KADDISH



by K. TZETNIK

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ALGEMEINER ASSOCIATES • NEW YORK

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[E. D'M. A. • א. דמ. ע.]

To David Apfelbaum
a "kaddish"
for your father the "kaddosh"
Reb Efraim Fishl
Apfelbaum
The korban-olah from
Auschwitz

K.Z. (German pronunciation Ka-Tzet) are the initials of Konzentration Zenter (Concentration Camp). Every K.Z. inmate was known as "Ka-Tzetnik Number ...", the number itself being branded into the flesh of the left arm. The writer of "Kaddish" was Ka-Tzetnik 135633.

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Contents **Page**

The Photo Posted Over the Author's Desk 9
1. A Jewish Home, before the Holocaust 10
2. My Town – Before 16
3. The Men of Metropoli 19
4. Operation Old People 25
5. Operation Children 28
6. Cyanide in the Ghetto 30
7. A Mysterious Melody 32
8. The Last Transport 37
9. Warsaw Ghetto Uprising 38
10. The Move to Another Planet 43
11. Face to Face 47
12. Inside 49
13. Dawn in Auschwitz 53
14. A Tear in the Death Camp 56
15. Father and Son 64
16. A Kindergarten in Auschwitz 67
17. Prayer in Auschwitz 70
18. Covenant Between the Crumbs 75
19. Block Curfew 76
20. Man Lying on the Brick Stove 81
21. Evening Rollcall in Auschwitz 85
22. In Line to the Crematorium 89
23. The Last Argument 95
24. The Death March 99
25. Liberation 104
26. The Survivor 107
27. Leaving 115
28. My Town – After 119
29. Wiedergutmachung 122

Contents **Page**

30. On the Way to the Land of Israel 126
31. I Kneel at Your Feet 134
32. Declaration of the State 137
33. Cain 141
34. The Threesome (a memorial) 143
35. Melech Steier 150
36. Curriculum Vitae 152
37. Nucleus 154
38. A Letter to the Editor that Was Never Sent 156
39. In the Final Moment 159
40. Daily Bread 161
41. Ninwoe 163
42. On this Day 165
43. Sruel Yitzchak Piekarski 167

ק. צעטניק

קדיש

דער אלגעמיינער פארלאג

ניו יארק, ה'תשנ"ח - 1998



Nazi soldiers leer at praying Jew in his last moments before being murdered.

THE PHOTO POSTED OVER THE AUTHOR'S WRITING DESK

Now for the first time do I notice that the tefillin on his head are not ordinarily shaped, the box is split like the Hebrew letter shin (ש), perched like a crown on the head of the Jew. He was about my age. Very soon he will join the row of shot victims lined up on the ground at the feet of the jolly comrades. But the moment of his shooting is not that significant here. Anyone can see this from the hidden light emanating from the face of the Jew. Only in Auschwitz did I see such a hidden brightness face to face – in the sealed isolation barracks, stuffed with skeletons waiting for the crematorium to be cleared for us. I stood squeezed next to the Shiliver Rebbe. In the ghetto the Rebbe opposed open rebellion against the Germans, arguing that such rebellion would bring definite death – constituting suicide, which is forbidden in the Torah.

In the Shiliver Rebbe's eyes, as we awaited our turn in the crematorium, I saw this hidden light.

I cannot tear my eyes away from the Jew in the photo. There were many times when I was in his situation, yet I never reached his state of transcendence. I would panic at such moments, and divine revelations do not take hold in moments of panic. Hence, see the serenity on his face! See his eyes staring down to the ground where he will fall at any moment! His hands are folded in a manner defying description, just as it is impossible to describe the glowing light beaming from his bare feet.

1

A Jewish Home, Before The Holocaust

The Shafran house stood on the main avenue of Metropoli's garden suburb. The seven-story building, designed according to some strange architectural concept of Alois Shafran, looked from a distance like an open Torah Scroll with the seven rows of windows running along its front like square Hebrew letters, its ends winding forward like the twin wooden rollers of the Scroll.

The entire first floor was the Shafrans'. The iron and coal magnate of Metropoli occupied the upper floors.

Alois Shafran, Talmudist prodigy son of the rabbi of a Polish village, had decided on a business career, and, to prevent his father's seeing him as a constant reminder of unfulfilled expectations, had moved to the town of Metropoli, then called "Little America." Before long, he had become one of the chief manufacturers of the district. There was hardly a worker's home in the whole of the Metropoli coalbelt without some item – a radio, closets, the clothing in the closets right down to the underwear – that had not been purchased on the installment plan, from one of Shafran's shops.

