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3:30–6:30 pm, Tuesday, May 10

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Building 2—Lobby, 4000 Lancaster Dr. NE, Salem, OR

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A Guide to Hell?

The Druggist of Auschwitz upends the Holocaust

There are the paradigms of the Holocaust we are given in middle and high school: crematoriums, torture, terrified victims and merciless Nazi torturers. We know the names: Hitler, Himmler, Churchill, Wiesel. Initially, Dieter Schlesak's *The Druggist of Auschwitz* tells us nothing different from what we've already been taught.

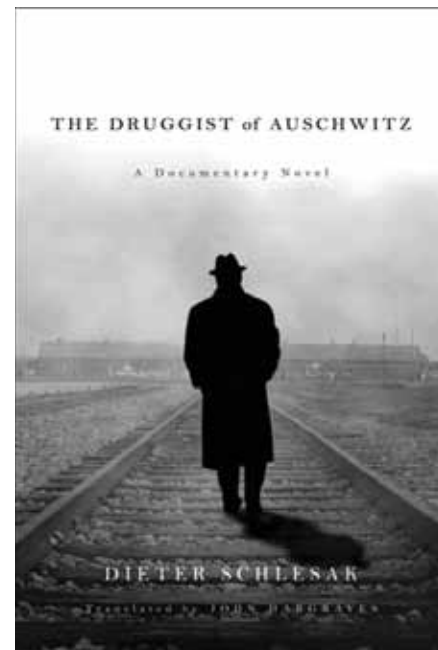
But it soon becomes evident that we have learned nothing. In Schlesak's Auschwitz, there are hardly any prisoners acting as sheep being led to the slaughter. We learn of the Auschwitz brothel, set up for officers and prisoners alike. And there is the Polish dancer who, upon refusing to change into prison garb in front of male SS officers, stole a gun and shot a soldier to death.

The roles of captor and captive become muddled and unclear, with corruption and negotiation frequently taking place on both sides. This is a Holocaust that has never before been discussed.

The book itself, however, may not be the best start to learning about an alternative Holocaust. It is labeled as a "documentary novel," a coy classification that dares the reader to question the validity of her own perspective of the Nazi regime. Eventually, despite the editor's notes and citations page, the reader begins to wonder what the true point of this book is. Is it a historical lesson about a time period we have nearly stopped re-examining? Or is it merely a macabre fable, constructed from true-life interviews with witnesses to hell on Earth?

The book's title figure is Dr. Victor Capesius, an SS officer and pharmacist who operated the Auschwitz pharmacy from 1943 until the camp's liberation in 1945. Maintaining a staff of Jewish doctors and pharmacists within the camp, Capesius may have participated in selecting prisoners for life or death (like his colleague, Dr. Josef Mengele). He also may have pilfered the valuables of the prisoners he treated, which would explain his post-war finances and ability to start several businesses despite his nine-year imprisonment for being an accessory to murder.

But so much evidence is presented for both points of view the reader begins to lose grip on what is documentary and what is fiction. The structure of the book itself becomes inconsistent, with sections of chapters being named, then numbered, then named again. Schlesak's own indignation at the events seeps through the latter half of the novel, to the point where his dialogue colors his interviews. The documentary portion of



the novel no longer seems as strong, his anger inspiring doubt at every turn.

The most dubious character of all is Adam, a Jewish man whose comments surround every description of a major event. We don't know if Adam is indeed real, and feel betrayed and indignant when he is proved false. After all, he is the character that best expresses the horror of Auschwitz with which we are familiar. But to find out that he and all of his horrific confessions are false? It's borderline reader abuse.

The lasting effect of this book is similar to the feeling we all had upon first reading the memos released by Wikileaks. At first we are ready to seize upon the history books with red pens and correct descriptions we've been fed for so long. But then the source of this new history starts to sound a little wonky. Before you know it, they're adding far too much of their own personal history to the story for their work to have the credibility it probably deserves.

We are left only to wonder what is really true in the Schlesak's book. A renewed look at the Holocaust, through the eyes of participants in its occurrence, is long overdue. But *The Druggist of Auschwitz's* blunt-force delivery of information, mixed with the author's reactions, ultimately don't do it justice. Its publisher classifies the book as fiction, which is probably best. But vivid fictional stories about the Holocaust, with incredibly believable details, may be one thing for which the world is not yet ready. **EW**

DIVA's exhibit, "The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau," runs May 6 - June 4; info at divacenter.org

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