

CHAPTER
16

Section 3

LITERATURE SELECTION *from Sophie's Choice*
by William Styron

The main character of this novel is a Polish Catholic woman named Sophie who lives in the United States. This excerpt is a flashback to a time in Poland during World War II when Sophie, her two children, a group of Polish Resistance fighters, and several hundred other Poles are being transported to a concentration camp.

The name Oswiecim—Auschwitz—which had first murmured its way through the compartment made her weak with fear, but she had no doubt whatever that that was where the train was going. A miniscule sliver of light, catching her eye, drew her attention to a tiny crack in the plywood board across the window, and during the first hour of the journey she was able to see enough by the dawn's glow to tell their direction: south. Due south past the country villages that crowd around Warsaw in place of the usual suburban outskirts, due south past greening fields and copses crowded with birch trees, south in the direction of Cracow. Only

Auschwitz, of all their plausible destinations, lay south, and she recalled the despair she felt when with her own eyes she verified where they were going. The reputation of Auschwitz was ominous, vile, terrifying. Although in the Gestapo prison rumors had tended to support Auschwitz as the place where they would eventually be shipped, she had hoped incessantly and prayed for a labor camp in Germany, where so many Poles had been transported and where, according to other rumor, conditions were less brutal, less harsh. But as Auschwitz loomed more and more inevitably and now, on the train, made itself inescapable, Sophie was smothered by the realization that she was victim of punishment by association, retribution through chance concurrence. She kept saying to herself: I don't belong here. If she had not had the misfortune of being taken prisoner at the same time as so many of the Home Army members (a stroke of bad luck further complicated by her connection with Wanda, and their common dwelling place, even though she had not lifted a finger to help the Resistance), she might have been adjudged guilty of the serious crime of meat smuggling but not of the infinitely more grave crime of subversion, and hence might not be headed for a destination so forbiddingly malign. But among other ironies, she real-

ized, was this one: she had not been *judged* guilty of anything, merely interrogated and forgotten. She had then been thrown in haphazardly among these partisans, where she was victim less of any specific retributive justice than of a general rage—a kind of berserk lust for complete domination and oppression which seized the Nazis whenever they scored a win over the Resistance, and which this time had even extended to the several hundred bedraggled Poles ensnared in that last savage roundup.

Certain things about the trip she remembered with utter clarity. The stench, the airlessness, the endless shifting of positions—stand up, sit down, stand up

again. . . . The view outside the crack, where spring sunlight darkened into drizzling rain. . . . Jan's books, which he tried to read in the feeble light as he sat on her lap: *The Swiss Family Robinson* in German; Polish editions of *White Fang*

and *Penrod and Sam*. Eva's two possessions, which she refused to park in the luggage rack but clutched fiercely as if any moment they might be wrested from her hands: the flute in its leather case and her *mís*—the one-eared, one-eyed teddy bear she had kept since the cradle.

More rain outside, a torrent. Now the odor of vomit, pervasive, unextinguishable, cheesy. Fellow passengers: two frightened convent girls of sixteen or so, sobbing, sleeping, waking to murmur prayers to the Holy Virgin; Wiktor, a black-haired, intense, infuriated young Home Army member already plotting revolt or escape, ceaselessly scribbling messages on slips of paper to be passed to Wanda in another compartment; a fear-maddened shriveled old lady claiming to be the niece of Wieniawski, claiming the bundle of parchment she kept pressed close to her to be the original manuscript of his famous *Polonaise*, claiming some kind of immunity, dissolving into tears like the school-girls. . . . Hunger pangs beginning. Nothing at all to eat. Another old woman—quite dead—laid out in

She kept saying to herself: I don't belong here.

