

Book Reviews

The Druggist of Auschwitz¹

Reviewed by Major Derek A. Rowe*

*Monsters exist, but they are too few in numbers to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are . . . the functionaries ready to believe and act without asking questions.*²

In fewer than two years, over 1.1 million people, mostly Jews, were killed at Auschwitz, a German concentration camp in present-day Poland.³ Between 1942 and 1944, up to 24,000 people a day were gassed and incinerated at Auschwitz.⁴ Most victims were gassed upon arrival and fully cooperated because they did not know they were walking into gas chambers.⁵ As such, Auschwitz represents the most efficient machinery of the Holocaust, a signal event in human history, and perhaps the darkest example of humanity's capacity for inhumanity.⁶ Given the singularity of the Holocaust, there has been no shortage of writings on the subject.⁷ Against this backdrop, Dieter Schlesak sets forth *The Druggist of Auschwitz*, a documentary novel.

Schlesak takes a new tack by focusing on a little-known military pharmacist, Dr. Victor Capesius.⁸ Dr. Capesius worked in the pharmacy at Auschwitz and was later convicted for his participation in selecting prisoners for the gas chambers.⁹ Through the eyes of a fictional character named Adam Salmen, Dr. Capesius is observed prior to the

war, during the war while at Auschwitz, and throughout his post-war life.¹⁰ This review first examines how effectively Schlesak contrasts the horrors of day-to-day camp operations, which cry for justice, with the absence of remorse expressed by Dr. Capesius for his role at Auschwitz. The second part analyzes Schlesak's discussion of two ethical situations arising in the context of Auschwitz's operations. The third section appraises Schlesak's use of a fictional character and Schlesak's credibility on factual representations. Ultimately, Schlesak is successful at communicating his intended message, but his disorganized style limits the application and reach of his work.

I. Schlesak's thesis: The horror of Auschwitz was possible because men like Dr. Capesius felt no guilt for their crimes.

From the opening paragraph and throughout every chapter, Schlesak describes the cruelty at Auschwitz using vivid imagery, as shown in the following examples:

[T]he bodies were not scattered throughout the room, but towered up in a pile to the ceiling, for the Zyklon B with its poisonous gases first started at the floor level and then rose. . . . So the unlucky victims trampled over one another: the higher up they could get, the later the deadly gas would reach them. A horrific struggle for two more minutes of life.¹¹

The child was standing by the truck playing with his apple. Then Boger went up to the child, grabbed him, swung him by the feet and smashed his head against the barracks. Then he calmly picked up the child's apple. And Draser told me to wipe up 'that mess' on the wall (This type of murder was known as the 'Boger swing.')

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¹ DIETER SCHLESAK, *THE DRUGGIST OF AUSCHWITZ* (John Hargraves trans., 1st ed. 2011).

² PRIMO LEVI, *THE REAWAKENING* 228 (Stuart Woolf trans., 1993).

³ *Holocaust Encyclopedia: Auschwitz*, U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005189> (last visited Sept. 2, 2012) [hereinafter *Holocaust Encyclopedia*] (stating at least 1.1 million were murdered at Auschwitz). See also ROBERT JAN VAN PELT, *THE CASE FOR AUSCHWITZ 257* (2002) (When initially interrogated by British Military Intelligence officers, Rudolf Hoss (Auschwitz camp Commandant) stated that approximately 2.5 million were killed at Auschwitz.).

⁴ SCHLESAK, *supra* note 1, at 10, 56.

⁵ *Id.* at 67, 119.

⁶ *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, *supra* note 3 ("The Auschwitz concentration camp complex was the largest of its kind established by the Nazi regime.").

⁷ Amazon and Barnes and Noble currently stock over 240 different Holocaust titles. Additionally, some of the best-known Holocaust authors have written specifically on the Auschwitz experience: VIKTOR FRANKL, *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING* (1946); ANNE FRANK, *DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL* (1947); PRIMO LEVI, *IF THIS IS A MAN* (1947); ELIE WIESEL, *NIGHT* (1960); CORRIE TEN BOOM, *THE HIDING PLACE* (1971), to name a few.

⁸ SCHLESAK, *supra* note 1, at 13.

