



**ADAPTATION AND RECEPTION STUDIES IN LIFE WRITING:
STAGING *OLGA'S ROOM* IN A LONDON THEATER**

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ABSTRACT

Adaptation is usually situated at the margins of comparative studies of literature and media, despite its increasing practice in popular culture. Moreover, adaptation studies often approach producers as the main agents concerning issues of fidelity to original texts. It is a position that ironically reinforces a derivative condition that marginalizes adaptation. In an attempt to approximate adaptation to a more central position and to acknowledge interactions between producer-text-audience, this article aims to explore reception of a staged play by analysing online theater reviews for well-known English newspapers and magazines. The play *Olga's Room*, originally written in German by Dea Loher in 1992, was translated a decade later and performed in an alternative London theater in 2013.

Keywords: Adaptation studies. Performance studies. Comparative literature. Life writing. Reception studies.

RESUMO

Apesar do uso crescente de práticas de adaptação nos meios de cultura popular, a ideia de adaptação ainda se encontra às margens dos estudos comparativos de literatura e mídia. Além disso, estudos literários sobre adaptação usualmente focalizam autor/produtor como sendo o agente responsável em questões de fidelidade em relação ao texto original. Ironicamente esta abordagem acaba reforçando uma condição derivativa e secundária que marginaliza a prática de adaptação nos estudos literários. Numa tentativa de resgatar a prática de adaptação e trazê-la para o centro de debates e reconhecer interações entre produtor-texto-audiência, este artigo explora a recepção de uma peça traduzida do alemão para o inglês e encenada num teatro alternativo em Londres em 2013. A peça em estudo é *Olga's Room* (*Olgas Raum*) escrita pela teatróloga contemporânea alemã, Dea Loher em 1992. O material analisado envolve críticas sobre a peça para colunas de jornais e revistas *online* inglesas. Portanto, esse artigo tem como objetivo compreender como os comentários críticos articulam noções de adaptação no contexto cultural de uma peça traduzida e encenada.

Palavras-chaves: Estudos em adaptação. PerformanceLiteratura comparada. Escritas de vida. Estudos de recepção.

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Adaptation under the Spotlight

At a certain period in her life, the Canadian artist Emily Carr made pottery with aboriginal ornaments. She used to sell her artefacts at craft fairs where they became very popular because of their indigenous motifs. In one of her autobiographies, Carr tells the readers that making pottery was a more personally rewarding experience than making a living by running her local hostel,

Of course, nobody wanted to buy my pictures. I'd never tried to paint to please them anyway, so I did horrible things like taking boarders to make a living, and the very little time I had for painting I tried to paint in the despised, adorable joyous modern way. The last two years I have taken up...pottery, adapting and utilizing my Indian designs for it. A much pleasanter livelihood than catering for people's appetites. (CARR, 2004 p. 204).

Carr was well aware of the local aboriginals' cultural practice on Vancouver Island, and knew that they did not use clay as part of their everyday artefacts; however, she appropriated and adapted the natives' motifs to her own creations. This short anecdote on Carr's pottery painting is a compelling case to illustrate how human beings use adaptation as a way to deal with everyday life adjustments and cultural transferences. Yet, when adaptation practice falls within the academic realm of literature and performance, it becomes decentralized. As observed in theater and film studies, adaptation is usually pushed to the margins because it is considered secondary and derivative.

To attempt to bring adaptation to the center of discussions in literature and performance studies, this article explores how online theater reviews deal with adaptation issues of a translated staged play. The original play *Olgas Raum* by Dea Loher – translated literally as *Olga's Room* – was performed by a theatrical company, Speaking in Tongues, in a London theater in 2013. The play *Olga's Room* is based on the accounts of a historical German woman named Olga Benario². In this contribution, Loher's play is read through the feminist lens of life writing theories because

² This study uses 'Olga Benario' and 'Benario' when it refers to the historical figure, and 'Olga' when it refers to the character in the play.



they are more inclusive in relation to fictional texts that deal with one's life story. Scholars such as Smith and Watson consider life writing "a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical [...]" (2010, p. 4). In this vein, Loher retells Benario's life story in order to be remembered and acted out across generations. It is a memory work of individual and collective traumas from the 20th century, since Olga Benario was a German-Jewish communist leader who fell prey to totalitarian regimes on the verge of the Second World War.

