

ALEXANDER  
ALTMANN  
A10567

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**SUZY ZAIL**



**black dog books**

First published in 2014  
by  **black dog books**,  
an imprint of Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd  
Locked Bag 22, Newtown  
NSW 2042 Australia  
www.walkerbooks.com.au

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Zail, Suzy, author

Alexander Altmann A10567 / Suzy Zail.

ISBN: 978 1 922179 99 9 (paperback)

For children.

Subjects: Horses – Juvenile fiction.

World War, 1939-1945 – Juvenile fiction.

A823.4

Cover images: horse silhouette © iStockphoto.com/Canterk; black horse

© iStockphoto.com/flyparade

Typeset in Bembo

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press



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*For Fred Steiner, A10567*

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# Chapter 1

Alexander Altmann stood in the dusty grey square, sweating. He looked up at the sun and guessed it was midday. His stomach growled. If he was home, his mother would be calling him to come in for lunch. He felt his eyes start to well. "Stop it," he said under his breath. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself." He wiped his nose on his sleeve and waited for his number to be called. He didn't need to look down at his arm at the number tattooed onto his skin. He knew it by heart. A10567.

The last time he'd heard his name was five weeks ago, maybe six. He hadn't recognised his mother when she'd called out to him. Her head had been shaved and she wore mismatched shoes and a tattered dress that gaped at the neck and, for the first time

since he'd stepped off the train, Alexander realised what he must look like.

“Alex!” she'd cried, clinging to the barbed wire fence that separated the men's camp from the women's barracks. “Alex! It's me.” They'd fed their fingers through the gaps in the wire and Alexander remembered feeling elated, and then sick to the stomach when he realised his sister wasn't with her.

He tried to banish the memory and make his mind go blank. He was used to blue skies and green fields, to nickering horses and the sound of the wind rustling the leaves. Not the sound of guns. He listened for the whistling wind and the buzz of insects, but when he opened his eyes the sky above Birkenau was still dirty with smoke and all he could hear was the brutal sound of men shouting and dogs barking.

“Caps off!” An SS guard drew a rubber baton from his belt. Alexander pulled his cap from his head and cursed silently.

“Caps on!”

Alexander set the blue and white cap back on his head and grumbled to himself. *What was the point of having prisoners do endless drills that sapped their energy?* Then a boy, two rows up, collapsed and Alexander realised – that was the point.

“Caps off.” The guard stopped before an old man



clutching his stomach. “Caps off!” he shouted, spit gathering at the corners of his mouth. The man raised a birdlike arm but the guard was faster, knocking the old man’s striped cap from his head. Alexander watched the man stoop to pick it up and saw the guard smile and reach for his gun. Alexander clenched his fists and dug his nails into the soft skin of his palms until the pain blunted all thought. The first time he’d seen a man shot, he’d stiffened with fear and turned away from the slumped body, his heart hammering so hard he was afraid the guards would hear it.

Later that same day, when he watched a guard kick a man to the ground for walking too slowly, his fear turned to anger. Anger was better, but it was still dangerous. Looking down at the old man’s bleeding body, limp as a sack of feed, Alexander took his fury and bottled it up with all the other dangerous thoughts that could get him killed.

*I have to get tougher*, he told himself. *No, not tougher, harder. Numb.* Being strong didn’t help. Not when the guards had guns and whips. Any one of them could walk up to him, stick a gun to his head and pull the trigger. And there was nothing he could do about it; no way to stop them, no matter how strong he was. Alexander looked down at theropy muscles along his arms. He’d been strong once. Almost as strong as his

father who had legs like tree trunks. Alexander wiped the sweat from his forehead with the heel of his hand and wondered whether he'd recognise his father if he saw him. He looked down at his boots. They were his father's boots. After the Hungarian police had marched his father from their farm with his hands tied behind his back, Alexander had fled to the stable and found his father's old riding boots by the back door. He was only ten at the time and they'd been too big for him so he'd put them in a box and hidden them at the back of his cupboard. Four years later they were still two sizes too big, but they were the first thing he'd pulled on when the police stormed the farm a second time. He'd worn them ever since, keeping them by his head when he slept at night so they wouldn't be stolen. The worn leather carried his father's scent and the smell of the stables and it made him feel a little less alone.