In time, Alois Shafran's home became a cultural "salon." Local intellectuals, distinguished visitors from the large Jewish centers of Poland, and touring artists and lecturers, knew they would find a welcome at the Shafran home – knew they would be accorded the hospitality granted by a consul to his fellow countrymen traveling abroad. The Shafran home was an oasis, where rabbinical hospitality was extended in European style – where the spirit of Torah

tradition was combined with a civilized tolerance of differences of belief.

The "Simple Wednesday Get-togethers" at the Shafrans' became an institution. Tables were spread with hot and cold dishes, and a special waiter stood ready to serve the guests.

Alois Shafran, in his forties, with a high, scholarly forehead and gentle eyes, was known as "The Man with a Heart"; his unassuming manner did little to suggest that he was the founder of the House of Shafran. The glowing beauty of his wife Shoshana belied the fact that she was a mother of five, with a son already in his second year at Cracow University, and a daughter who turned heads on the street.

At home the Shafrans spoke Hebrew, a practice started by Shoshana, who had been a teacher of the language. This habit was respected even by young Chenkin, an ardent Communist and labor activist and a regular at the Wednesday get-togethers: "From among our coal and iron mines, I salute an unaffected Eastern custom, a gesture of sincerity, not snobbism!"

On this "simple" Wednesday, some new faces were present. In the company with Professor Julian Stroitzki, who was seated at one end of the table, were Professor Dr. Steinitz and Oskar Kahanov, the tyrant of the Bilitz textile complex, who was in Metropoli that day to discuss business with Alois Shafran. Kahanov had readily accepted Shafran's invitation to stay for the salon.

Julian Stroitzki, professor of mathematics at Cracow University, was the foremost scholar in his field and his reputation had spread far beyond the borders of his country. Nevertheless, a few months earlier, as he was leaving the campus after delivering a lecture, a gang of students had beaten him unconscious and had painted on his back "Leprous Jew to Palestine." As a result of this he was forced to remain in the hospital for several weeks. The Rector's bouquet of flowers, delivered with the university's sincere regrets, was insufficient restitution. Professor Stroitzki did not return to the university, to which he had given the best years of his life, and within whose walls he had won international acclaim for his country.

Professor Dr. Steinitz, a refugee from Germany, was a specialist in neurology. Patients streamed to his Berlin clinic from all over Europe, as well as from across the Atlantic. Once the Nazis gained power they harassed him constantly. But Professor Steinitz, a staunch German patriot, stubbornly bore his physical and mental anguish, waiting for times to change. He refused to abandon his post and go into exile, regarding all those who did as deserters.

Came 1938. The white-haired professor refused, later, to tell what had happened when the armed S.A. broke into his clinic. But other Berlin refugees

reported that the aged professor, standing firm on the threshold of his clinic, had refused to comply with the S.A. demand for his suicide. Steinitz did not return home that night; he traveled to the border, until he reached the refugee city of Zbonshin, finally making his way to Metropoli. Now, any mention of the Fatherland found him stonily silent.

Seated around the Shafran table, however, the guests forgot personal troubles and joined in the general mood of relaxed good humor.

Chenkin whirled into the room, hair flying wildly, his hat perched precariously on the back of his head – the hat he never remembered to remove in the hall unless some stickler for politeness reminded him of it.

He entered talking. And talking, dashed back to the hall to fling his hat down; then talked his way back – to the table, his sharp nose and pointed chin talking; his long dangling arms and legs talking – even his pockets stuffed with local and foreign newspapers, talking.

Ferber, a young writer and drama critic, was the polar opposite of Chenkin – a man who weighed his every word, and then spoke reluctantly. When he took the floor, even Chenkin made a supreme effort to hold his peace.

Shafran's daughter Zippora, in her third year of high school, seated herself at the piano. Strains of Mozart winged gently through the room. All eyes were on Zippora – except for those of Alois Shafran, whose troubled gaze was on Irena, his eldest, standing beside her sister at the piano. He had noticed recently that Monyek Matroz, his chief sales supervisor, was bothering her. Matroz was an oily, fast-talking hustler, thought Shafran, but the snake wouldn't dare harm the child, no matter how long he lurked outside the school. Still, the possible moral effect of the sales supervisor's behavior on Irena troubled him. But, for now, until he could rid his home of the man, he'd better pretend to know nothing, in spite of the sleepless nights the affair was costing him.