My main theoretical frame is based mainly on Linda Hutcheon's (2006) recent studies on adaptation, in which she invokes interdisciplinary perspectives from translation, literature, and performance to the field of comparative studies. Hence, this contribution analyses online newspaper and magazine reviews about the translated staged play *Olga's Room* performed at an alternative theater in London. I argue that adaptation can render ambiguous with familiar and uncanny images that may fall above or under audience's expectations. Ultimately, this contribution aims to go a step further within adaptation studies by emphasizing interactional and trans-generational perspectives between producer (e.g. author, translator and director) and receiver (e.g. reader, audience and critic) in order to offer possibilities besides common issues of fidelity to the original.

Writing Life on the Stage: Olga Benario

In 1935, while Emily Carr was spiritually engaged with her famous painting *Edge of the Forest* in the forests of Vancouver Island, Olga Benario, a German-Jewish member of the Comintern (i.e. Communist International) was crossing the Atlantic towards South America with her partner, Luis Carlos Prestes, the leader of the Brazilian communist movement. Their reason to travel to Rio de Janeiro was to organize an insurrection against a dictatorial government established by the country's president, Getulio Vargas. However, the uprising failed, and eventually the leaders were caught and imprisoned under Filinto Müller's mandate since he was



the chief of the local police and a Nazi sympathizer. In 1936, Benario was deported to Germany, where two months later she would give birth to her only child, Anita Prestes, in Barnimstrasse Prison in Berlin. Her daughter was released to her paternal grandmother's custody under pressures from international campaigns. Benario, however, was kept under Gestapo's control and spent five years in different prisons and concentration camps, and eventually sent to Bernburg, where she was gassed in the winter of 1942 (SAIDEL 2004, p. 51).

Benario's extraordinary life story has inspired many activists, artists and social groups to reconstruct and represent her ideals throughout the years. In 1985, Fernando Morais, a Brazilian leftist journalist, wrote a biography that became not only a best-seller in the country, but also an authorized document that gained credibility due to its comprehensive archival research on Benario's life. The biography was soon translated into other modern languages including German in 1989. From a Brazilian perspective, Benario's life narrative 'traveled' when other European artists decided to adapt her life story into films and plays. One example is Dea Loher, a novice German dramatist who debuted her writing career with a play called *Olgas Raum* staged in a Hamburg theater in 1992. The monologue, an adaptation from Benario's life-writings, deals with memories from her martyrdom inside a prison cell in Rio de Janeiro while incarcerated at Ravensbrück concentration camp. The structure of the original play as well as the translated one consists of nine monologues alternated with dialogues involving Olga, her two cell mates and the chief of the local police. The monologues contextualize the story and situate the characters in relation to one another; whereas the dialogues between Olga and her female cell mates are a revision of her memories enriched with details of her life story. Yet, Olga's dialogues with the chief of police Filinto Müller are metaphorically dense, sadistic, and with sexual innuendos. The original dialogues at a linguistic level contain long syntaxes with indirect and complex sentences, which are mirrored in the play when performed in English.

Since its debut, the original play was performed in alternative theaters throughout Germany. It is, however, twenty years later that the play was eventually translated into English as a European theatrical company (Speaking in Tongues) commissioned it in order to organize



performances in Luxembourg (at the Cultural Center of the Abbaye de Neumünster in 2012), and in London (at the Arcola Theater in 2013). In this sense, the English translation, the different theatrical locations, and the diverse production-reception dynamics may show a starting process of Europeanization in Olga's story, which leads to questions of trans-generation and cross-cultural communication concerning the performed play.

