

Amnon's Journey. Extract.

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Traduction Shan Benson

To start, we have to talk about the monsters, for it was their love of music that not only makes this story amazing, but also more horrifying. There was Maria Mandl, a young woman who was only thirty-six when she was hanged after the war. She had reached the upper echelons of the SS hierarchy in concentration camps, and had done so very quickly, becoming Oberaufseherin, one of the top ranks of the fearsome SS, the German officers in charge of overseeing and exterminating millions of human beings.

Maria Mandl first learnt her profession of murderer at Ravensbrück, then came to Auschwitz in October 1942 where the inmates promptly nicknamed her "the Beast." As Oberaufseherin, she was a fanatical Nazi whose sole purpose in life was to carry out the horrifying plans of Hitler and SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler.

Several survivors of Auschwitz have told the following story. It was early spring. Dozens of families were gathered in a field near the gas chambers and crematoriums. The prisoners did not know they were going to die in a few hours. They should have been murdered, but the death machine was jammed. The Sonderkommandos were not managing to gas and burn quickly enough the bodies that were piling up by the thousands. Maria Mandl wandered among those waiting to die. In the soft light of the afternoon, almost all the witnesses recall that the SS Oberaufseherin had never appeared so beautiful. She did not bother looking in the faces of those whom were waiting to die. A child ran away from his mother and

before the terrified young woman could get him back, the little boy clung on the skirt of Maria Mandl. The longer-term camp inmates, who knew what the Beast was capable of doing, waited to see her whip the child to death on the spot. But Maria Mandl knelt down, looked in the eyes of the child and smiled at him. She stood up, she took the child's hand and she walked towards the SS barracks. The little boy's family, and all the families and children who were waiting in the sunshine were gassed a few hours later. The next day Maria Mandl appeared again with the little boy. She had dressed him in nice clothes she had found in the camp storage. The Beast appeared to be happy. She asked some of the older inmates for advice on how to look after the child properly. The game – because it was only a game – lasted a week. On the seventh day, a happy, beaming Maria Mandl, took the little boy herself to the gas chamber.

We do not know if after having taken the child to his death, the Beast went to console herself at the women inmates' orchestra that she had created at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Maria Mandl requested from her musicians the loveliest pieces from "Madame Butterfly"; pushing a child into the gas chamber was perhaps not a sufficiently disturbing event for the Oberaufseherin to feel the need in listening to the music she liked.

Maria Mandl was no exception among the SS, of whom most needed music. Before they were hanged, the executioners of Auschwitz attempted to explain how they managed to murder thousands of men, women and children without showing any emotion and then sobbing while listening to Mozart. They had a need for German music, their music, to convince themselves that their dreadful mission made sense. Their crime went beyond what mankind had ever suffered, but they wanted to

convince themselves that in organizing the genocide of millions of human beings they were defending the culture that had given birth to Bach and Beethoven. (...)