⁹ *Id.* at 18. Before this book appeared, Dr. Victor Capesius was not a widely known figure in Holocaust genre writings. Capesius was one of twenty-two defendants tried in the 1963–1965 Frankfurt Auschwitz trials.

¹⁰ *Id.* at vii.

¹¹ *Id.* at 70.

¹² *Id.* at 256.

A sick and starving prisoner is beaten and stomped to death by a German soldier for not wearing his hat.¹³

Vivid imagery is certainly not new to Auschwitz-specific Holocaust writings.¹⁴ Because similar works exist on Auschwitz, some critics dismiss Schlesak's heavy-handed approach as repetitive and unnecessary.¹⁵ Others, perhaps those who are less familiar with Auschwitz writings, are simply overwhelmed by the horrors described.¹⁶ Yet as with other landmark events in history, the lessons of the Holocaust bear repeating.¹⁷ Moreover, the images are necessary for the first part of Schlesak's purpose: to drive home the reality of these horrific events.¹⁸ Visualizing progressively worse cruelties in every chapter leaves an impression of reality that is not made by cursory statistics of death by fire, gassing, or execution. With a firm grasp of the nature and magnitude of the crimes, the reader is in a position to receive the second part of Schlesak's consistent, if indirect, message: the atrocities of Auschwitz were possible because men like Dr. Capesius felt no guilt or remorse for what happened there.¹⁹

¹³ *Id.* at 295.

¹⁴ PRIMO LEVI, *IF THIS IS A MAN* 9 (1958). Levi wrote in the preface, "As an account of atrocities . . . this book of mine adds nothing to what is already known to readers throughout the world on the disturbing question of the death camps." Each of the works cited in note 7, *supra*, and particularly Elie Wiesel's *Night*, gives a first-hand account of day-to-day horrors at Auschwitz.

¹⁵ See Michael Hofmann, *The Death Camp Pharmacist*, N.Y. TIMES (Jun. 24, 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/books/review/book-review-the-druggist-of-auschwitz-by-dieter-schlesak.html?pagewanted=all> (comparing Schlesak's book unfavorably with "the formal brilliance and heroic forbearance of much direct or first-generation or pre-'documentary' Holocaust writing: Primo Levi or Tadeusz Borowski or Elie Wiesel or Imre Kertesz or Fred Wander").

¹⁶ Mary Whipple, *Dieter Schlesak—The Druggist of Auschwitz*, SEEING THE WORLD THROUGH BOOKS: REVIEWS BY MARY WHIPPLE (May 6, 2011), <http://marywhiplereviews.com/dieter-schlesak-the-druggist-holocaust/> ("This is a difficult book to read—the horrors are so great and so overwhelming . . ."). See also Alan Cheuse, *Depravity, Despair In 'Druggist of Auschwitz'*, NPR BOOKS (May 12, 2011), <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/12/136250384/review-the-druggist-of-auschwitz/> ("[I]t was about 40 pages in that I set the book down, unable to take much more of its horrors."); R.M. Peterson, *The Druggist of Auschwitz* review, AMAZON.COM (May 25, 2011), <http://www.amazon.com/The-Druggist-Auschwitz-Documentary-Novel/dp/0374144060> ("The litany of horrors overwhelms everything else in the book.").

¹⁷ Herbert Mitgang, *Writing Holocaust Memories*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 15, 1986, at 11 (quoting Aharon Appelfeld, *To the Land of the Cattails*, "The Holocaust is a central event in many people's lives, but it also has become a metaphor for our century. There cannot be an end to speaking and writing about it").

¹⁸ This brief review critically analyzes Schlesak's main thesis. It is worth noting however, that Schlesak has painstakingly collected and injected trial testimony, letters, and personal interviews into his work. The sheer volume of documentary support assembled by Schlesak generally lends credibility to the imagery described.

¹⁹ SCHLESAK, *supra* note 1, 133 ("For Capesius feels absolutely no guilt; his conscience never bothers him. . . . It was precisely this inability [to feel guilt] that made Auschwitz possible in the first place.").