Adaptation, Paratext and Reception

Since this contribution focuses on audience reception of the staged text in order to examine how adaptation renders ambiguity with familiar and foreign images, I have examined online reviews posted by recognized English newspapers and magazines, such as *The Guardian*, *Time out London*, *Theater Guide London*, *The Jewish Chronicle*, *One Stop Arts*, and *Exeunt Magazine*, and one by *Luxemburger Wort*, outside Britain but written in English. In this study, the reviews are regarded as *paratext*, a term borrowed from the French narratologist Gérard Genette in his work on *transtextuality* (1991) to refer to the surroundings of a text. As the film scholar Robert Stam observes, *paratext* becomes “accessory messages [...] that come to surround the text” (2000, p.65) with high chances to influence prospective audience. The reviews analyzed in this article are individual responses from external critics whose commentaries are considered more impartial and less biased than the acclaimed reviews posted on the theater company's Facebook page. On the whole, the reviews comment on translation, authorship, and performance which fall within a continuum of “fidelity-criticism” with influences on adaptation studies. Hutcheon recalls that, “for a long time, ‘fidelity-criticism’, as it came to be known, was the critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies, especially when dealing with canonical works such as those of Pushkin and Dante” (2006, p.6-7). In this view, ‘fidelity-criticism’ falls within a comparative frame, in which original and adaptation rest each at opposite endings.

Yet, in the case of a performed text such as *Olga's Room* a comparative method might be limited to duality (i.e. source and target texts), as it entails a more complex exercise that involves



different objects such as original play, translated play, staged play, translated staged play, German production and British production. For this reason, investigating a dyadic relation between source and target will not account for the interactions that may emerge among the objects as seen in a network perspective of theater translation. Based on her own translation practice, Kate Eaton mentions that a collaborative work is necessary when dealing with theater translation. As she remarks, "...translators and actors alike engage in a process of translation and adaptation; not only working with a target text based on the foreign source text, but adapting that target text to the requirements of the stage" (EATON 2012, p. 180). Despite its advantages from the point of view of theater translation, it can pose practical challenges for academic researches that are textual-oriented, that is, that deal with verbal and non-verbal images. For this reason, this study turns to the interactions between 'text' (i.e. staged play) and audience (i.e. reviewers) oriented by a reception perspective.

Despite the film scholar Carl Plantinga's concerns with (film) reviewers as a representative of an audience with "subjective impressions" that are "heavily mediated" and "institutionally constrained" (2009, p. 13), this article insists on the importance of considering reviews as a study object in reception studies. Since a reviewer's task is to create paratexts that not only hold historical, but also rhetorical values to persuade a reader to attend or not a cultural spectacle, reviews gain social responsibility to engage audience with arts (CONNER 2013, p. 77). In this sense, writing a review gains a social dimension and becomes a performative act that can be placed under Austin's famous book title – *How to do things with words* (1962). Bearing this in mind, this study analyses the play reviews in order to understand how they deal with adaptation regarding familiar and uncanny images, and what rhetorical forces they hold to potentially influence prospective audience.

Reviewers in the Limelight



To start with, the British theater critic Lyn Gardner for *The Guardian* newspaper centers her review on the linguistic constructions of the original play in German by stating that *Olga's Room* is Loher's first play. Thus she writes that it is "a slightly clumsy construction, heavy on monologues and memories". Gardner complains that the playwright provides little information about Olga's personal and political life, making the historical woman a "cipher" for the viewer to sort it out. In a similar vein, an anonymous reviewer for *Time Out London*³ criticizes the textual heaviness in the translated text, by stating that the script is a "bleak whimsy" for its "over-earnest two hours in the gloom". This criticism might be attributed to issues of literal translation that does not offer enough cultural adaptation to the target text, making it less accessible to reader and audience. Sharing similar views, William Drew, a reviewer for *Exeunt Magazine*, sees the play as a "series of clichés", which "rarely surprises the audience"; however, Drew recognizes Loher's potential to become a full-fledged playwright, and regrets that the British audience has not had a chance to "see her at the top of her game". Yet, a reviewer for *One Stop Arts*⁴ (only known by the name Akash) criticises the narrative, or better, the "linearity of the story" as confusing at times. Yet, the reviewer fails to give further explanations, leaving us to infer that the confusion might be a result of the flashback technique that Loher uses in order to build up a storyline that intercalates past, present and future, without holding clear contextual markers to set temporal borders. The play is heavily reliant on Olga's memories of her private and public life as a communist leader, and it intertwines with local and global historical facts of the pre-war period. A reviewer Graham Cleverley for *Wort.lu* also criticises the play by commenting that "I very much look forward to seeing the same actors in a better play", though the reviewer does not address the specific problems the play might have or lead to. Instead, Cleverley only praises the actors' efforts for keeping up with their strong performance on stage.

