

A memoir of Auschwitz

Friday 26 August 2022, by [ROSDOLSKY Roman](#) (Date first published: 10 May 2022).

On May 8-9, we in [Спільне / Commons](#) Journal often reposted memories about Auschwitz by Roman Rosdolsky, one of Ukraine's most prominent Marxists. He was imprisoned by the Germans for helping the Jews, but he was lucky to survive.

This is a translation of memoirs in English by John-Paul Himka – <https://ukrainesolidaritycampaign.org/2020/01/27/auschwitz-70th-anniversary-a-memoir-by-roman-rostdolsky/>

Next is a short quote from his memoirs and an important story about his life and work.

"It was in the camp, on Sunday, after lunch. A group of prisoners were lying on their bunks and talking about the end of the war, which they expected was approaching. A young Pole, Kazik, turned to an older prisoner, whom everyone called "the professor," and asked him:

"Professor, what will happen to Auschwitz after the war?"

"What do you think should happen? answered "the professor." "We'll go home."

"Don't talk nonsense, professor," said Kazik. "No one here will get out alive."

"That's true," said the professor. "But, still, the living should not abandon hope [words of the Polish poet Juliusz Stowacki]! And as for Auschwitz itself, the new Poland will build a great museum here and for years delegations from all of Europe will visit it. On every stone, on every path, they'll lay a wreath: because each inch of this earth is soaked with blood. And later, when the barracks collapse, when the roads are overgrown with grass and when they have forgotten about us, there will be new and even worse wars, and even worse bestialities. Because humanity stands before two possibilities: either it comes up with a better social order or it perishes in barbarism and cannibalism."

The unfortunate professor was only repeating the words already spoken by the socialist thinker Friedrich Engels 80 years ago. I had heard them several times before the war. But in the bunks of Auschwitz they sounded more real and more correct than ever in the past. And who today, after all the Auschwitz's, Kolymas, and atom bombs, can doubt the truth of these words?"

Almost all of Rosdolsky's comrades with whom he worked in the Communist Party of Western Ukraine died in the horrors of those years. Some of them were killed by the Nazis, others by the Stalinists. Rozdolsky could also have died many times.

He had to flee Vienna from the Austro-fascists, then from Lviv from the Soviets, but he was able to pass even through Auschwitz and not die. Rosdolsky not only managed to survive, but also emigrated to the United States and continued his research work.

The first topic he undertook was a critique of the texts of Marx and Engels, written during the Spring of Nations in 1848. In those texts, Engels wrote horrible xenophobic things about the Slavic

peoples who did not support the revolution.

Rosdolsky defended his dissertation on this topic in 1929 in Vienna, in which he tried to justify Engels. But after going through World War II and seeing what the Nazis were doing, he changed his mind dramatically.

Rosdolsky completely rewrote his text. In fact, he wrote a new work that completely refuted his own dissertation. Rosdolsky criticized Marx and Engels from their own methodological positions. You have to have a lot of intellectual courage and honesty to do that.

Rosdolsky argued that on a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm “Marx and Engels abandoned, with regard to East Central Europe, a cardinal aspect of their own materialist method: the rigorous class analysis of historical phenomena. Unable to come to grips with the class contradictions of the revolution, with the class basis of the Austrian Slavs’ counter-revolutionary conduct, Marx and Engels had to explain this conduct by means of something from outside, “exoteric” to, their materialist method. They thus reached back into their Hegelian past and made new use of Hegel’s altogether idealist conception of “nonhistoric” peoples to explain the reactionary behaviour of the Austrian Slavs”

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03017609108413334>

It is significant that Rosdolsky could not publish his work (Engels and the “Nonhistoric” Peoples) for many years because left-wing publishers feared that criticism of Marx and Engels, even from Marxist positions, would pour water on the enemy’s mill.

He managed to publish it only after his magnum opus, *The Making of Marx’s Capital*, was published. Later, when Himka translated the work from German into English, many publishers also refused to publish it.

Finally, I would like to say to those Western leftists who do not want to admit their mistakes. Don’t worry, even Marx and Engels fucked up when they wrote about Eastern Europe without understanding the local context.

Roman Rosdolsky

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P.S.

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