

# Protective Custody: Prisoner 34042

by Susan Cernyak-Spatz; ed. Joel Shatzky. N & S Publishers. New York, 2005.  
282 pp., \$14.95\*

Reviewed by Sanford Gutman

**Susan Cernyak-Spatz** has written a chilling account of her life in three concentration camps: Thereisenstadt, Birkenau, and Ravensbruck. Her story covers the main elements of most Holocaust memoirs, including the horrors of camp life, the role of luck in survival, the interaction of the inmates, and examples of resistance. The book is unique, however, in Cernyak-Spatz's focus on her experience as a woman in the camps and because she does not hide the darkest and most personal parts of her experiences.

The memoir begins with a detailed account of Cernyak-Spatz's life between 1922 and 1936. She came from an assimilated, middle-class family that lived both in Vienna and Berlin, as her family's greeting card business required. Only vaguely aware of the Nazi threat in 1933, Susan Eckestein, as the author was then known, lived comfortably and had many non-Jewish friends.

Only between 1936 and 1938 did Nazi rule begin to impact her happy existence. Her family moved back to Vienna, but Austria's reception of the Nazis, and later Hitler, made it clear that Jews were not welcome. Now, at 16 years old, the author's world began to collapse further. Her family moved to Prague, where they maintained some semblance of normalcy until the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939. Later, in 1939, her father escaped to the United States, but her mother decided to stay in Prague with her lover, keeping the young Cernyak-Spatz with her. In the memoir, the author holds her mother partly responsible (because of her mother's attachment to the extra-

marital affair) for Cernyak-Spatz's later camp experiences.

Between 1939 and the spring of 1942, conditions worsened for the Jews of Prague, but Cernyak-Spatz, her mother, and the mother's lover were able to avoid deportation until the spring of 1942. That year, they were sent to Thereisenstadt. The author paints a relatively favorable picture of Thereisenstadt—of plays, concerts, and falling in love. As she puts it, "it was a wonderful time for me," despite living in a camp run by Nazis. All this changed, however, when she was deported to Birkenau in January of 1943.

The section on Auschwitz-Birkenau and the author's later evacuation to Ravensbruck at the end of the war are the most important and interesting of the memoir. Here, Cernyak-Spatz describes the Nazi selections, roll calls, and other attempts to dehumanize her, and how she managed to maintain her sense of humanity. She attributes her ability to survive to a combination of luck, support from other women, and her own plucky personality. At one point, she audaciously told one of her guards that she was a secretary and could help keep records. Instead of killing her for speaking to him, the guard rewarded her with an office position. At other times, positions in the hospital and Kanada (where the Nazi officials kept the clothing and valuables brought by the inmates), arranged in part by her fellow female inmates, kept the author's spirit alive. This support helped her through such horrific experiences as being raped while working in the hospital, the perpetual feeling of hunger, and her transfer

to Ravensbruck.

If there is a major theme to the memoir, it is that survival depended on having a "family" to help, care for, and connect with. Cernyak-Spatz maintains that women tended to be more nurturing than men and that this helps explain the survival of many women in the camps. This is an argument made by other women survivors as well, but it is hard to demonstrate. The styles of mutual help may simply be different between men and women. Nevertheless, the gender issue is an important one, and Cernyak-Spatz's book makes a very useful contribution to the still scant literature on the life of women in concentration camps.

The memoir ends with her rescue at the end of the war and her marriage to an American soldier, a marriage that did not work out. This chapter is the least satisfactory and seems like an unnecessary footnote to a valuable memoir about life in the camps. Cernyak-Spatz's writing is serviceable and makes easy reading. While it lacks the human insights and beautiful writing of some of the better known Holocaust memoirs, the book is a valuable woman's perspective of camp life and would be a useful counterpoint for high school students to the more widely read *Diary of Anne Frank* or *Night*, by Elie Wiesel. 📖

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\* N & S Publishers is currently in transition. Its present address is c/o Joel Shatzky, 367 Fourth St., Brooklyn, N.Y., 11215. Telephone: 347-223-4573.