the exterior aisle on the spot where her heart attack had felled her, her hands frozen around a crucifix and her chalk-white face already smudged by the boots and shoes of people treading over and around her. Through her crevice once more: Cracow at night, the familiar station, moonlit railroad yards where they lay stranded hour after hour. . . . An hour's sleep, then the morning's brightness. Crossing the Vistula, murky and steaming. Two small towns she recognized as the train moved westward through the dusty pollen-gold morning: Skawina, Zator. Eva beginning to cry for the first time, torn by spasms of hunger. Hush, baby. A few more moments' drowse riven by a sun-flooded, splendid, heart-wrenching, manic dream: herself begowned and bediademed, seated at the keyboard before ten thousand onlookers, yet somehow—astoundingly—flying, *flying*, soaring to deliverance on the celestial measures of the Emperor Concerto. Eyelids fluttering apart. A slamming, braking stop. Auschwitz. They waited in the car during most of the rest of the day. At an early moment the generators ceased working; the bulbs went out in the compartment and what remaining light there was cast a milky pallor, filtering through the cracks in the plywood shutters. The distant sound of band music made its way into the compartment. There was a vibration of panic in the car; it was almost palpable, like the prickling of hair all over one's body, and in the near-darkness there came a surge of anxious whispering—hoarse, rising, but as incomprehensible as the rustle of an army of leaves. The convent girls began to wail in unison, beseeching the Holy Mother. Wiktor loudly told them to shut up, while at the same instant Sophie took courage from Wanda's voice, faint from the other end of the car, begging Resistance members and deportees alike to stay calm, stay quiet.

It must have been early in the afternoon when word came regarding the hundreds upon hundreds of Jews from Malkinia in the forward cars. *All Jews in vans* came a note to Wiktor, a note which he read aloud in the gloom and which Sophie, too numb with fright to even clutch Jan and Eva close against her breast for consolation, immediately translated into: All the Jews have gone to the gas. Sophie joined with the convent girls in prayer. It was while she was praying that Eva began to wail loudly. The

children had been brave during the trip, but now the little girl's hunger blossomed into real pain. She squealed in anguish while Sophie tried to rock and soothe her, but nothing seemed to work; the child's screams were for a moment more terrifying to Sophie than the word about the doomed Jews. But soon they stopped. Oddly, it was Jan who came to the rescue. He had a way with his sister and now he took over—at first shushing her in the words of some private language they shared, then pressing next to her with his book. In the pale light he began reading to her from the story of Penrod, about little boys' pranks in the leafy Elysian small-town marrow of America; he was able to laugh and giggle, and his thin soprano singsong cast a gentle spell, combining with Eva's exhaustion to lull her to sleep.

Several hours passed. It was late afternoon.

Finally another slip of paper was passed to Wiktor: *AK first car in vans*. This plainly meant one thing—that, like the Jews, the several hundred Home Army members in the car just forward had been transported to Birkenau and the crematoriums. Sophie stared straight ahead, composed her hands in her lap and prepared for death, feeling inexpressible terror but for the first time, too, tasting faintly the blessed bitter relief of

acceptance. The old niece of Wieniawski had fallen into a comalike stupor, the *Polonaise* in crumpled disarray, rivulets of drool flowing from the corners of her lips. In trying to reconstruct that moment a long time later, Sophie wondered whether she might not then have become unconscious herself, for the next thing she remembered was her own daylight-dazzled presence outside on the ramp with Jan and Eva, and coming face to face with Hauptsturm-führer Fritz Jemand von Niemand, doctor of medicine. . . .

"*Du bist eine Polack,*" said the doctor. "*Bist du auch eine Kommunistin?*" Sophie placed one arm around Eva's shoulders, the other arm around Jan's waist, saying nothing. The doctor belched, then more sharply elaborated. "I know you're a Polack, but are you also another one of these filthy Communists?" And then in his fog he turned toward the next prisoners, seeming almost to forget Sophie.

