



SS-Gruppenführer Jürgen Stroop watching housing blocks burning during the Warsaw Uprising

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HISTORY

Recollections of an unrepentant Nazi mass murderer

Kazimierz Moczarski shared a cell for 255 days with an SS general. In *Conversations with an Executioner* he recorded what the war criminal said



Roger Boyes, Diplomatic Editor

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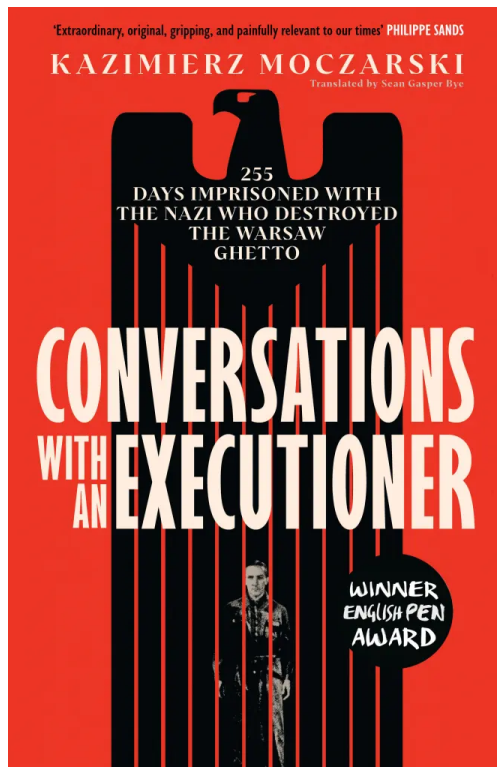
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It was an extraordinary scoop. Kazimierz Moczarski, a trained journalist and ex-law student, had served as an officer in the Polish Home Army, the Armia Krajowa, working mainly in

Europe for the showdown in Berlin.

Moczarski, though, found himself neither a hero nor a celebrated survivor. Rather, when the Germans fled and the Russians moved into Warsaw, he was arrested by the communist secret police, the UB, which had been installed by the Soviet overlords. Like other Home Army officers, he was declared an enemy of the state and jailed for 11 years. During his stretch, he claimed later to have been tortured in 49 different ways.



It must have been quite a relief, then, at least initially, when in March 1949 he was led into a nine-metre cell. His cellmate, Jürgen Stroop, was considered to be one of the most cold-blooded Nazi murderers, the SS equivalent of a general. Stroop had been found guilty of ordering the killing of nine American prisoners of war and was sentenced to death by a US military tribunal. Instead of hanging him themselves, the Americans handed him over to the Poles for the separate crime of

After the initial discomfort, Moczarski grasped that he had been handed the opportunity of a professional lifetime. No one had been confined at close quarters for so long — they shared a cell for nearly nine months — with a war criminal ready to talk, even boast about his crimes. Moczarski realised he had the chance to interrogate a war criminal not as a prosecutor but as a chronicler. Others have, of course, conducted close-up interrogations of mass murderers — Gitta Sereny's 1974 book *Into That Darkness* stands out — but Moczarski's probing is different.

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First, a man like Stroop, who knows he cannot escape the noose, is less likely to dodge awkward truths. Second, the prolonged intimacy of sharing a small death cell for 255 days and nights, sleeping on pallets on the floor, taking turns to do the cleaning, created a different kind of interviewing atmosphere. "Their behaviour," says the book's remarkable translator, Sean Gasper Bye, "was guided by a prisoners' code of honour that demanded equality, confidentiality and a degree of mutual respect."

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Sereny's biography of Franz Stangl, the former SS commandant of the Sobibor and Treblinka extermination camps, was based on 70 hours of face-to-face interviews in 1971. Moczarski, by contrast, found himself drifting in and out of conversation with Stroop. The result: a portrait of a true believer, an ardent follower of Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler, but also one who saw Nazi membership as a way of clambering up.

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Stroop emerged from the First World War having lost his virginity to a Romanian milkmaid and with a smattering of vocational training as a military map-maker, but otherwise with little distinction. He was a senior sergeant with an Iron Cross, inferior in grade to the one awarded to Hitler. The story he told Moczarski was one of postwar reinvention: he adopted a poseur's monocle, wore polished boots and developed a taste for horse-riding and for the mannerisms of an officer class to which he did not belong. He married (despite his Catholic upbringing) the daughter of an intellectual Protestant priest.

Jewish civilians are held at gunpoint by SS troops during the Warsaw Uprising

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Stroop, who saw himself as a model of Nordic purity, rose inside the SS with a speed he would never have achieved in the regular army. Himmler had an eye on him and made sure that he was promoted to SS-Hauptsturmführer (the equivalent of captain). Stroop immediately went out to buy a new uniform and had a cobbler run him up a new pair of leather boots. When they gave him a blister at a party rally, he bawled the man out, accusing him of sabotage.

