

AUSCHWITZ SURVIVOR: "I REMEMBER THE FIRST ONE THERE"

The pen of history has written the name of Stanislaw Ryniak on its pages. His claim to fame is something none of us would ever want.

Before he made the history books there was another pen and another book. It was a German pen – a Nazi pen. It wrote his name on what was known as the hauptbuch, the official registry of prisoners who were condemned to Auschwitz.

Stanislaw Ryniak's was the first name there. There were many more after his. You may find it hard to believe he wasn't Jewish. He was Polish, a Polish Catholic.

He was the first of the first. He came as part of the first transport of prisoners the Nazis sent to Auschwitz. It was a trainload of 728 Polish prisoners from the Polish city of Tarnow. It arrived in Auschwitz on June 14, 1940.

Stanislaw Ryniak survived his four years at Auschwitz and returned home when the war ended. Despite all the physical and mental abuse he endured, he was able to reach the age of 88 when he died in the closing days of February, 2004.

Michael Preisler of New York City is a former Auschwitz prisoner who remembers Ryniak. They met after the Gestapo arrested Preisler and sent him there in October, 1941, just two months after Hitler's SS murdered the Polish saint, Father Maximilian Kolbe. In the hauptbuch, Preisler is registered as No. 22213.

Preisler knew he was in big trouble when he found out where the Germans were sending him. "Just the mention of Auschwitz caused anyone in Poland to shake from fear," he said. And finally getting there "made you feel like you walked into hell itself."

Fortunately, it was the early arrivals like Ryniak who were still around and understood the sheer terror that gripped anyone entering the camp. Preisler recalls how they comforted and counseled the newcomers. "Just to tell us what we should or shouldn't do to keep the SS guards from killing us gave us that little glimmer of hope we might make it to the next day," he said.

Even though Ryniak was the first prisoner, he was given 31 as his number. That was because the SS had already brought in some of the most brutal criminals from jails in Germany and gave them the first thirty numbers. "They were known killers and the SS made good use of these cruel beasts to help them in their evil work," said Preisler.

During the first two years, most of the prisoners in Auschwitz were Polish Catholics. "Any friendship you made always faced the risk of being abruptly ended by an SS-man's bullet, a fatal beating, sickness or starvation." Preisler lost touch with him after the Germans shipped Ryniak out to another camp in 1944. Preisler, however, remained in Auschwitz until the very end in 1945.

Preisler wanted to start a new life when he came to America after the war. He had every

intention of erasing his terrible experiences from his memory. But when television and the rest of the media began to make the Holocaust a favorite topic, he found this impossible.

Even worse than reviving his horrible nightmares, Preisler saw the American public was often given a distorted and inaccurate account about what really happened. And it was the Polish Catholics like Ryniak and him whose suffering was being misrepresented. It was a revision of history and he felt a personal obligation to Ryniak and the other Auschwitz Poles to fight this "perversion of truth." It's a fight he has waged for more than twenty years.

"It's a tough one because the power of the media is so overwhelming," he said. A favorite misrepresentation the media keeps repeating is the reference to Auschwitz and other German concentration camps as "Polish" camps, according to Preisler. "We keep telling the media this is wrong and misleads the public but they just won't stop," he said.

Another example he finds malicious is the accusation that the Poles wanted the Germans to build their death camps in Poland "so we could watch the Jews be killed." As far as Preisler is concerned, "there's somebody out there trying very hard to shift the blame for Nazi crimes to the Polish people."

Not content to fight such falsehoods alone, Preisler was the motivating force to have the Polish American Congress create a Speakers Bureau and its Holocaust Documentation Committee. He currently is the co-chair and says its purpose is "to assure that the ordeal of Polish Catholics like Stanislaw Ryniak" is reported and recorded accurately and without prejudice.

When Preisler came to America and prepared to become a U.S. citizen, going to the movies was a big help for him to learn English. One scene that made a lasting impression showed a witness testifying in court and swearing "to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

That's what Preisler says he wants the media to do when they write or report on Poland.

Contact: Frank Milewski – (718) 263-2700

Note to Editor: The attachment is the German-made photo of Michael Preisler after his arrival in Auschwitz.