

Mala and Edek: A story of Auschwitz

Mark O'Connor

Characters

Edek Galinski – Handsome, tall and well built. Age 24. Polish. Prisoner number 531. One of the first batch of prisoners to arrive at Auschwitz and knows the camp and ways to survive well. Has a strong spirit and trusts no one.

Mala Zimetbaum – Polish Jew who moved to Belgium. Age 22. Deported to Auschwitz in September '42. Known throughout Birkenau for her beauty and kindheartedness to other prisoners. Prisoner number 19880. Still manages to see the good in people.

Jan Kozel – Polish political prisoner (based on several real life prisoners). Age 28. Prisoner no 125727. Recently transferred to Auschwitz. In Block 11 for stealing shoes. Fears he will die at any time and has begun to give up hope.

Jakub – Kapo (based on several Kapos of Auschwitz). Polish criminal and ex-boxer. Has a fearsome reputation and has a wide range of brutal torture techniques. Prisoner Number 49. Age 32. Has single-handedly murdered hundreds of prisoners through beatings.

Voice on Tape:

(taken from Primo Levi's *The Drowned & The Saved*)

However this war may end, we have won the war against you. None of you will be left to bear witness. But even if some of you survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say the events you described are too monstrous to be believed. They will say that there are exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us who will deny everything and not you. We will be the ones to dictate history.

As this is being played Jan enters and walks to front stage right. A light slowly rises upon him so that by the time the tape has finished he is in full light. He is dressed in prisoner uniform. His prison number is 25727. From the symbols on the front of his uniform, we can tell that he is Polish. Even though we are to assume that this is some time after the events of the play he remains the same age of his early thirties. When he speaks to the audience he addresses them directly.

Jan:

It is said that the eyes of a human are the gateway to his soul. In Auschwitz a person's eyes were the first thing to die. It was a tangible sign that the person's spirit had finally gone, that hope of survival had finally disappeared. The term for a person in this state was Muselmann. It was one of the few words that everyone understood. Think about it, in Auschwitz alone there were people from most places in Europe, all with their own language and dialect, all too scared to communicate. And yet, not to understand a simple command such as 'Take off your cap' would end in death. Muselmann, the eyes of a dead man. In the short time that I knew Edek, I never saw that look in his eyes. I saw fear. But I also saw hope, courage and at times even love. He eradicated that look from me that was so close to consuming me completely. He gave me hope and a will to survive.

The main set is now lit. All we see are three flats, which form a cell. The flat at the back has a small grill at the top in the centre the size of a brick. In the stage right flat, there is a small hole in the bottom that represents a hole to the next cell. The reason for this will become clear later. In the middle of the cell there is a bucket. The lighting of this cell is poor. It is good enough for

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the audience to see what is going on but not much better than that. Jan goes and sits in the cell corner stage left. This becomes Jan's spot in the cell for the rest of the play. After a while, we hear footsteps. Jan becomes terrified. He believes it is the SS coming for him. Edek is thrown in by Jakub and he falls to the floor. He is twenty-four years of age. For a while, there is silence with Jan looking at Edek.

Jan: *Moving over to Edek to help.* Hello my name is Jan, Jan Kozel.

Edek: *Not accepting Jan's help.* Edek...

Jan: Yes I know. Edek Galinski. *Edek eyes him with suspicion.* You and Mala are big news.

Edek: Are we. *This is not said as a question.*

Jan: *Sounding excited.* I am sorry you were caught. With no news for so long I was sure that you both had made it. There is no response from Edek. Do you have any news of how the war is going? I hear the Allied forces are well into France by now and that the Russians are finally fighting back from the east....

Edek: You said your name was Jan. Well Jan do me a favour Jan and stop asking me stupid questions. I want to sleep until they decide what they are going to do with me. *With this Edek turns his back to Jan and ends up facing audience. His eyes remain open.*

Jan: *After some time.* I'm sorry.

The lights fade with both prisoners looking at each other. After a couple of seconds lights come up. Edek is standing by the grill in the wall. He sings Serenade in Messico by Claudio Vila. He has a beautiful voice and sings the song with emotion. The whole time he is singing Jan looks at him with great bewilderment although it is also clear that that he is moved by Edek's singing. When Edek finishes singing he sits back down. Lights fade with Jan still looking at Edek.

Lights come back up and Jan is in pain in the middle of the cell. It is clear from the blood on him and by the noises he makes that he has been badly beaten. He lies on the floor in obvious discomfort. After a short period Edek is thrown into the cell. Again it is clear from appearance and actions that he has also been beaten. Both prisoners lie looking at each other without saying anything.

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Jan: *After some time.* Well at least we cannot accuse each other of receiving any special treatment.

Edek: Why did they torture you?

Jan: Because of you.

Edek: I'm sorry?

Jan: There's no need to be.

Edek: That's not what I meant.

Jan: *There is a brief silence. Edek is eyeing up Jan. It is clear he wants to ask him what he meant but seems unwilling to be the first to speak.* They tortured me because they wanted to know what you had told me about your escape and who had helped you. When I told them in the few days we have been together you haven't told me nothing more than your name, they hit me even more for lying to them. Not to be trusted is one thing. To be beaten for it, well that's something completely different.

