

most of them into large concrete rooms that they locked shut and filled with poison gas. After the people died, the Nazis burned the bodies in huge ovens. Sickening smoke had filled the sky day and night, the soldier said, because the Nazis had to work overtime to incinerate the bodies—more than one million men, women, and children were murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

“No! It’s not possible,” I said. “I don’t believe it.”

“There is evidence,” the soldier assured me, “and there are witnesses.”

The soldier told me about Ruth Webber, who was my age when she was liberated from Auschwitz-Birkenau by Soviet troops. She was a witness to Nazi crimes. She said: “A transport would come in with a lot of people and they would move in a certain direction, and then they would disappear. They would never come out. So you realized that something is happening to them, and seeing the, the chimneys smoking continuously, especially after a transport—even at my age you kind of put two and two together and realize that yes, this is where you go, behind those, that fence that has the, uh, the blankets on it and the trees covering something that goes on behind there, that you go in and you don’t come out anymore. Exactly what was happening I don’t know, all I knew is that you come out the chimney.”¹⁶

“But why?” I asked, as if a reason even mattered—as if any reason could justify such evil.

“Because they were Jews,” the soldier said. “Because they were Jews.”

It was Hitler’s plan, the soldier explained, to murder every Jewish man, woman, and child living in Europe—for no reason other than that they were Jewish. Auschwitz-Birkenau was the centerpiece of an elaborate system of camps that Hitler’s henchmen built to exterminate them. The soldier told me that Allied forces were finding and liberating camps like this all over Europe. American forces, the soldier said, had recently liberated camps with names like Dachau, Mauthausen, Dora-Mittelbau, and Buchenwald. But Hitler’s death factories were so efficiently run, he said, that the Nazis had already succeeded in killing nearly six million people—mostly Jews, but also some Christians and others whom Hitler considered inferior and had sent to the camps.

The soldier warned me not to enter the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. He said I wouldn’t like what I would see, but I walked through the gate anyway. I had to know the truth. Words above the front gate said, “Arbeit Macht Frei [Work Shall Set You Free].” The words

were part of a deception, the soldier said, because 70 percent of the people arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau were killed immediately. The rest were put to work, but there was never any intention to set them free. The Nazis meant to force the prisoners to work as slaves and starve them until they died.

I entered what was left of a long one-story concrete building. I shut its incredibly heavy metal door behind me. There were no windows in the room, but sunlight filtered in through broken areas of the walls and ceiling. The air in the room was cold—much colder, I thought, than the weather on that winter day could possibly have made it. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw odd shadows in the room, and I thought I saw them moving, too. Then, over a broken wall, I saw the oven.

“It’s true,” I said, as I felt the tears start to come, and I slumped to the gas chamber’s floor. “My God, it’s true.”

