



Zofia Posmysz

In January 1945, as the battle front approached, thousands of prisoners from KL Auschwitz-Birkenau were marched deep into Germany. That 'Death March', as it has become called, claimed a still uncalculated number of victims. Prisoners from Birkenau walked for almost three days and finally in biting frost were transported in open wagons to Ravensbrück. Here, as Zofia Posmysz recalls, the next ordeal awaited the exhausted women: they had to spend 3 weeks under a kind of tent, sleeping on the bare earth. Zofia Posmysz was liberated by the Allies from the Neustadt-Glewe sub-camp on the 2nd of May 1945. She decided to return to Poland despite efforts to persuade her to remain in the zone controlled by the Allies. As one of a group of 20 she set out on foot (this has been immortalised in 'To Freedom, to Death, to Life') reaching Kraków at the end of May. Her mother and younger brother awaited her at the family home. Her father (a railway worker) had died in August 1943, shot by the German Bahnschutz, something she only learned on her return. Her older sister, who was married, lived in Warsaw. Zofia Posmysz went to her there to find work and continue her schooling. She passed her matura in 1946 and took up the study of Polish literature at Warsaw University, combining this with night-work as a proof reader for one of the newspapers. Towards the end of her studies she began working for Polish Radio in its literary department.

In 1959 she wrote the radio-play, 'The Passenger in Cabin 45', that was decisive for her literary career. The resonance it evoked led quickly to its adaptation as a play for television, and the outstanding director Andrzej Munk decided to make a film of, 'The Passenger'. The film – with among others the phenomenal role of Aleksandra Ślaska as Liza – appeared on the screen immediately after the death of the director in 1963. A year earlier 'The Passenger' had appeared in the form of a novel and on the basis of that, in 1968, Mieczysław Weinberg composed the opera score to Aleksander Miedwiedew's libretto. Its world premier at the Bregenz Festival in 2010 was a great artistic event, and consolidated the position of 'The Passenger', as one of the most important works on the subject of the camps, extraordinary and exceptional in so far as it combined the perspectives of the drama of war of both the victim and the oppressor, usually kept distinct.

The fame of 'The Passenger' somewhat overshadowed the other important works of Zofia Posmysz including the novels 'Holiday on the Adriatic', 'Microclimate' and 'The Price', the stories already mentioned and many radio plays, scripts and works on contemporary themes. The account of 'The Christ from Auschwitz', an elaboration of one of the episodes in 'The Passenger' is without doubt one of the most important elements of the testimony given by the life of this outstanding author, and extraordinary woman.

Zofia Posmysz was born in Kraków on the 23rd of August 1923. When the war broke out she was a pupil at a school of commerce. The new circumstances forced her to interrupt her studies for a certain time. In order to avoid deportation to Germany as forced labourer she took up work as a waitress in a German casino, having been directed there by the Arbeitsamt (labour office). Soon she took up her studies again in an illegal underground school. It was here among the participants of the illegal course that she came into contact with the underground press, distributed by her classmates. Probably as a result of the work of an informer, the whole group was arrested on the 15th of April 1942. After six weeks in prison Zofia Posmysz was sent on the 30th of May 1942 to the women's section of the main camp at Auschwitz, but she was there only a short while. One of the prisoners working on cleaning the banks of the Soła river managed to escape and in retaliation Zofia Posmysz's whole sub-camp of some 200 people was sent to a punishment battalion located in Budy near Oświęcim. In inhuman conditions, starved and beaten, and above all forced to carry out heavy labour, the women struggled desperately to survive. After two months the surviving 143 members of the group were sent to Birkenau, where a women's section of the camp had been opened. Some years later Zofia Posmysz recounted this episode of her camp career in 'Sängerin'.

Birkenau was a new stage in the ordeal of the camps. It began dramatically for her – with typhus and dysentery decimating the prisoners (see her story 'That same Doctor M'), but soon came an unexpected change for the better: in March 1943 she was transferred to the camp kitchen and two months later was promoted to the function of book-keeper. It was then that she met Tadeusz Palone-Lisowski, brought from the men's camp to prepare her for her new task of book-keeping.

She wrote about this encounter in, among others, 'The Christ from Auschwitz'.



Zofia Posmysz
in 1940



Portrait of Zofia
Posmysz
by Zofia Bator,
drawn
in Auschwitz
in 1944



Photographs taken for the records during registration at KL Auschwitz in 1942
(photo: archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum)



Zofia Posmysz during a meeting in the cycle 'Literature and Memory. In the Shadow of the Medallion'
at the International Youth Meeting Centre, 2008