Concerning the play production, the reviewers have been harsh on their comments too. For example, the anonymous reviewer for *Time Out London* praises the performance but not the

³ Olga's Room. *Time Out London*. Retrieved from: <http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/olgas-room>. Acces: Oct./2014.

⁴ Page is not available as *One Stop Arts* website is no longer maintained.



production, and criticises the director Samuel Miller for choosing a naturalistic tone to the staged play, "which feels completely at odds with Loher's writing". The life writing content in Loher's text is essentially fictional filled with imaginary poignant dialogues between victims (incarcerated militants) and perpetrator (the police chief). Yet, factual material to guide audience is absent from the play which might leave a viewer thinking that such encounters had historically occurred; however, there is no documentation to support a likelihood of those uncanny dialogues between Benario and Müller.

Nevertheless, John Nathan, a reviewer for the *Jewish Chronicle*, gives credit to the committed cast, but he also criticizes the play production for narrowing Olga's life to memory and psychology. As a result, Nathan points out that the audience is left to "imagine the intrigue, tension and drama" that surrounds Olga's life, that is, the context in which the historical events took place. To some degree, we could argue that the reviewer criticizes the production for keeping the staged play on a literal translation and for not allowing enough room to adaptation. The context of the play with its historical, political and social connotations has gaps that the audience needs to fill. The failure to adapt the play to a contemporary British audience obscures the understanding of the monologues and dialogues which are deeply based on individual and collective memories from Germany and Brazil. For this reason, Nathan states, "if someone one day writes a really good play about this woman, the outside is where it will largely be".

Following a similar criticism, the reviewer Drew accuses the production of keeping the play literally, which impedes its success; Drew says, it "doesn't really shine a new light on the processes it represents on stage". For the reviewer, to keep the performance faithful to Loher's text means to reinforce some patriarchal practices against women, that is, oppression, violence and torture. In a similar tone but holding opposite views, Lauren Mooney, a reviewer for *Theater Guide London* rashly criticizes the performance for being "messy", and not allowing the play to "spark" as it "must have been in the original production". Both reviewers' reactions go with the continuum of fidelity-criticism, one implying to keep it closer to the adaptation ending (i.e. less faithful); whereas the other closer to the source ending (i.e. more faithful). As seen, Drew has a



less orthodox understanding of fidelity-criticism than the previous reviewers, and emphasises that the target text (i.e. staged text) must liberate itself from the original one. Contrarily, the other reviewers criticise the production for keeping the performance too literal to the text, that is, to the original, by not allowing creativity to emerge on the staged play. Therefore, there is some ambiguity emerging from these reviews that puzzles the reader to a conundrum: should the performance have sparked by having its own signature, or should it have sparked by being faithful to the original production?

Furthermore, Mooney, the reviewer for *Theater Guide London*, also remarks that the production trims the two supporting actors' stage presences, i.e. Olga's cellmates Genny and Ana. By being underused, Genny's and Ana's performances are limited to sexualized interrogation scenes dominated by the chief of police's (Filinto Müller) sadistic personality, which according to the critic is "sensationalised, pointless and extremely tasteless". In Mooney's view, the play does not evolve and gets stuck "behind the heavily implied sexual violence". Similarly, the critic Cleverley for *Wort.lu* is disappointed with the scenes related to Olga's deportation. For him, the suspense and tension leading to the climax are noticed when the drum crescendo sound gets louder and offstage footsteps get closer to Olga's cell. However, the audience is let down at the end, as Cleverley remarks, "Expectation grows. Suddenly stops. But nothing happens".

It seems that the reviewers would unanimously agree with the thumbs down to the staged play and production. Yet, their comments to the translated play are more sympathetic. For example, *The Jewish Chronicle* reviewer describes the play in English with a positive tone, "lucidly translated"; however, Mooney, the reviewer for the *Theatre Guide London*, blames the translator (David Tushingam) for a "clunky translation, filled with exchanges that fall far of naturalism but are not quite stylised enough". Because the original text in German suffers from verbosity, Tushingam's literal translation with its proximity to the original text becomes detrimental to the English version which becomes "heavy" and flows unnaturally. In an interview, Tushingam remarks that it is imperative that a translator "understands how plays



function in performance and must translate the right plays” (ZATLIN, 2005, p. 42). According to the reviews analysed in this study, we can conclude that the translated play has not taken into account the performance itself. To do so, it would have involved a work of adaptation along with translation.