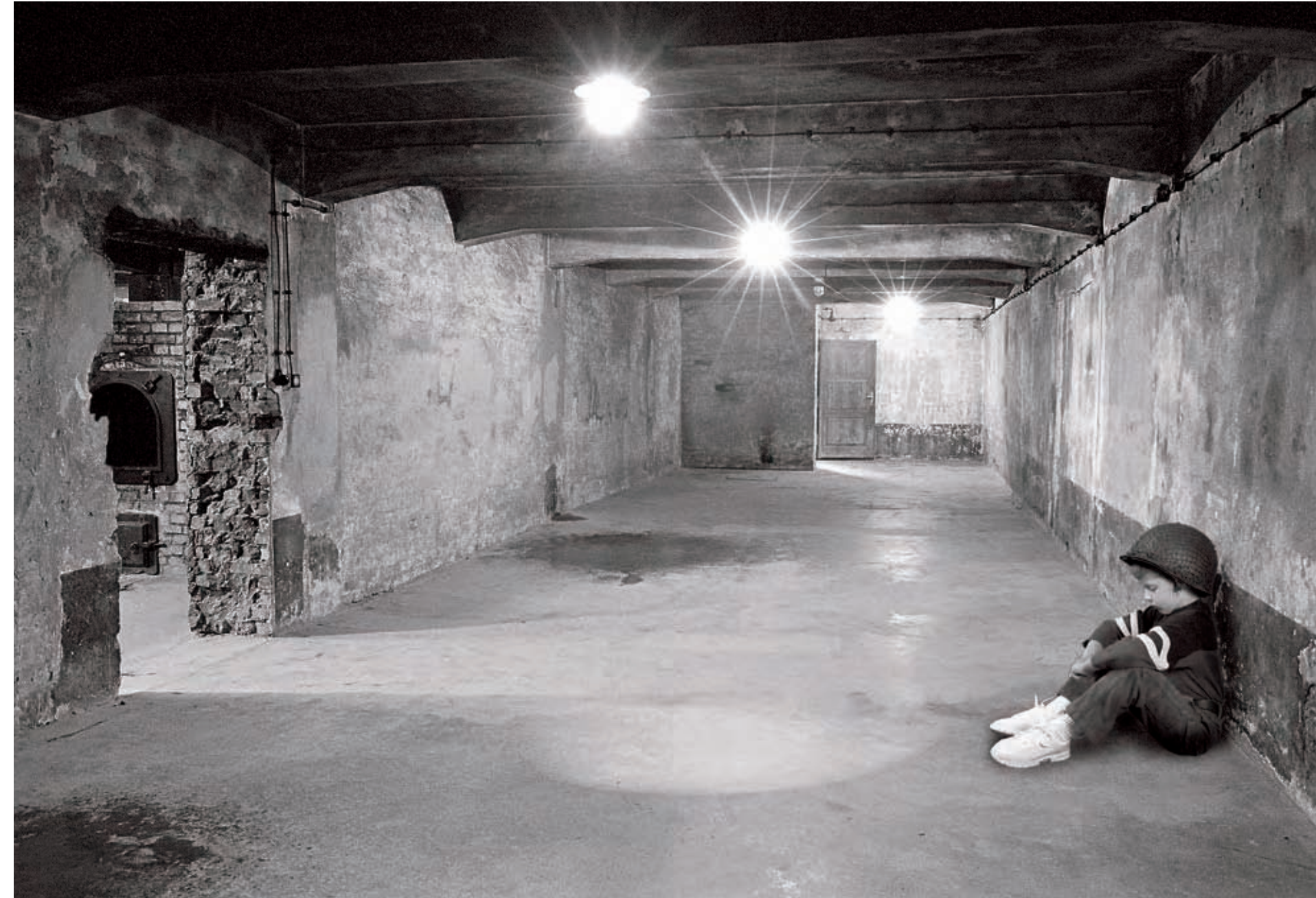
As I cried, I saw the shadows move again, and I heard the voices of a million ghosts calling out to me. They echoed my words. “Yes, it’s true,” they said. “We were here. Please don’t forget us.”

I promised I would never forget.

Later, as I walked through the ruins of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, I realized that it had not been destroyed by bombs or by fighting. The buildings looked like they had been dynamited and burned deliberately, some from the inside. It was the Nazis, I realized, who had destroyed the camp when they tried to hide their crimes. They didn’t want the world to know what they had done. They didn’t want any evidence.

The Nazis didn’t want any witnesses, either. When they learned that Soviet troops were advancing on the camp, the Nazis sped up the pace of their murder. But they ran out of time to kill everyone, so they decided to evacuate the rest of the prisoners by making them march hundreds of miles to other camps deeper inside Germany. The prisoners called the relocation a “Death March.”

Lilly Malnik was a teenager who was forced to march from Auschwitz-Birkenau to a camp named Bergen-Belsen inside Germany. She was a witness to Nazi crimes. She said: “Word came to us that we were going to evacuate Auschwitz. Why were we evacuating Auschwitz? It is because the Russians were coming close by. And so we . . . we all walked out of Auschwitz and we started walking. We walked for days. I’ll never forget it. I don’t know how many days we walked. We walked and then took cattle cars and then we walked again. And as we walked, we heard gunshots and they told us to keep on marching. We heard gunshots and they were shooting people in



GAS CHAMBER AND CREMATORIUM AT AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU. Location: Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial, Oswiecim, Poland. Date: 1996. The crematorium (left) operated from August 1940 until July 1943. The large room (right) was initially a morgue, but it was adapted to become a gas chamber in 1941. When the camp was expanded in 1942, the Nazis shifted the mass murder of the Jews to newer Auschwitz facilities and gradually stopped using this gas chamber and crematorium; the furnaces and chimney were demolished, the openings in the roof through which the Nazis had poured poison Zyklon-B gas were plastered, and the building became a storage facility and air raid shelter. © Michael St. Maur Sheil/CORBIS