Edek: I thought you were an informer. I'm sorry you were beaten. Let me ask you Jan, do you trust people? Because if you do you are a fool.

Jan: And what are we supposed to do if we can't trust each other Edek? What have we got left? You trusted Mala.

Edek: Yes, but I love Mala. *There is silence.* You see this? *He shows Jan his number tattoo.* That's how long I've been here. By rights I should be dead. *(Pause)* You see Jan, when I say I don't trust you, it's not because I don't want to.... it's because I've forgotten how to.

A long pause

Jan: Have you told the SS anything?

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Edek: No. They know I had help. They know it's impossible to escape for as long as we did without any help. They just don't know who? You know, I would almost be enjoying this if it wasn't for the fact I know they are doing the same things to Mala.

Jan: Did you know Mala before here?

Edek: If only. When we escaped it was the first time we had experienced freedom together.

Jan: Tell me about it. *Edek looks at Jan with some suspicion. Jan sighs.* Leave out the bits you don't want to tell me or the things that may incriminate others. I.... It just might be nice to get to know the person I might be sharing my last few days with a little better. That's all. *It looks as if Edek is going to say nothing and Jan shrugs as if he has given up and turns away from him. As he does this Edek begins to talk.*

Edek: I heard about Mala before I met her. I had run into a girl I used to know in the woman's camp. Jakub had me working on building some new huts. He always sorted me out the better jobs...

Jan: Surprised. You knew Jakub before?

Edek: We arrived here at the same time. It was clear even then that the SS wanted as little to do with the day to day running of this camp so they got Polish criminals like Jakub do their dirty work for them. It was like lighting a fuse paper with most of them. They couldn't wait to get their hands on us. It became even worse when the Jews arrived. Anyway, Jakub found out that I spoke both English and German. Thinking it would help whichever way the war turned out he got me to teach him both languages. In return he did me favours.

Jan: Like what?

Edek: Getting me clothes and shoes that fitted. Leather boots at that. Not those bloody wooden things. I remember the first time he called me into his room. His table was covered in so much food. Sausage meat, cheese, bread, vegetables. I ate so much so quickly

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I was sick for two days. Nearly killed myself. When he gave me food after that I was a bit wiser. In the time that I have known Jakob he has kicked the shit out of me on several occasions but he's also saved my life.

Jan: You were saying about Mala.

Edek: Yes. Yes I was. I met Sara. I didn't recognise her at first but she recognised me instantly. We used to live in the same street. Nice family. Anyway she found out that I had access to most of the camp and she was trying to find out details about her family, especially her two children. I guess that being Jews they had gone straight to the gas but I didn't tell her that. Instead I said I'd do whatever I could to find out some information. It was worth it just to see the look of hope on her face. She broke down in front of me and started crying and said she didn't know what she had done to deserve such acts of kindness from two people in one day. I asked her what she meant and she told me that Mala had managed to get a photo from Canada of her two children. I think that was such a brave thing to do. I've done some things in this camp of great risk to myself, most of them bloody stupid but to do something where, if you were caught you would instantly be shot, and to do that to give someone else a brief moment of hope... *He stops talking immersed in thought.*

Jan: How did you meet her?

The lights now fade in the cell. Edek rises and moves forward to the front of the stage which is now lit. Even though the first piece of dialogue is to Jan, it is clear that we are now at another time in the camp.

Edek: Well she more kind of met me.

Mala enters from BSL. She is carrying a bundle of books. She passes Edek and bumps into him and drops the books. She lets out a grunt of frustration and begins to pick them up. Edek picks up 1 or 2 and hands them to Mala.

Mala: Thank you. *They both pick up the books in silence. Edek does not look Mala in the face.* Thank you. My name is Mala, Mala Zimetbaum.

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Edek: Edek. *Edek walks away.*

Mala: Edek Galinski. *Edek stops but does not turn to her. The following conversation happens back to back so from a distance it is not easy to tell they are talking to each other. She smiles.* I was talking with Sara today and she told me you were trying to trace her children for her. She pointed you out to me. Do you have any news of her family yet?

Edek: No. *He is blunt and suspicious. Mala does not seem to notice.*

Mala: Me neither. Although, I can find no record of them going to the gas here so there is hope I feel.

Edek: You can find no record?

Mala: Let's just say that my job gives me so opportunities to check things for people sometimes.

Edek: That must be dangerous?

Mala: No, staying here until you die doing nothing but watch yourself fall apart until you turn into what they think we are. That's dangerous. You have been here a long time Edek.

Edek: Years now.

Mala: You have never thought to escape?

Edek: *Almost laughing to himself.* I think of little else. It is not the lack of will that stops me.

Mala: Then what does?

Edek: The thought that I may be one day nearer to this all being over.

Mala: Or one day nearer to your death?

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Edek: *He stops and thinks about this. His voice begins to warm a little. Maybe. I don't look at it that way. I've known too many people in here which have wished away their life. All of them now dead. I may well die in here, but I'm not going to lie down that easily for the bastards.*

Mala: *She smiles at Edek. You are a lot like me then.*

Edek: *Edek look at her for the first time. How beautiful to see a smile. How beautiful it is to see you smile.*

Mala: *How beautiful it is to have something to smile at.*