The apparent general thumbs down to the staged play are not because of a lack of loyalty to the original text, but as Hutcheon remarks, they are “in terms of a lack of creativity and skill to make the text one’s own and thus autonomous” (2006, p.21). Theater-goers would definitely find themselves bewildered when coming across enthusiastic promotional material on the theatrical company’s website on the one side, and less promising online column reviews from some well-known local magazines and newspapers on the other side. Being on the crossroads of rhetorical conflicts potential viewers would find it hard to choose which path to take. The path becomes even more winding when the promotional material describes the play as an adaptation of a “true story”, a tale of a “freedom fighter”, of a “communist” and “revolutionary” among others. Yet, it does not mention that the play is based on a fictionalized autobiography that relies on Olga’s memories while incarcerated in a concentration camp.

To the reviewer for *Wort.lu*, Graham Cleverly, the playwright uses intertextual elements with which the audience might identify while watching the play. For example, Müller, the Brazilian police chief, shows a sadistic personality similar to Scarpia’s, a male character in Puccini’s opera *Tosca* (GIACOSA, 1900). Both characters’ dialogues with their imprisoned women contain sexual innuendos in the hope of making the women fall prey to the men’s caprices, as their beloved partners have been taken away. As it is seen in Scarpia’s speech, Act II:

She will come... for the sake of her Mario!
For the sake of her Mario, she will comply with my desire
Such are the alterations of love's deep joys and deep sorrows. (GIACOSA, 1900, p. 52)

Comparatively, in *Olga’s Room*, Müller wants to appropriate his victims, mainly Olga, with his cruel and perverted interrogation as shown in the scenes "Pas de Diable I":



Luis Prestes is dead to you. He no longer exists. I destroy him. I am your master now. What can you know that I don't know? You will tell me everything. You will trust me. You and the child. My wife and my child. Who I take care of. Who I am responsible for. (LOHER, 2013, p. 30)

The performance from “Pas de Diable I” shares some traces with Puccini’s opera in which the audience can make allusions to Scarpia’s and Floria Tosca’s encounters. The intertextuality in *Olga’s Room* allows the play to travel over time and space, keeping a dialogue with previous cultural artifacts. The dialogism in the play is not only limited to high culture work, but is also viable in popular culture material. For example, in one of the scenes, Müller uses a pair of scissors as a sexualized symbol to sadistically torment one of Olga’s cellmates (Ana Libre). The use of scissors makes allusion to the American film *Scissors* (1991) directed by Frank de Felitta. The protagonist, played by Sharon Stone, attempts to defend herself from an attempted rape in an elevator by stabbing a man on his back with a pair of scissors. Next, at a scene inside a movie theater, the woman is abruptly assaulted by a man holding a pair of scissors against her bosom. The pair of scissors symbolizes a sexualized object to sadistically torture female victims as seen in the play and in the film; it might eventually create uncanny aesthetic effects on the audience.

Trans-generation and Adaptation in *Olga’s Room*

Hutcheon claims that adaptation is a trans-generational phenomenon, in which cultural transmission is done mostly by intertextuality (2006, p. 32). Although her argument is insightful, her focus is on textual markers, as she states that intertextual elements are “traces visible in the text” (HUTCHEON, 2006, p.107). Her notion of trans-generational phenomenon in adaptation can be applied in this case study, in which the playwright’s role is one of cultural transmission. Reading Loher’s *Olgas Raum*, we can hypothesize that she wrote the play based on an adaptation from one of Benario's published life writings: the German biography, *Olga Benario: die Geschichte eines tapferen Lebens*, written by Ruth Werner in former East Germany (i.e. German Democratic Republic, GDR) in 1961; and a Brazilian one, *Olga*, by Fernando Morais (1985).



During an interview in 2004 Loher mentioned that she studied under the guidance of the famous German playwright Heiner Müller⁵ who once had been an active member of the German Writer's Association in the GDR. As she continued, Benario's life story was well-known as a heroine and martyr across East Germany, where public schools paid homage to her. What struck Loher the most was to know about Benario's transatlantic experience in Brazil followed by a deportation to Nazi Germany.

