

August 1944, Oslo

Leopold Tyrmand is just heading for a rendezvous with the resistance movement when he is arrested. Somebody grassed him up. Was it Klimek? Or Babinicz, like in Vilnius? They're transporting him somewhere. When the doors of the prison van open, he sees the boots of German officers, and right behind them – barbed wire and a sign: "Grini Concentration Camp". 'Oh, fuck,' he says in Polish. 'Now I'm sure to be shot.'

September 1944, Grini near Oslo

Lolek is undressing along with the others. After being inspected they are sent to the washroom, and then have to immerse themselves in vats of Lysol disinfectant. Then their heads are shaved. They are stripped of their names, documents, clothes and finally hair – absolutely everything, so that they became an amorphous and nameless mass of prisoners. The prisoners aren't given striped uniforms here, however, but navy-blue ones. Lolek – wearing an armband with the letter "P" – enters the camp, is told to go to barrack no. 19. During the war he found himself among strangers speaking foreign languages in a strange place so many times he learned to act swiftly. For the time being he'd escaped death again, but for how long? After a few metres he's surrounded by a small group of prisoners. It doesn't look like a friendly welcome. Tyrmand clenches his teeth and looks from face to face. 'You,' says the most menacing of them. 'What?' Lolek replies, acting tough. The guy approaches him and asks: 'How are things in Warsaw?' The question defuses the tension. Leopold looks them over and shakes his head, indicating that things are going badly. He's one of them now.

1943, Majdanek Concentration Camp

There's no hope of surviving here, only a faint hope you won't be next. It's difficult to say how many people in all there are in the camp, the number rises and falls. But people keep disappearing without a trace. Mieczysław Tyrmand, Leopold's father, is standing naked among a hundred other prisoners. His head is crawling with lice. A guard walks up to him and says in German: 'You stink. Boots!' [...] After leaving the barrack the same guard materialises in front of him again. 'Boots,' he says threateningly. 'Boots?' Mieczysław repeats and looks at his companions in misery. They've all obediently removed their footwear, but he's

forgotten himself. A cobbler wearing boots. Then they are all driven in a file, then they pass through a gap cut in the fence. They are now beyond Field V. It's a crisp morning. Now they order him to jump into a pit. He's weak at the knees owing to hunger. And so *these* are the trenches that have been dug, so deep you can't see the field from them. Just boots. Hundreds of officers' boots. The trench turns twice, it was dug zigzag. He sees the end of it. A wall of earth. 'Halt!' yells an officer. Mieczysław looks up and now realises that even though he knows the date of his birth, he will never know the date of his death. He doesn't know exactly what day it is. He only knows it's the last day. And now he was shot and will soon die. A moment later another body falls on him. The last thing he sees are the army boots of the German officer standing above the pit. He couldn't have made better ones himself.

Excerpt translated by David French



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MARCEL
WOŹNIAK
Born 1984

Tyrmand. *Pisarz o białych oczach*
[Tyrmand. *The Writer with the White Eyes*]

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Books published
Biografia Leopolda Tyrmanda. Moja śmierć będzie taka, jak moje życie, 2016
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Otcztań, 2018
Mgnienie, 2017
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