Granted, this message has been published before.²⁰ In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt makes the same point using evidence gathered for, and presented at, Adolf Eichmann's trial.²¹ Both Schlesak and Arendt highlight the absence of any remorse or sense of guilt from the defendants for their roles in the Holocaust.²² Yet this is not surprising to prosecutors or criminal defense attorneys. At trial in the United States, any statement that may be perceived as consciousness of guilt can be used as evidence against the defendant, assuming a proper foundation can be laid. Dr. Capesius and other Holocaust perpetrators are keenly aware that such statements can make the difference between conviction and acquittal. Therefore, it is understandable that remorseful statements that would satisfy the public generally are not made or are not publicized.²³ Whether or not the lack of remorse is a significant observation, Schlesak effectively communicates this and the reality of Auschwitz operations using the little-known figure of Dr. Capesius. Readers with the stomach to finish the book are brutally reminded of what occurred during the Holocaust at Auschwitz. With that vivid reminder, readers are shocked that Dr. Capesius never expressed any guilt for his role.²⁴ Thus, on his central two-part thesis, Schlesak is successful, though his secondary message has limited value because criminal defendants so often refrain from expressing guilt or remorse.

II. Schlesak on Military Ethics

Schlesak guides the reader to reflect on military ethics as he discusses how otherwise normal German soldiers could succumb to the genocide of the Holocaust. However, he fails to develop this line of thought. A secondary figure in the book, SS Second Lieutenant Roland Albert, states, "[I]t was just love of order and sense of duty" that kept him working at Auschwitz.²⁵ In context, the chapter merely gives

²⁰ See Martha Toll, *The Druggist of Auschwitz*, WASH. INDEPENDENT REV. OF BOOKS, <http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/book-review/the-druggist-of-auschwitz-a-documentary-novel/> (last visited July 2, 2012) ("Nor is Schlesak the first to chronicle the complete disconnection between the perpetrators' actions and their later disavowal of personal responsibility.").

²¹ HANNAH ARENDT, *EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM: A REPORT ON THE BANALITY OF EVIL* 21 (1965) (discussing the lack of remorse Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi regime figurehead, exhibited at his trial).

²² *Id.* See also *supra* note 19.

²³ BERND NAUMANN, *AUSCHWITZ*, at xiv (Johan Praeger ed., 1966) (noting that silence from the defendants prevailed, as presiding Auschwitz Trial Judge Hans Hofmeyer remarked, "I have yet to meet anyone who did anything in Auschwitz. . . . The commandant was not there, the officer in charge only happened to be present, the representative of the Political Section only carried lists, and still another one only came with the keys.").

²⁴ In a survey of twenty-two independent reviews of *The Druggist* posted on Amazon.com, every reviewer commented on the impression made by horrific imagery. Most reviewers also commented on Dr. Capesius's lack of remorse.

²⁵ SCHLESAK, *supra* note 1, at 224, and ch. 5 (heading). Schlesak also quotes Albert as saying that "orders are orders," at 179, and there was "no back talk," at 242.

the reader the impression that Albert was mentally ill.²⁶ However, the following testimony from the 1963-65 Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, quoted in the book, provides an insight into how a soldier may have felt forced to work at Auschwitz against his will:

A human reaction in Auschwitz was only possible in the first few hours. After you had been there just a short while, it was impossible to react normally. Because of the duty roster, everyone had some kind of skeleton in his closet. You were trapped, you had to go along.²⁷

This shows that some German soldiers were not aware of what was happening at Auschwitz until they arrived. Once they witnessed executions or gassings in the first few hours, they were complicit and therefore in a dangerous situation. This is particularly true as the war drew to a close; new soldiers would likely be seen as potential witnesses against experienced Auschwitz soldiers. This passage provides one rationale for how the Auschwitz operation perpetuated itself through fear. This dialogue is also valuable because it allows military readers to ponder how they would react upon being transferred to Auschwitz and realizing the nature of the camp mission. However, Schlesak does not develop this line of thought; he only presents it in passing.

A second opportunity for ethical reflection is provided when Dr. Capesius testifies that he assumed what was happening at Auschwitz was legal.²⁸ Clearly, Auschwitz was a criminal enterprise, but Schlesak's testimony is insightful for today's military readers because law has increasingly permeated the conduct of war.²⁹ Today's military readers may have to take action that will later be scrutinized in court. To avoid being wrong about the law, military readers may ponder their legal awareness while working in a combat zone. Again, Schlesak provides this opportunity for ethical reflection through testimony, but he does not develop it with

²⁶ *Id.* at 185, 223, 224. During interviews Albert frequently stutters and spontaneously quotes poems of dubious connection to the conversation. He also taught religion while working at Auschwitz.