Why hadn't she played dumb? "*Nicht spricht Deutsch.*" It could have saved the moment. There was such a press of people. Had she not answered in German he might have let the three of them pass

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through. But there was the cold fact of her terror, and the terror caused her to behave unwisely. She knew now what blind and merciful ignorance had prevented very few Jews who arrived here from knowing, but which her association with Wanda and the others had caused her to know and to dread with fear beyond utterance: a selection. She and the children were undergoing at this very moment the ordeal she had heard about—rumored in Warsaw a score of times in whispers—but which had seemed at once so unbearable and unlikely to happen to her that she had thrust it out of her mind. But here she was, and here was the doctor. While over there—just beyond the roofs of the boxcars recently vacated by the death-bound Malkinia Jews—was Birkenau, and the doctor could select for its abyssal doors anyone whom he desired. This thought caused her such terror that instead of keeping her mouth shut she said, *“Ich bin polnisch! In Krakow geboren!”* Then she blurted helplessly, “I’m not Jewish! Or my children—they’re not Jewish either.” And added, “They are racially pure. They speak German.” Finally she announced, “I’m a Christian. I’m a devout Catholic. . . .”

The doctor was a little unsteady on his feet. He leaned over for a moment to an enlisted underling with a clipboard and murmured something, meanwhile absorbedly picking his nose. Eva, pressing heavily against Sophie’s legs, began to cry. “So you believe in Christ the Redeemer?” the doctor said in a thick-tongued but oddly abstract voice, like that of a lecturer examining the delicately shaded facet of a proposition in logic. Then he said something which for an instant was totally mystifying: “Did He not say, ‘Suffer the little children to come unto Me’?” He turned back to her, moving with the twitchy methodicalness of a drunk.

Sophie, with an inanity poised on her tongue and choked with fear, was about to attempt a reply when the doctor said, “You may keep one of your children.”

“*Bitte?*” said Sophie.

“You may keep one of your children,” he repeated. “The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?”

“You mean, I have to choose?”

“You’re a Polack, not a Yid. That gives you a privilege—a choice.”

Her thought processes dwindled, ceased. Then

she felt her legs crumple. “I can’t choose! I can’t choose!” She began to scream. Oh, how she recalled her own screams! Tormented angels never screeched so loudly above hell’s pandemonium. *“Ich kann nicht wahlen!”* she screamed.

The doctor was aware of unwanted attention. “Shut up!” he ordered. “Hurry now and choose. Choose, . . . or I’ll send them both over there. Quick!”

She could not believe any of this. She could not believe that she was now kneeling on the hurtful, abrading concrete, drawing her children toward her so smotheringly tight that she felt that their flesh might be engrafted to hers even through layers of clothes. Her disbelief was total, deranged. It was disbelief reflected in the eyes of the gaunt, waxy-skinned young Rottenfuhrer, the doctor’s aide, to whom she inexplicably found herself looking upward in supplication. He appeared stunned, and he returned her gaze

with a wide-eyed baffled expression, as if to say: I can’t understand this either.

“Don’t make me choose,” she heard herself plead in a whisper, “I can’t choose.”

“Send them both over there, then,” the doctor said to the aide, *“nach links.”*

“Mama!” She heard Eva’s thin but soaring cry at the instant that she thrust the child away from her and rose from the concrete with a clumsy stumbling motion. “Take the baby!” she called out. “Take my little girl!”

At this point the aide—with a careful gentleness that Sophie would try without success to forget—tugged at Eva’s hand and led her away into the waiting legion of the damned. She would forever retain a dim impression that the child had continued to look back, beseeching. But because she was now almost completely blinded by salty, thick, copious tears she was spared whatever expression Eva wore, and she was always grateful for that. For in the bleakest honesty of her heart she knew that she would never have been able to tolerate it, driven nearly mad as she was by her last glimpse of that vanishing small form.

“Don’t make me choose,” she heard herself plead in a whisper, “I can’t choose.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why was Sophie sent to Auschwitz?
2. What choice did the doctor force Sophie to make?
3. Given the circumstances, do you agree with Sophie’s actions? Why or why not?