"A10567."

"*Yavol.*" Alexander stepped forwards. He'd heard his number called dozens of times since coming to Birkenau, but he still felt the sting of it, every time. The guard with the clipboard who'd called his number didn't look up, just moved his pen further down the page.

The band tuned their instruments and, as the first

of the labour units filed back into camp through the main gate, the conductor tapped his baton on his stand. The man had a faded cap on his head and a black space where a tooth had once been, but his eyes were still bright and his movements quick. Alexander had heard that the band members slept on beds with straw pallets and received extra rations. That they ate cheese with their bread and drank water when they were thirsty. Alexander could rope a cow from fifty metres and come to a sliding-stop on a horse from a flat-out gallop but he couldn't play the violin if his life depended on it. He stared at the conductor and tried not to hate him. I need to work, he thought. If I'm of use to the Nazis, I'll be fed.

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The returning prisoners trudged through the gate in time to the music, their heads bent low, skin stretched over bone. The stronger ones carried the dead. They stacked the bodies like bits of rotten wood and fell into line to be counted. No one pitied those who had died. Alexander wondered if the men closest to the bodies saw them at all, or just saw through them, to the pockets they might empty or the boots they might steal. Maybe they were all numb. Maybe the only prisoners who continued to draw breath in Birkenau were those without a heart.

A German officer in a black uniform glanced

onto a podium and shouted for sixty men to replace the quarry workers who'd died that day. No one volunteered. Quarry workers usually didn't last more than a week. The guards plucked the stronger looking inmates from the line and sent them to stand beside the men who worked the quarry. The officer in the black uniform glanced up from his notes and instructed his guards to collect a cook, two tailors and a bricklayer to replace the men in those units who had died. Hands flew up but Alexander's arm remained by his side. If he were older, if he were an accountant or a carpenter, if he knew how to cook or sew or weld, he could avoid the quarry and secure a place in a labour detail that worked indoors.

Alexander wanted to work. He was used to working. *Make yourself useful*, his father used to say, and Alexander would rush from the farmhouse to the stable to muck out the stalls or water the horses. Water. Alexander licked his lips. They were cracked and dry and tasted of blood. He needed water. He looked down at his grubby hands and dusty pants. Alexander hadn't showered in five weeks. Not since that first day in Birkenau. He shuddered, recalling the cool water that had dripped from the rusted pipes and the laughter of the naked men as they kissed each other's cheeks when the first drop fell. He hadn't

understood their strange reaction – not until later that night in the barrack when he asked the block leader if he knew where the children from the trains had been sent.

“I have a sister.” He choked on the last word as the Polish guard grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to the door.

“There are two types of shower blocks in Birkenau.” The Pole grimaced. “The one you were sent to where you get wet and the other one ...” he pointed at a grey brick building hidden behind a stand of fir trees, “... where you don’t.”

“I don’t understand,” Alexander said, regretting the words as soon as he’d spoken them.

“Gas.” The block leader spat the word at Alexander. “They use gas.”

Alexander and the remaining men were marched back to their block. Another trainload of Hungarians had been squeezed into his barrack during rollcall and Alexander pushed past them to wait in line for his dinner. He hadn’t eaten since midday and the watery soup he’d swallowed for lunch only intensified his hunger so that it tore at him. He heard a voice behind him ask “Where are you from?” but he didn’t turn around.

“I’m from Medzev,” the boy persisted. Alexander

rolled his eyes. The new boys were all the same. They were looking for an ally, for someone to help them make sense of their surroundings. There was nothing he could say to make sense of this place. The SS wanted them dead. It didn't make sense, but they had guns, so it didn't have to.

Alexander stepped away from the boy, loosened his belt and unhooked his bowl. His hunger was vicious. When he reached the front of the line he held out his bowl and the block leader dropped a brick of grey bread and a sliver of sausage onto it.

