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## Extra

### Auschwitz: 1. Suicide – two doctors' accounts

Greg Wilkinson 

Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, and Miklós Nyiszli, a general practitioner and forensic pathologist, recounted in 1946 their respective experiences and observations of earthly hell in *Man's Search For Meaning* and *Auschwitz. A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*.<sup>1,2</sup>

Both shared differing interests in suicide. As a student in Vienna, Frankl organised youth counselling centres to address teenage suicide. After obtaining his MD in 1930, Frankl worked at Steinhof Psychiatric Hospital, Vienna's principal psychiatric hospital – the main site of the Nazi programme of euthanasia and enforced sterilisation – where he was responsible for the treatment of women who were suicidal. Nyiszli studied medicine in Hungary and Germany, graduated from Breslau in 1930, and began working as a general practitioner at home in Transylvania. His Doctoral dissertation was in forensic pathology – the indications of causes of death in suicide – and he also undertook autopsies for the courts and police.

Frankl and Nyiszli were Auschwitz contemporaries, whose versions crystallise the Holocaust, albeit contrasting in style, focus and purpose. Neither mentions the other. The former relates how everyday life in a concentration camp was reflected in the mind of the average prisoner, and influenced his development of logotherapy. The latter declares, 'I write not as a reporter but as a doctor ... in strict accordance with reality and without the slightest exaggeration'.<sup>2</sup>

Nyiszli reports that during his daily visits to the crematorium Sonderkommando (inmate units forced to aid the disposal of gas chamber victims) there was always someone who took him aside and begged him for a swift sure poison – 'I invariably refused';<sup>2</sup> and, their commonest method of taking their own life was an overdose of sleeping tablets, which they had no trouble procuring, for they found large numbers when they went through the belongings of the dead. He adds that hanging and electrocution against the high-tension wires were common.

Frankl says the thought of suicide, born of hopelessness, was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. He made himself a firm promise on his first evening that he would not 'run into the wire ... the most popular method of suicide'.<sup>1</sup> He adds, 'A very strict camp ruling forbade any efforts to save a man who attempted suicide. It was forbidden, for example, to cut down a man who was trying to hang himself. Therefore, it was all important to prevent these attempts from occurring'.<sup>1</sup> He describes individual psychotherapeutic attempts with two would-be suicides: 'In both cases it was a question of getting them to realise that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them'.<sup>1</sup> At a collective level, one evening, invited by the senior block warden to instil hope, at their lowest ebb, his response: 'The purpose of my words was to find a full meaning in our life, then and there, in that hut and in that practically hopeless situation'.<sup>1</sup> Among other encouragements, Frankl quoted Nietzsche '*Was nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker*'.

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