Hardly had Zippora finished her recital when Chenkin, temporarily defeated by Mozart, took off again. He flew about, lashing out at Britain for playing her political *z'nut* game, stuffing the mouth of the German Moloch with chunks of Europe, all to keep a balance against the Soviet Union. "Britain's so blinded by her hatred of Russia that she's willing to sell her soul and tread on dead bodies: look at Czechoslovakia and Vienna!"

"But don't you think," put in Alois Shafran quietly, "that Britain is doing everything in her power to prevent another international bloodbath? The British prime minister had the wisdom to swallow his pride and fly to Munich for negotiations with that criminal upstart; history will evaluate this as a great moral act of British diplomacy for the preservation of peace."

"History will evaluate it all right!" Chenkin leaped up. "But for the time

being, that British journalist, Winston Churchill, has explained the situation most clearly. He says Britain faces two choices – shame or war. She chose shame, but she won't get out of war. Now, you tell me just who it was that reared this German viper?" Chenkin, growing vehement, stood there as if haranguing a mass meeting. "Why didn't they chop its head off back in '33? What's Hitler betting on? Why is he allowed to get away with this war of nerves, taking Europe by the throat to squeeze out more with each passing day? Could it be that the West has put an ax into the hand of this Golem, to chop away the East with? Let me hear one of you deny that Britain's playing the *z'nut* game in Europe!" Chenkin brought his fist crashing down on the table. "I only pray that the day doesn't come when the Golem turns on its creator!"

"As far as I'm concerned," Ferber put in, "the Soviets' innocence isn't proven yet. Where is the Kremlin's morality when, right in the heart of Europe, its finest idealists are being tortured in Dachau? Why hasn't Moscow said one word about the brutalities being inflicted on human beings there even if they do happen to be mere Jews? Isn't that star on the Soviet flag meant to shine for universal liberation?"

"I don't understand what the Soviet Union has to do with it," sputtered Chenkin, "We're discussing Britain, the Nazis' backstreet ally ..."

"It's too soon to know who will be the real Nazi ally," Ferber cut in, unhurriedly drawing from his pocket a first proof of his evening paper and unfolding the front page for all to see: side by side, two photographs – Hitler and Stalin.

A sense of nervous apprehension filled the room.

Shafran read from the paper aloud: "Moscow and Berlin are conducting secret negotiations. The world waits with bated breath: are the National Socialists and the Communists to come to an agreement? Further news expected."

The guests sat in numbed silence. Chenkin stood with his head to one side, his eyes staring strangely. Each person seemed to be waiting to hear what the next one would say.

No one was aware of the greetings being exchanged at the front door. Then, Alois rose and welcomed Sanya Schmidt and Harry Preleshnik into the room. The younger Shafrans encircled the couple like chasidim in blissful attendance on their rebbe. The atmosphere in the room changed as soon as Sanya seated herself at the table. Professor Steinitz, smiling boyishly, poured two glasses of wine, and, with a chivalrous bow, proposed a toast. Taking the glass, Sanya said in the mock tones of a public speaker:

"Chenkin, here's to the coup of Russian diplomacy over the greatest lie in the 20th century! Here's to the victory of the Red Army in its forthcoming struggle with Fascism in all its forms! Long live Stalin, who pays the enemies of the Soviet Union measure for measure, fraud for fraud, hypocrisy for hypocrisy ..."

Amazed, Chenkin stared at Sanya: Incredible as it seemed, this charming capitalist had just answered the question spinning around in his head. She could just have been putting on an act, of course, but what did it matter. She had solved the riddle for him. Chenkin was speechless.

Ferber pushed his chair from the table. "I've had enough!" The red-haired youth's face was overcast and gloomy. He was obviously anxious to leave. "I'm sick of this Jewish phlegmatism over what's happening around us. The ink isn't yet dry on Hitler's declaration of his intention to wipe out the whole Jewish nation, and nothing, not the slightest notice is taken by any of us. Even if we don't consider ourselves a nation, Hitler certainly does. We sit around snugly chattering about other countries' sick policies, as if we don't have some pretty rotten politics of our own. Do you think for one minute anyone is going to lift a finger for us when we fall into Hitler's clutches? What those liars call "world conscience" is a lot of cock-and-bull. We're sick inside, and the first thing we need is an accurate diagnosis. Why, we have a medical specialist right here with us. Ask him. He's both healer and patient!"

Oskar Kahanov's face showed he was about to say something in answer to Ferber. But, no – he chose not to interrupt the pleasant French conversation he was engaged in with Madame Shafran. He would refrain from calculated unpleasantness; who was this canting Zionist loafer anyway, that he should waste his breath on him?