²⁷ *Id.* at 247.

²⁸ *Id.* at 104.

Question from the court: "while you were in Auschwitz, did the events taking place there ever seem to you to be illegal?" Answer of the defendant Capesius: "I grew up in Transylvania with a great respect for all things German. . . . My father especially was constantly saying that Germany was the model of order and the rule of law. Given this attitude, I assumed as well that what was going on in Auschwitz was legal"

²⁹ See Colonel Charles Dunlap, Law and Military Interventions: Preserving Humanitarian Values in 21st Century Conflicts (Carr Ctr. for Human Rights Policy, Harvard Kennedy School of Gov't, Workshop Paper, 2001), available at <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/cchp/Web%20Working%20Papers/Use%20of%20Force/Dunlap2001.pdf>.

commentary; he only quotes Dr. Capesius's responses and moves on to a different subject.³⁰

III. Schlesak's Confusing Organization and Questionable Credibility

Schlesak's organization and style make the book difficult to follow for two key reasons: first, the fictional character fails to connect the events into a coherent, logical narrative; and second, Schlesak loses credibility by frequently mixing fiction into the text he asserts is fact.³¹

A. Fictional Character

Per the jacket cover, and not stated in the actual text, Adam Salmen is the fictional character through whom Schlesak tells the Auschwitz story.³² Adam is from the same hometown as Schlesak and Dr. Capesius: Schassburg, Transylvania.³³ Schlesak begins on the first page speaking of Adam in third person so the reader assumes either that Schlesak himself is speaking, or that Schlesak will later clarify who is speaking.³⁴ He never clarifies. Sometimes Adam does speak in first person, and sometimes someone else, presumably Schlesak, speaks in first person.³⁵ Nor does Schlesak consistently use Adam as the narrator; all too often throughout the book, Schlesak changes speakers, leaving the reader confused.³⁶ Normally, the author of a documentary novel uses a fictional character to connect documented parts of a story in a logical or chronological order.³⁷ An effective

³⁰ SCHLESAK, *supra* note 1, at 105.

³¹ "Schlesak's primary point is the horrific reality of the Holocaust. This fact may render stylistic considerations petty and 'beside the point.'" Toll, *supra* note 20. It is also worth noting that given the large number of German words, German cities, and German authors referenced in this translation of Schlesak's book, it is clearly intended for a German audience. Although this is not Schlesak's shortcoming (the book is a translation), this makes it difficult for an English-speaking reader to follow. This reviewer found an encyclopedia helpful to bridge contextual gaps that naturally resulted from unfamiliarity with German words, cities, and authors.

³² SCHLESAK, *supra* note 1, left inside flap. This is highlighted because it is easy to miss; one particular book reviewer, writing for National Public Radio, missed what is hidden in the flap and states, "As his main narrator [Schlesak] uses the testimony of an actual survivor named Adam, one of the Jewish prisoners . . ." Cheuse, *supra* note 16, at 1.

³³ *Id.* at 4 (stating that Adam is the last Jew of Schassburg and discussing Schlesak's visit with Adam at his home).

³⁴ *Id.* at 3.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Peterson, *supra* note 16 ("Too many times it is not sufficiently clear who is speaking."). See also Whipple, *supra* note 16 ("The novel moves around, changing speakers, introducing and discussing an event from the point of view of one person at one point, then later in the book, giving a somewhat different point of view on the same event by a different person.").

³⁷ See OXFORD DICTIONARY OF LITERARY TERMS 95 (3d ed. 2008) (describing "documentary" as including such documentary-style novels as Upton Sinclair's, *The Jungle* (1906)).

example of this technique in the Holocaust genre is found in Elie Wiesel's *Night*.³⁸

In *Night*, Wiesel uses a fictional character, Eliezer, who represents Wiesel, himself a survivor of Auschwitz.³⁹ Eliezer relates his entire Auschwitz experience through his first-person account. The result is a seamless narrative that the reader can easily relate to and follow. In contrast, Schlesak only occasionally uses Adam to connect events; he frequently abandons Adam as narrator and carries on with several pages of witness testimony dialogue or summary, interspersed with brief first-person narrative.⁴⁰ In these passages, when Schlesak returns to Adam, the subject is a new event or topic. The effect is disorienting for the reader and creates gaps the reader must bridge with assumptions. Schlesak's failure to clarify who is speaking, coupled with his failure to consistently use Adam to connect the narrative, make it unnecessarily difficult for the reader to follow the key Auschwitz events he recounts.

