

“Taut As A String”

Introduction

This story by Sara Nomberg-Przytyk is about Karola, a woman imprisoned at Auschwitz who uses complex strategies to assure her children’s survival. Assisted by her fellow female inmates, Karola passes her daughter off as several years older than her true age so that the girl can get a concentration camp number, work, and survive. She also manages to hide her young son, even from the dreaded Mengele, so that the boy can live. The women know that they face certain execution if these acts are discovered. Also, a German doctor deliberately ignores Karola’s children when they arrive at Auschwitz, thereby facilitating their survival. In her actions as the mother and protector of her children, Karola builds a bond with the other women inmates in her block. The story emphasizes the wit and survival instincts of Karola, the other prisoners, and the children themselves.

Learning Goals

- Students will become aware of the sisterhood that developed among female inmates in the camps.
- Students will understand the difficulties imposed by the Holocaust on women’s ability to save, protect, and nurture children.
- Students will learn that individual acts of kindness helped some people to survive.
- Students will appreciate the courageous and heroic behavior of women who themselves were imprisoned and abused.

Discussion Questions

- Explain Karola's professional background. Why is it ironic in the story?
- Are there stereotypes in the story? What are they?
- Is a stereotype challenged? What is it? What is the message here?
- What role does Dr. Koenig play?
- What is done for the daughter? Why can this be done?
- What is done about the son?
- Who acts as "mother" to the boy? Why?
- What saves the children?
- What "saves" Karola?

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Karola was a registered nurse. Before the war she had worked in a hospital in Krakow. If it is true that the practice of a profession influences a person's outward appearance as well as a person's psyche, then Karola was an excellent example of the rule. All you had to do was to take one look at her and you would instantly know what her profession was. The tranquil expression on her face, the calmness of her movements, her quick, light step, and the nobility of her figure all indicated that Karola must have been a wonderful nurse. When I first met her in Auschwitz she was about thirty-five years old.

She was not eager to reveal her intimate secrets. Always she seemed to be lost in thought. I knew very little about her. Her coolness was intimidating. I saw her often,

since Karola worked on the hospital block. Her manner was unchanging: calm and quiet.

It was rumored in the camp that Karola had left two children with her sister - a thirteen-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son. She very rarely spoke about them. Apparently she feared that the mere mention of them might have the power to bring them here to her. Rumor had it that Karola's sister had found a place outside the ghetto, among good gentile friends, and that there she took care of Karola's children.

I remember that hot summer day when Karola was informed that her sister, along with the children, was on the ramp in Auschwitz, waiting with the others for the arrival of the German doctor.

It was twelve o'clock. Dr. Koenig was in the clinic, looking over the sick. He was tall and skinny and gloomy. Even so, we preferred him to Dr. Mengele, who often talked to the sick like a benefactor. Suddenly the door of the infirmary opened and Karola burst in like a hurricane. She kneeled in the middle of the infirmary and stretched out her hands to Dr. Koenig in a beseeching way. She begged for the lives of her children. Orli, who had come into the infirmary with Karola, was standing next to her. Karola was lucky. Mengele was not in the infirmary that day. If he had been there he would have sent her to the gas chamber along with the children, because the children could not live in the camp and they could not be sent to the gas chamber by themselves. It would not be humanitarian.

Koenig was taken aback for a moment, and Orli added hurriedly that Karola was a professional nurse and a very good worker.

Koenig said, "Come with me, then, and take your children!"

Orli went with Karola in order to help her get the children through the gate.

In the evening I went to the neighboring block where Karola lived. She was sitting with her children on the highest bed. Since the girl was tall and like her mother, well-built, Karola had no trouble in adding three years to her recorded age. She was put down as sixteen on her registration card, and a number was tattooed on her arm. The age of little Zbyszek was difficult to cover up. He was five years old and small-framed. Slim, though tall, he had dark brown hair, bangs combed onto his forehead, and a dark complexion, all of which were brightened by beautiful blue-gray sparkling eyes. He looked at that terrible world, at those sick lying in the beds around him, and he listened. His head was held at a tilt as though he was constantly listening and was ready to escape.

Karola's daughter Krysia had to start work as a *laufer* the next day. She started her adult life, if that is what you can call it, in Auschwitz. What was to be done with Zbyszek? With Orli's help she had smuggled him into the camp. Since he did not have a number he did not actually exist. Koenig knew about the boy, and the question was how would he behave? Would he appear one day and take Zbyszek to the gas chambers with the other children? The mercy of the German gods rode a fitful horse - that we knew very well.

Karola withered and aged. Zbyszek lay hidden on the top bunk when she was at work. You can imagine what Karola went through on every visit from Mengele or the other SS men on the block. She could never be certain that the boy would not become frightened and do something to draw attention to himself. Koenig never asked her about

her children. He acted as if he knew nothing about the matter. There was no danger from that quarter.

A few months went by in this way. In the evening, after roll call, Zbyszek would crawl out of his hiding place, and Karola would go out to the front of the block with him. The boy had to walk and run a little.

Once I met them as they were going about their nightly exercise. It was the end of the summer and the chimneys were smoking without stop. Karola stood at an angle, looking around with the watchfulness of a hawk. Zbyszek ran around the block, taut as a string.

“You know, he is very frightened,” Karola told me. “I had to tell him what would happen to him if the Germans see him. It is very important that he doesn’t leave his bed during the day. He brought a book of poems with him. I taught him to read, and now he reads all day. He knows everything by heart. If I could get him some Polish books what a joy it would be for him.”

Zbyszek came running toward us, fatigued, like any boy his age.

“You didn’t see any Germans?” he asked with an air of sadness and tragedy, a vigilant look on his face.

The Germans did not visit us on Sundays. We felt freer than we usually did, and we would meet in the infirmary. That Sunday Karola came with her children. With her *laufer’s* armband Krysia felt completely safe. Zbyszek recited some poems. He stood in the middle of the infirmary, quite handsome, and talked about a train sweating grease and oil. I looked at him and simply could not believe that there were people who desired

his death. It was quiet in the infirmary, and Zbyszek's every word rang like the most beautiful music.

Suddenly the *sztubowa* ran into the infirmary from the next block.

"Mengele," she shouted.

I looked at Zbyszek. Till this day I see his pale face. He stood there as if turned to stone. We all jumped up. We hid Zbyszek under a mattress and made the bed over him. He did not protest. He did not say that he was uncomfortable or that he could not breathe. Karola ran to her block.

Half an hour later we pulled a barely breathing child from under the mattress.

"Has he gone for sure?" he asked. "Because I can lie here till evening."

Zbyszek lived through Auschwitz. Although all the prisoners knew about him, no one betrayed him to the Germans.

Assessment

- Based on this story, write an essay on sisterhood among female inmates in the camps.
- Using this story as a basis, write an essay on the effect of the Holocaust on women's roles as mothers and nurturers.