While Ferber was speaking, Harry Preleshnik had not taken his eyes off the black ritual stain on the ceiling – the stain painted there in memory of the destruction of the Temple. He sank into his own thoughts. He hardly sensed his mental turmoil pulling him from the table; did not feel his feet stop at the piano. The black and white keys merged and whirled before his eyes until a piercing pain throbbed through him. Sinking onto the small round stool, he brought his hands down on the keys, to master them. Gradually, both black and white surrendered to his gliding fingers as the bared fangs of an angered beast are gradually withdrawn under the hypnotic gaze of the animal trainer. Hesitantly, his fingers traversed the keyboard, back and forth, as if groping through heavy mist; soft, pulsating notes, shimmering to the corners of the room: isolated, separate, then merging into a vibrant ecstatic reel full of the soul's longing for vision. Gleaming now, like a multi-banded ray of light, the long, glowing chords slashed through a dense cloudiness, the rays brighten-

ing, widening, to outline sharply a horizon of iridescent peaks. White, woolly sheep threading down the mountainsides into the deep green of a valley to the trilling sound of shepherds' pipes, their music wafting toward the ridges. Then the hush of single notes, the falling solitary drops of rain after a dawn-shower, spreading to the corners of the room, followed by a new melody, straining and pounding with courage, with hope, surging to a joyous dance of creation: iron and concrete walls springing aloft to the rhythm of rippling arms, vigorously swinging high and low. The blacksmith slamming down his hammer. The plowman thrusting his blade into the craggy soil; the planter casting his seed. And a golden sea of stalks undulating in the winds. Evening draws its shadows up from the valley and climbs to drape its cloak over the mountains. The notes, now scattering, softening, slow, erupted with renewed fervor into a tempestuous dance to celebrate this day's work.

And faint gossamer sounds. The shepherd piping the evening's song, a lover's longing call to his beloved ...

His elbows on the keyboard, Harry buried his face in his hands. No sounds followed. His listeners had been transported to another world.

2

My Town – Before

Behind you, in the spacious show-windows, the chrome of the electrical appliances glitters in the light of the sun. Standing here, at the corner of the square, your glance expands like breath drawn deep and free all the way to the end of Park Street. Over your head is the large, circular street-clock: Five minutes to nine! In our town all the people set their watches by the "Electra" clock.

Sun over Park Street of Metropoli.

The crowns of the twin rows of trees are daubed with gold, as if brushed on by the sun. What's so strange about it? Tear a page, and then another out of the calendar and you have: 9.1.1939. In Poland, we can already say for sure: Friend, it's time for the leaves to fall ...

White-collar workers begin to arrive from Commerce Street. They glance up at the clock over your head, and hurry along to the post office. At its entrance people coming out shake their heads at them: No use going in. It's the second day that the mail boxes are empty.

The promenade between the two rows of trees is all but deserted today. Little Moni whizzes along on his bicycle like a hurricane: "Hey, Moni, you're really burning up the road today!..."

The boy turns his head as he pedals furiously:

"Sure, mister! Only two days to go before school!"

Right, Moni, two days from now, at this hour, you will no longer be able to skim along on your bicycle. Make the most of your hour, child.

On the broad marble steps of the District Courthouse feet climb up and down. You would say, like any other day. Over the main entrance stands the Goddess of Justice, eyes blindfolded, weighing in her scales the white light of day.

Moni comes like the wind, speeding closer. He drops one foot from the pedal to the ground and, braking, looks up at the clock and cannot understand. Every day, the doctor, Mrs. Lewison, is on her veranda by this time. "Monkele, my precious," she calls down to him, and a Suchard chocolate bar tumbles into his hands.

Mrs. Doctor! Mrs. Doctor!... the boy calls up to the veranda.

"Monkele, my precious!" A black traveling-hat is set on the knot of Mrs. Lewison's white hair. "You must forgive me today, precious. Don't you know there's a war on at the border? Hurry home, Monkele, it's best to stay at home today."

Passersby cast silent, furious glances at the veranda: some people just have to cause panic! This isn't the first skirmish between border-patrols!

The boy hops onto the bicycle saddle. The wind puffs out the back of his shirt. "Stay home?! Not me!... The day after tomorrow school starts, Mrs. Lewison!"

From out of Bar Polski staggers a drunken soldier, a bottle of Vodka in his upraised hand. The sun gleams on the light-colored leather of his uniform belt. A brand new belt. His eyes grope on the sidewalk for a place to take his next step:

"Early to war and we'll finish soon.