B. Credibility

Roughly one third of the book is written in italics, with the remainder in Roman type. An Editor's Note explains that italic type, taken from the original German edition, is used for fictional narrative and Roman type for "quoting either from transcripts . . . or from his own [Schlesak's] interviews."⁴¹ Given the sheer volume of Roman type throughout the book, the Editor's Note gives the reader a strong sense that the book is fully supported with source documents. This impression is strengthened with the inclusion of actual trial testimony, judicial notes, pictures of witnesses, witness statements, and a lengthy "Works Consulted and Cited" bibliography at the end.⁴² However, for the critical reader, this editorial note loses credibility beginning on page one.⁴³ None of the Roman type on page one comes from transcripts or interviews because it is Adam's fictional background.⁴⁴ Five of the first eight pages have lengthy sections of Roman type that are also fictional.⁴⁵

Again, Adam is a fictional character. His conversation with Schlesak and his journal are likewise fictional. Yet Adam's conversations, poems, journal entries, and thoughts are in both Roman and italic type throughout the book.⁴⁶ This invites the critical reader to ponder two questions: What else in Roman type that is not specifically attributed to witness testimony is also fictional commentary? Furthermore, by using this italics/Roman type model, is Schlesak attempting to promote his book as more factual than it really is? The bottom line is that Schlesak undermines his hard work at assembling facts from transcripts, documents, and interviews by inserting fiction in a typeset he asserts is for factual matters.⁴⁷

IV. Conclusion

On one hand, *The Druggist* is an excellent summary of Dr. Capesius's involvement at Auschwitz.⁴⁸ *The Druggist* contains a wealth of imagery, in painful detail, of the horrors of the Holocaust. This imagery successfully impresses upon the reader the reality of what took place at Auschwitz.⁴⁹ Schlesak also demonstrates that Dr. Capesius never showed guilt or remorse for his part in the genocide, which is unsatisfying to many, but unremarkable to attorney-readers. On the other hand, Schlesak misuses his fictional character, making his narrative difficult to follow. Additionally, while it is clear that Schlesak has amassed a wealth of documentary support, he calls his factual credibility into question by misusing a typeface distinction. Ultimately, Schlesak's stylistic problems eclipse his successes, so that this reviewer does not recommend *The Druggist* for a Judge Advocate who is looking for an introduction to Holocaust genre writings. This is particularly true when *The Druggist* is compared to other, easier-to-read Auschwitz accounts readily available.⁵⁰

³⁸ ELIE WIESEL, *NIGHT* ch. 1 (Stella Rodway trans., 2d ed. 1960).

³⁹ *Id.* at vi.

⁴⁰ SCHLESAK, *supra* note 1, at 28, 30–31, 38–44, 176.

⁴¹ *Id.* at vii.

⁴² *Id.* at 119.

⁴³ *Id.* at 3.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 6, 8, 11, 23, 60, 93, 107, 133, 176.

⁴⁷ This is particularly unfortunate because Schlesak actually knew Dr. Capesius. *Id.* at 232. Schlesak's mother also dated Dr. Capesius. *Id.* Therefore, Schlesak is in a position to gather more evidence and shed more light on Dr. Capesius's life than other authors.

⁴⁸ Compare NAUMANN, *supra* note 23 (summarizing evidence and trial testimony of all twenty-two defendants tried during the Auschwitz trials), with SCHLESAK, *supra* note 1, ch. 2 (generally showing that Schlesak's work at collecting documents and witness-related information is far more comprehensive than Naumann's)).

⁴⁹ As noted by Martha Toll, reminding readers of Auschwitz has intrinsic value and may render literary criticism "beside the point." Toll, *supra* note 20.

⁵⁰ See *supra* note 7 (listing notable Auschwitz authors, such as Viktor Frankl, whose book *Man's Search for Meaning* sold over twelve million copies in twenty-four languages, or Elie Wiesel's *Night*, that sold over six million copies).