Moczarski did not let proximity to his subject become sympathy. For the most part, Stroop, who for years had only had a low-ranking German policeman from the vice squad for company in his cell, wanted to share his often deranged views about the world with the literate Polish officer. The Catholic Church, he told Catholic Moczarski, had been in league with Masonic orders to destroy Germany. Christianity is, he said, echoing his mentor Himmler, a “Jewish inspiration”. As for Christ, he had been blond, his mother having been impregnated by a soldier of the Germanic tribes. The brainwashing of the Nazis did not disappear after Hitler’s suicide in the bunker.

Plainly, Moczarski came to see his time with Stroop less as an intriguing opportunity for a writer trying to explain the workings of a homicidal mind and more as an extension of the torture process that he had been enduring at the hands of the communists. But there was one massacre that needed explanation before Stroop was led to the scaffold: the planning and twisted logic behind the slaughter of the Warsaw Jews.

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In early 1943, Stroop was ordered to travel to Lviv in what is now western Ukraine. The ghetto there had been dissolved – Stroop used the old Nazi euphemisms “resettlement”, “special treatment”, “resolving the question” in his conversations with Moczarski – and it was up to the SS officer to organise the clean-up operation. That is, to liquidate thousands of Jews in the province of Galicia and set up 25 Jewish labour camps, so-called Julags (*Judenlager*). Stroop’s ambition was to use this captive labour force to build a motorway across the expanse of Ukraine. “For as long as I was in Lviv, the Jewish road-prisoners were happy, and Heinrich Himmler kept postponing the intended liquidation of those camps.”

prisoners were literally working themselves to death while the SS pocketed their notional wages. But Moczarski also wanted to get on to the key point: that Berlin was so impressed by what Stroop was doing in southern Poland, it told him to head for Warsaw and finish off the Jewish ghetto there. That meant another promotion, to the equivalent of an SS general.

Moczarski's role slipped from sober, even respectful listener and became more engaged, while Stroop talked increasingly like a skilled administrator of industrial-scale murder. "We never organised pogroms," Stroop boasted. "Only barbarians behaved that way." That may be true, Moczarski said, in the sense that pogroms were often acts of collective insanity. By contrast, "your operations were planned in cold blood, worked out in detail, underpinned with Aryan platitudes and implemented on a large scale, at every stage".

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Kazimierz Moczarski in 1956

ARCHIWUM ELZBIETY MOCZARSKIEJ/FOTONOVA

The tension between the two prisoners grew as Stroop relished the memory of what he still considered a job well done. He recalled, at the end of a hard day in which flame-throwers had been blasted at Jews in hiding, tucking into steak and pommes frites, washed down with a glass of burgundy, and lighting up an Egyptian cigarette. He rang Himmler in Berlin ("who says in a soft and pleasant voice that I hadn't let him down") and it is clear that he considered the elimination of the "sub-humans" in the ghetto to be a career high.

Again and again, as Stroop described the flame-throwers turned on the already rickety tenement buildings of the ghetto, Moczarski appealed to the SS officer's buried sense of humanity. "Did you never pity their young lives?" the Pole asked. Stroop was silent, jaw clenched. "Praise be what hardens," he said eventually, quoting Nietzsche. "*Gelobt sei, was hart macht.*"

He remembered how his SS troopers threw grenades into Jewish cellars, waiting for the children to emerge. "There was one case I saw," he said. "First we pulled out the mother. Semi-conscious,

torture.

In November 1949, Moczarski was removed from the cell and the physical torture resumed; this time new nightmares had been added to his time in solitary confinement. In 1952 he was sentenced to death. That was commuted in 1953 – the year that Stalin died – to prison for life. The authorities did not relay that information to him for two years. Only a general amnesty in 1956 set him free, after he had served 11 years behind bars. Stroop, meanwhile, had been hanged four years earlier.

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Throughout that limbo Moczarski tried to cling on to the tens of thousands of words that had been relayed to him by Stroop. No paper, no pen was permitted in prison. Stroop's testimony had to be locked in his head. The book is compelling, even now, but sometimes has to be read as an early example of New Journalism. Sometimes Moczarski makes no bones about

As for the feat of memory, it is not unique. The Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn used broken matches to count lines of verse that he composed in his head. Catholic Lithuanians imprisoned in the gulag used rosary beads to remember texts they had composed. Moczarski set it all down before he died in 1975. The communist authorities published it two years later, but only in a censored version. When the communist regime fell, an uncensored version was published in Poland. This has now been brilliantly translated by Sean Gasper Bye for publication in the UK. It's a book that won't leave you alone, which will gnaw at you like a prison rat.

***Conversations with an Executioner: 255 Days Imprisoned with the Nazi who Destroyed the Warsaw Ghetto* by Kazimierz Moczarski, trans Sean Gasper Bye (Duckworth pp480 £25). To order a copy go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](https://www.timesbookshop.co.uk). Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members**

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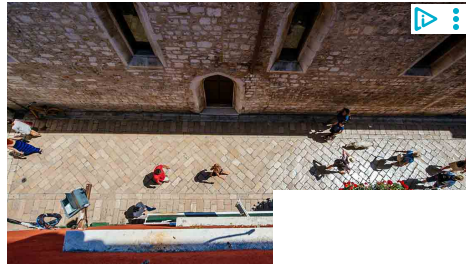
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