Alexander sat on the floor, cross-legged. The block leader handed out the last of the bread and turned to face the men sprawled on the ground.

“I'm your block leader.” He addressed the new inmates. “They call me ‘Bloody Mietek’.”

Alexander had heard the speech dozens of times but it still felt like the block leader was directing the words at him.

“You'll find out why.” Mietek spoke through his teeth. He was an ugly, small man with clay-coloured eyes and a crooked nose and Alexander wondered whether his sadistic streak had anything to do with his jagged left ear, which Alexander guessed had been torn away in a fight, leaving just a nub of flesh.

“There are only two things to remember in this

barrack.” Mietek smiled, revealing yellow teeth. “One: do as I tell you. And two: don’t try to escape. The only way out of here is through the chimney.” The boy from Medzev looked confused and, for a moment, Alexander felt bad about how he’d treated him and wondered whether he should pull the boy aside later and talk to him: explain the showers that leaked gas and the smoke from the ovens. But then the boy would think that Alexander wanted to be his friend and Alexander didn’t want friends. Not when there was every chance that tomorrow, when he woke up, they’d be gone.

Bloody Mietek threw down needles, thread and a bundle of cloth, and instructed the new men to take two triangles of coloured fabric and a rectangle of material with their number printed on it and sew the patches onto their jackets. The triangles were all yellow. Jews wore two yellow triangles, sewn together to form a Star of David, like the one Alexander had been forced to wear back home. There were other colours in the camp. Alexander had seen pink, black and violet triangles. The man Alexander had slept beside last week wore a red triangle on his shirt. He’d told Alexander to watch out for the green triangles. They were the professional criminals: the thieves, arsonists and murderers. Mietek wore a green triangle.

“Welcome to your new home.” The block leader let the men take in their surroundings. The inmates looked at the three tier plank beds. There were no mattresses on the boards, just bits of straw that smelled like dung and thin, grey blankets. The walls were bare and the floor was grimy. A chimney flue ran the length of the barrack which was bookended by the block leader’s room at one end and a row of containers smeared with excrement at the other.

“Enjoy your stay.” He snatched a plank of wood from beside the door. “Now get outside.” He swung at the nearest man and Alexander ran for the door. Men rushed to escape the block leader’s reach, tripping over each other as they fled outside. Alexander reached the latrine hut, found an empty hole in the concrete slab, pulled down his pants and sat down on the bench. Even though it was summer, the floor was slimy with mud and the room was damp.

“*Scheissen!*” Mietek commanded, lowering his stick. It was hard to shit on command, sitting shoulder to shoulder with the next frightened man. Especially when your stomach was empty, but it would be hours before he would be allowed back to the latrines, so Alexander tried.

“You finished yet?” The man staring down at Alexander reached out to nudge him. Alexander



kicked out at the man and he moved down the line, rubbing his shin. There were only fifty-eight holes bored into the concrete bench, five minutes to do your business and hundreds of men. Fights broke out and the stronger men won. The man who'd nudged Alexander was tussling an older prisoner for an empty seat, three holes down. Alexander covered his ears and tried to block out the shouting and the sound of men straining to empty their bowels and, beyond the hut, the sound of dogs barking and guns firing. He craved quiet but there was nowhere in the camp where he could hide from the noise. There wasn't enough room or enough food, he thought, standing to wipe himself with a scrap of lining torn from his jacket. There were too many people, too many Nazis and dogs and guns, too much noise.

Back in Hungary, Alexander had avoided Košice's busy city streets, preferring the countryside's gaping spaces and endless sky. Part of him had been relieved when the order came that Jews weren't allowed to continue at school. He'd grown tired of the taunting and the banners decorated with swastikas which lined the streets. He hated the blaring loudspeakers strung from lampposts and the signs that read: *Jews not allowed*. He loathed being trapped indoors, behind a desk, when all he wanted to do was ride his horse into

the hills. And here I am, he thought, trapped behind barbed wire. He leaned over a rusted basin, washed the stains from his square of lining and walked back to the barrack.

