

De Volkskrant
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08-02-2025

Anyone who starts reading Bert Natter's gruesome novel about a concentration camp will not be able to stop

In *At the End of the War*, Bert Natter describes a single day and night in a concentration camp that closely resembles Ravensbrück. The effect of this relentless, multi-layered prose is hypnotic.

Novels that open with a long list of characters can be quite intimidating; you anticipate an annoying back-and-forth between the densely populated pages and the overview at the beginning—who *is* this person again? *At the End of the War*, the extensive novel by Bert Natter (1968), starts with a list of 31 characters. *However*, that number quickly dwindles, and by the end—630 pages later—less than half remain. A disturbing realization: what happened to all those people?

A glance at the time and place in this novel reveals enough: April 20, 1945, in a concentration camp that strongly resembles Ravensbrück. In this camp, located 90 kilometers north of Berlin, around 132,000 (mostly political) prisoners were held between 1939 and 1945—primarily women (but also men) from Poland, Russia, Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. At Ravensbrück, they were imprisoned, raped, tortured, starved, subjected to forced labor and medical experiments, and murdered.

The Nazi Staff

How exactly this ‘worked’ is detailed in Natter’s novel—literally—since the focus is on the Nazi staff: what they do, how, with whom, and what motivates them. The most significant role belongs to SS-Obersturmführer Karl Zehlendorf, a classic Nazi—the kind who idolizes Beethoven while simultaneously sending as many Jews as possible to the gas chamber. His meticulously kept archive, in which he records his efficiency with precision, is something he considers “*a masterpiece that he had once hoped, at a festive moment, to present personally to the Reichsführer-SS, bound in a beautifully calligraphed cover.*”

That, to his bitter dismay, will never happen, as the Red Army is approaching—the sounds of their advance already audible in the distance. Panicked orders arrive from Berlin: burn all evidence of inhumane practices, evacuate the prisoners, blow up the gas chambers. Because: “*You can bet there will be tribunals.*”

But first, Hitler’s birthday *must* be celebrated with a grand party at the Kommandantur. Obersturmführer Zehlendorf has been given a distinguished task: performing Beethoven’s *Sonata Pathétique* on the confiscated Bechstein piano. It might just be his first step toward post-war life—perhaps a career as a concert pianist, something he has secretly always dreamed of.

Extremely inconvenient, then, that he faces so many obstacles. His wife Christine does nothing but complain about the miserable place she’s forced to live in. His secretary, Rita, is so seductive that he *must* assault her. Camp doctor Lancelot Weitze cannot be trusted (where has all the *dental gold* gone that Herr Doktor extracted from prisoners’ mouths?). His driver, Herbert, is sluggish, and the maid, Annemarie, is insolent. To make matters worse, Zehlendorf’s 11-year-old son, Ernst, has gone missing.

What follows is a horrific night of frantic searching for Ernst, while the approaching Russian threat grows ever greater and everyone inside and around the camp becomes increasingly aware that the end is near.

A Hypnotic Book

Bert Natter has long been recognized among literary connoisseurs as an excellent writer. His novels *Remington* and *Goldberg* (both from 2015) were well received, but he has never reached a large audience. The question is whether that will change with a brick of a book about a concentration camp. Yet, I wouldn't rule it out: *At the End of the War* is hypnotic—at times, it reminded me of *The Remembered Soldier* by Anjet Daanje: relentless prose that grabs you by the throat.

Natter has made two significant literary choices that deeply impact the reading experience. First, the novel covers only a single day and night, described in meticulous detail—there are no time jumps. A typical reader, moving through this densely packed book at about thirty pages per hour, will spend roughly as much time reading as the events themselves last—a strange, real-time experience.

Second, the perspective constantly shifts between characters, from the highest-ranking Nazi to the Jewish prisoner working in the gas chamber. The unfolding story is fragmented into mini-chapters (some just a few lines long), each presenting a different viewpoint on the camp and its events. These sections are consistently titled with the character's name and location: "*Eva in front of the Schreibstube*," "*Emanuel at the main gate*," "*Gisele in the gas chamber*." This structure keeps the 24-hour timeframe moving at a brisk pace.

Like a War Film

Natter has also *boldly* amplified everything: the sadistic prison guard Eva Deutz, with her falsely friendly face, "*through which her wickedness glows like the eternal fires of hell*." The Nazis who, in true cinematic fashion, pivot sharply on their heels like characters in an American war movie. The exhausted camp orchestra, weaving its way through drunken soldiers while playing cheerful marching music. Deportation lists fluttering through the air, snarling guard dogs, and three escaped capuchin monkeys scurrying between the barracks.

At times, the book is shamelessly sentimental—the camp doctor, after yet another atrocity, recalls the faces of his children ("*Petertje and Paultje*"), "*who would never believe he was capable of this*." At other times, it is darkly humorous—like Zehlendorf cautiously opening a bathroom door after an unbearable stench: "*No one in the hall. Sometimes, luck is on your side*."

All in all, every possible literary device is unleashed—the *Sonata Pathétique* of Beethoven played at full volume. Perhaps this is necessary to keep the reader engaged with a subject from which one might otherwise turn away. And it *works*. Once you start reading, you *cannot* stop—which in itself feels somewhat uncomfortable. Are we indulging in all this horror? Is it *right* to present such atrocities in such a gripping way? Or was the reality of the camps so grotesque and absurd that Natter simply had no choice but to write it this way? I fear the latter—that aside from the names, Natter had to invent very little; if anything, he has merely condensed events.

A Middle Finger to the Nazis

In that sense, the novel is also, paradoxically, a middle finger to the Nazis. We read about everything they spent the entire book trying to destroy: the truth. But who determines what truth is? The character who is speaking? The best liar? The highest-ranking officer? The writer?

This is the novel's central question: truth as a fluid concept, embodied in the mystery of what happened to the innocent boy, Ernst. His older brother Reinhart lies about their final moments together, thinking to himself, "*his lie will become the truth.*" When the maid expresses doubts about his story, Zehlendorf dismisses her: "*You are not in a position to determine what is true and what is not.*" Three times, a prisoner attempts to tell the Obersturmführer the truth about his son, and each time, their words are lost to violence.

Truth is shot, gassed, burned—transformed, you might say, into the one universal truth: death. A bleak, defeatist conclusion. Or does the story offer another outcome? It is this additional layer—carefully constructed by Natter—that makes *At the End of the War* far more than just a collection of atrocities. There is something for the reader to uncover—somewhere in the filth, truth glimmers.