Inspired by historical accounts of Benario's life, Loher adapts her "Olga" into a play so as not to duplicate Olga's martyrdom as previously described in the biographies, and later on in films such as the German bio-documentary *Olga Benario: ein Leben für die Revolution* by Iyitanir Galip (2003) and the Brazilian biopic *Olga* by Jayme Monjardim (2004). Loher understands that Benario's image would be soon turn into a media icon. As an act of resistance against mythicising the historical woman, Loher attempts to decontextualize Benario's multiple identities that have been constructed by political ideologies and institutions of power. By attempting to de-mystify Benario, Loher recontextualizes the historical woman by creating the character Olga who is an antithesis of a martyr, revolutionary and freedom fighter. In this vein, Loher is able to 'recast' Olga as an accomplice of a torturer, as the protagonist dramatically declares in Monologue IV:

The only way not to be a heroine, a martyr, a victim, is to make myself an accomplice, a collaborator. I myself torture. Torture everyone who crosses my path. Ultimately myself. Myself included. Starting with Luis Prestes I finally end up with me. (LOHER, 2013, p.38)

The Monologue IV might sound uncanny to readers who are familiar with Benario's life writings that usually portray her as a victim or a prey of dictators and violence. Instead, Loher allows her Olga to wear the masks of the perpetrators in order to survive at least during the performed play. Thus, her interpretation of Olga is a sign of resistance; the playwright refuses to

⁵ See the interview in German at https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/bitstream/handle/11222.digilib/106049/1_BrunnerBeitratgeGermanistikNordistik_18-2004-1_15.pdf?sequence=1



reduce the militant to conditions of victimhood as mainstream narratives have done so far. The playwright's originality is evident in the act of deconstructing Olga's identity by de-sensitizing and de-politicizing her image and recasting her story through a work of memory while Olga waits for her death inside a cell in Ravensbrück concentration camp. Moreover, Loher uses adaptation as a form of critique, as argued in Venuti "[adaptation] can invite a critical understanding of the prior materials as well as their original or subsequent contexts, the linguistic patterns, cultural traditions and social institutions in which they were positioned" (2007, p.38). Yet, none of the reviews analyzed here makes correlations to Olga's biographies and films, from which we can infer that Benario's life story is still very much a cipher in Londoners' minds.

Although intertextuality has been an element mentioned in the reviews, it falls within the textual scope of the play disregarding allusions or correlations outside the text. In this sense, the notion of trans-generation that links Loher's play to previous biographical contents seems out of reach in the reviews. We can conclude that the reviews ignore possible network relations between the staged play and previous Benario's life writings and historical accounts. Instead, the reviews are based on a micro perspective that mostly involves comments on text, author, translator and director, which solely perform the rhetorical task of persuading readers to attend (or not) the play. Overall, the reviews fail to situate the play *Olga's Room* in a trans-generational context, by leaving readers without further sources to learn more about Benario's story.

Coda

In short, the play *Olga's Room* is translated into English with very few traces of adaptation at a textual level, with stylistic constructions close to the original in order to maintain fidelity and subordinate status in relation to the German text. The theater company Speaking in Tongues also keeps adaptation at a minimum level in favor of fidelity and conformity to the text; however, as some reviewers have pointed out, the staged play lacks originality, and its foreignization hinders the audience's contextual understanding of Olga Benario as a historical figure in Brazil during Vargas' Regime, for example. Ironically, the more the translated play in



English keeps its fidelity and proximity to the original, the less the staged play has a chance of achieving a level of success similar to the original production. It would not be fair to point the finger solely at the translation because of its lexical inadequacies. Neither would it be fair to solely blame the director for lack of contextualization and better stage composition. Still, it would not be enough to criticize only the playwright for her dramaturgic inexperience. Ideally, theater translation should follow a collaborative endeavour in order to guarantee a successful staged play. Yet, it seems that none of the reviewers has pointed to this direction, and instead, criticisms were isolated and fragmented; that is, falling on text, translator, actors and director, without embracing a holistic view that would take into account the interaction between production and reception.

...In 1942, while Emily Carr was finishing her *Cedar Sanctuary* in Victoria, where fresh oil painting mixed with the fresh air of the forest, Olga Benario took her last deep breath in a chamber with Zyklon-B Gas...

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