Mietek turned the lights out and the men climbed onto their bunks. The boy next to Alexander closed his eyes and slept. Alexander didn't say goodnight. There was always someone in the barrack who didn't wake up the next day. So why say goodnight, he thought, when what you really mean is goodbye. Alexander turned away from the boy and stared at the wall. The wooden barrack had once been a horse stable and Alexander could still see the rings on the walls where the horses had been tethered. He'd slept in a stable before, the night his workhorse, Sari, had given birth to her foal, but the room had been warm and had smelled of leather and oats.

Alexander lay on the splintered wood, fighting sleep. He hadn't had a full night's sleep since the day he'd arrived in Birkenau. Every time he slipped into sleep, he saw his sister disappear into a grey brick building: the shower block where you didn't get wet. He wished he had a photograph of Lili, so he could look at his sister when he woke. A photo of her smiling face so he could banish her screams. Just one picture of the family so he could remember

his mother's dark eyes, his father's crooked smile and his sister's blonde curls. There were nights he missed them so badly that the only thing he could do to stop himself crying out was to dig his nails into his palms. He unfurled a hand and traced the small crescent-shaped scars carved into his skin until his eyes grew heavy and sleep pulled him under.



*“Steh auf!”*

Alexander woke to the sharp sound of a whistle and Mietek's mean voice.

The block leader grabbed his plank of wood and Alexander leaped from his bunk. He didn't need to dress; he slept in his clothes. Breakfast was a cup of coffee. It tasted rank but it was hot and wet so Alexander drank it. The block leader threw out a handful of beet peels and ten men threw themselves on the scraps.

“Time for muster!” Mietek swung his plank at the nearest body. Alexander ran for the door and fell into line for the walk to the rollcall square. Another blue sky day, he thought, another day staring down the barrel of a gun and daring himself to hold its gaze.

“Don't let her know you're scared,” his father had

said to him the first time Alexander had sat on Sari's back. He was three. Sari was five: a gentle, hard-working mare with big kind eyes. Still, he'd been frightened when he'd felt the animal under him. It was one thing to climb onto the fence railing and pat the horse's brown mane, or sit in the milk cart beside his father and watch Sari's ears flick backwards and forwards as she trotted along. But another altogether to climb onto her broad back and feel her muscles shift under him.

Don't show the bastards you're scared.

Alexander stood in the baking heat and waited for the men to form their labour units. Caps on. Caps off. Men collapsing around him. Lunch was a bowl of gritty cabbage soup. Alexander tipped his bowl and licked it clean. He'd learned not to gulp down his meals. He drank slowly, paying attention to every sliver of cabbage, fixing his mind on the way the broth felt sliding down his parched throat. He'd been on his feet for six hours, had fifteen minutes for lunch, and here he was again, back under the mean sun, fighting his hunger and fear. He blotted the sweat from his face with his sleeve and counted down the hours until dinner.

When the labour units filed back into camp, the guard in the black uniform took the podium, cleared

his throat and ran through the list of skilled workers needed to replace the day's dead. He called for three carpenters, a chemist, two mechanics and a metal worker. Men edged forwards and raised their hands. Alexander toed the dirt and waited for the whistle that marked the end of evening rollcall. His thirst was fierce and his stomach hurt. The block of bread he'd demolished the previous night lay in his stomach like a stone.

The guard tucked his clipboard under his arm and scanned the faces of the men assembled below him. "... horses."

Alexander lifted his head as he caught the end of the sentence. Three arms shot up in front of him. Had he heard right? After six weeks of rollcalls, waiting and watching, while other boys, smarter boys, more skilled boys, left his barrack for beds with clean sheets, had the guard spoken of horses?

Alexander looked up at the guard's face, at his lips, frozen into a grimace, and willed him to speak. To repeat what he'd said so Alexander could be sure. The man pointed to each of the men in turn, and waved them from the line.

"That's three of you. We need four men experienced with horses. Anyone else?"

Alexander's hand flew up just as the man beside

him raised his arm. The guard turned to look at Alexander and the prisoner beside him. He pointed a stubby finger and cleared his throat.

“You. Fourth from the end. We’ll take you!”

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