, these stories constitute a masterwork of world literature.

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Features

- Auschwitz stories

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A remembrance of things past

By Lonya

Imre Kertesz, a concentration camp survivor and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature often asks in his work: is there life after Auschwitz? Can one live with the ineffable guilt that accompanies survival against all odds? For Borowski the answer appears to be no. On July 1, 1951, at age 29, Tadeusz Borowski opened a gas valve, put his head in an oven and took his life. There is no small amount of irony in the fact that after escaping the gas of Auschwitz and Dachau Borowski would end his life in this manner.

Borowski was born in Soviet occupied Ukraine to Polish parents. His father was sent to a Soviet work camp, building the White Sea Canal, but was released in an exchange of prisoners with Poland. Upon his father's release, the family settled in Warsaw. Although not Jewish, Borowski was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 for subversive activities when he was caught surreptitiously printing his own poetry. He spent the rest of the war in Auschwitz and Dachau. The first piece of luck or fate that saved his life was the decision by the Nazis to stop exterminating non-Jewish prisoners two weeks before Borowski's arrival.

The series of stories contained in *This Way for the Gas* are all written in the voice of one prisoner, Tadeusz. Not unexpectedly the stories appear to be loosely autobiographical. Borowski's writing is not overloaded with emotion. It is descriptive and matter of fact. The day-to-day tone of the writing, writing that describes death and deprivation as normal events adds an emotional impact to the stories.

For example, in one scene the prisoner Tadeusz describes a football (soccer) match played by the prisoners. He served as goalkeeper and described his walk to retrieve a ball that was kicked way over the net. As he walks to the ball he sees through the barbed wire fence truckloads of prisoners being herded through the gas chambers. Later in the match he has to retrieve another ball. As he returns to the goal he matter-of-factly estimates that 5,000 prisoners have been gassed between his retrieving the two balls. It is powerful storytelling.

Equally compelling are stories that describe the numerous decisions Tadeusz and his fellow prisoners made every day in order to survive. Taking clothes from the luggage of prisoners destined for the gas in order to trade the clothes for bread. People fight for survival and despite a certain ethical code amongst prisoners (there are some things even the dying won't do) they all know that the steps they take to survive often means that someone else will perish. Borowski does not flinch from subjecting his alter ego and his fellow prisoners to a critical self-examination of these choices. Both Borowski and his narrator survived Auschwitz. But as you can see from these flawlessly executed stories the question of how much of one's humanity remains is a difficult question. The emaciated bodies of the survivors could often be repaired. But the sense of a moral inner flame extinguished by the acts required for survival is not so easily relit. The reader cannot help but wonder whether the lingering impact of those choices in Auschwitz somehow invariably led to the choice he made in July 1951.

Tadeusz Borowski's "*This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen*" is a wonderful example of how fiction can portray the horrors of genocide with an emotional clarity that non-fiction sometimes lacks. This book ranks with Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* (the Gulag) as a monumental piece of remembrance presented in the form of short stories, vignettes of life in a place with little mercy and less humanity. They each stand as stark testimony, even though they are works of literature and not history, to the "evil that men do."

Upon finishing "*This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentleman*" I found myself wanting to repeat the words

"never again" as a refrain. Yet upon reflection one looks at subsequent world events: Bosnia, Cambodia, Chechnya, Sudan, and Rwanda (among others) and asks whether humanity makes the phrase "never again" a futile gesture. It has been said that those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it. Anyone who reads Borowski's testament will long remember the prose that, hopefully, will keep us from forgetting.

L. Fleisig

126 of 137 people found the following review helpful.

A MASTERPIECE

By S. F Gulvezan

Tadeusz Borowski was a teenager when the Nazis invaded Poland. He was eventually arrested by the Nazis for participating in the underground press (he had a copy of BRAVE NEW WORLD in his pocket at the time he was searched), and sent to Auschwitz. His girlfriend was also sent to Auschwitz. Borowski wrote a cycle of stories that spanned Poland under Nazi occupation, the experience of Auschwitz, and his travels after the war, to France, where he felt like a "walking ghost" amongst the exiles, and finally his return to Poland. He wrote a cycle of stories about these experiences published in two volumes in Polish, FAREWELL TO MARIA and WORLD OF STONE. His girlfriend had also survived Auschwitz and went to Sweden after the war. Borowski persuaded her to return to Poland and marry him. But life did not go well for Borowski. After he wrote his two volumes of stories, he, like many other young Poles, decided that communism might be the best thing for Poland, and subjugated his brilliant writing talent to churning out reams of "socialist realism" for the communists. But he was depressed and he was drinking heavily. When a close friend of his was tortured by the communists, he became completely disillusioned with the communists. One night in 1951, after visiting his young wife in the hospital, who was soon to give birth to their first child, he went home and killed himself. What lives on, however, are the two marvelous books of stories, among the finest ever written, detailing in a quiet, subdued way (much like the other masterpiece of man's inhumanity to man in the communist GULAG, Shalamov's KOLYMA TALES) the world he'd experienced. Unfortunately, currently only a portion of Borowski's stories are available in English translation, the ones dealing with Auschwitz, under the title, THIS WAY FOR THE GAS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. These are fine, fine stories. Once read, they are unforgettable. I only hope that the complete FAREWELL TO MARIA and WORLD OF STONE will be issued in English translation soon.

38 of 39 people found the following review helpful.

Misrepresented Polish Inmate/Author on the Functioning of Auschwitz

By Jan Peczkis

Instead of repeating the many other reviewers, I focus on certain issues. To begin with, accusations have been leveled against the author for being calloused towards Jewish deaths. In actuality, he sympathetically describes the human scenes of suffering, such as the dead and trampled infants in the death trains, the sick being shot and dumped into the pyres, entire transports of Jews going up in smoke, etc. However, he does mention the Jewish kapos.

The author has sometimes been accused of dwelling on Jewish passivity in the face of impending death. This is untrue. In fact, Borowski discusses the Sonderkommando revolt in a positive manner (p. 77), and otherwise devotes a fair amount of detail to a Jewish woman who threw gravel into the eyes of an SS man (Schillinger), grabbed his dropped revolver, and mortally wounded him. (pp. 123-126).

The author also elaborates on some of the experiences of non-Jewish inmates at the camp. One attempt at normalcy at the camp was the playing of soccer. Borowski comments: "Between two throw-ins a soccer game, right behind my back, three thousand people had been put to death." (p. 64). Obviously, this attempt at normal living should not be construed as a form of disrespect for the dying and dead. [In like manner, the oft-mentioned carousel enjoyed by Poles while the Germans were burning the Warsaw Ghetto was an attempt at normalcy, and in no way a form of disrespect towards the Jews and their sufferings.]

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