A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps: My Mother’s Memories of Imprisonment, Immigration and a new life by Barbara Rylko-Bauer. University of Oklahoma Press, 400 pp., $26.95. The subject of this riveting publication was 89 years old before her daughter, a medical anthropologist, began the years-long interviewing process providing the biographic core of this book. Unlike most survivors of concentration camps, she was not a Jew but a Catholic Pole. Her story is unfamiliar, yet not unique. A young physician living in the city of Lodz, she was arrested in 1943 by the Germans as suspect in resistance activities. She then became successively a prisoner in three different concentration camps, “a slave doctor” to Jewish women slave workers “in the vast economy of forced labor that fueled the Nazi war machine, a survivor of a forty-two day death march” (p.5), a displaced person in Germany and finally a refugee in Detroit. “The new life” of the sub-title denying her the possibility of practicing medicine, she spent many years as a nurse’s assistant. The loss of her profession became the major regret of her life. Medicine, luck, personal discipline, and ingenuity had helped her survive. Throughout her focus was narrow, on what she knew from direct experience. She did not think back with hatred or demands of revenge. In Detroit the “the book was closed;” the author learned little of her parents’ lives. Here she provides supportive documentation for her mother’s account, as well as more on the German rule: the treatment of Slaves as inferior beings yet claiming some of them as “Volksdeutch,” descendants of Germans settled in the East, as women who might bear “German” children in the Lebensborn, the Nazi breeding program. The book as a whole is a warning against easy generalizations. Much of the larger story is lost when we think we’ve heard it all before.

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