In Berlin-town we'll lunch by noon – "

O la-la ...

Lunch by noon ...

The headwaiter lounges in the bar entrance, his round face smiling. The sun latches onto the shiny satin lapels of his dinner-jacket, climbs along the sparse hairs brushed back over his pate. He is proud. The army hit-song fires him with a heroic lust for battle. The song drifts down the boulevard, over the square. On every side people look at the soldier, their eyes hailing him with affection. Passersby give him the right of way. The air is charged with suspense, jeopardy and self-sacrifice.

O la-la ...

Lunch by noon ...

– In Berlin town

we'll lunch by noon ...

From Synagogue Alley a Jew comes shuffling out. He hugs the phylactery bag under his arm, not raising his eyes: He, and his Maker. The furrows in his forehead run deep to his sidecurls and beard. From the street opposite, an officer wearing high boots and leather jacket comes towards him. The Jew senses the danger echoing at him from the thuds of the heavy boots. Quickly, he gets off the sidewalk, out of their reach.

"The Jews sold us out to Hitler!" the one in boots declaims like a rabble-rouser to the passersby. The drunken soldier flings his arm over the orator's shoulder, still gripping his bottle: "You said it!," he croaks. "Every damn word of it is true! These Kikes are hatching a war against Hitler!..." The orator sweeps his hand over the whole of Park Street. "Let's wipe all of them out, then there won't be any more war!..."

On the horizon the smoke rises blue from the chimney of Gutshein Brothers Factory. Colored bedclothes swell the sills of the open windows ringing with the pulse of early-morning bustle. Women's arms beat the feather pillows, and from the open window fourteen-year-old Renya Zeidner can be heard quarreling with her mother who didn't let her go on the school trip.

On the face of the large round "Electra" clock the hands point like the arms of a traffic-policeman. Exactly "9" o'clock!

In our town all the people set their watches by the "Electra" clock. Actually, all it takes is a moment. But you always pause longer, for when your glance falls on the twin rows of trees of Park Street, you cannot easily tear it away. After all, this is where your cradle stood –

3

THE MEN OF METROPOLI

Earth.

Fifteen men dig one pit in the earth. Fifteen men lined up in a straight row, a yard separating each one from the next –

They dig.

The sun lies supine on the metal of the spade. With every thrust of your spade – you bury the sun in the earth. But with every shovelful of sod tossed away, the sun floats up once more –

Brighter than ever.

Opposite, reflected in the pupils of your eyes: boots. A row of boots. Above the boots – trousers. Olive-drab trousers. Higher up – white hands.

Training machine-guns –

"No looking up!"

The machine-gun barrels are trained on you.

Behind your back they stand massed in rows, the men of Metropoli. When you bend way down to lift your spade with greater zeal, you see through the space bounded by your flexed arm – their legs. A motley mass of legs, herded close. Not one of those legs will move the slightest bit in any direction, just as a date, crushed into its square package, won't move from the press.

Fear has fused them into one lump.

The citizens of Metropoli. You know them. From their midst you were picked out. From among them you come. You dig your own grave – and they

are watching.

Fifteen men dig a common pit. Yourself, one of the fifteen.

Earth.

Here she is, the earth. Fear yet wants to wrest you away from her. But you know: she is yours. In a little while, you'll enter in unto her. She lies uncovered before you. Your eyes are on her. Nobody on her surface wants you now. Only she, earth. She alone will hold your face close.

Earth.

Earth of all hues. Your neighbor's – black; his neighbor's – russet; your own – brownish. You know: you are standing on the premises of the Gutshein Brothers Factory; you know: from the rooftops, on every side, machine-gun barrels are pointed at you. You never had occasion to set foot on this lot. Earth not yours. Private. Now she is no longer a stranger to you. Under her top-layer earth is the same, everywhere.

"Hurry it up! Hurry it up! I'll be right there to help you out!" a German voice shouts to the row.

A pair of boots approaches. For the first time in your life, you see the boots of a German soldier. You can't help the thought flashing through your mind: Polish army boots are nicer ... The German bends, as if he wants to show the laggard how to dig. The man who has surrendered his spade stands aside, watching. His face expresses gratitude mixed with chagrin over that gratitude. Suddenly: the blade of the shovel flashes through the air, striking him with full force, flush in the mouth.

Over and over again, a vocal refrain accompanying the vicious blows:

"I'll be right there to help you out!..."

"I'll help you out!..."

"I'll ..."

From the ground, a monstrous creature is pulled to its feet. Two eyes, unsocketed, hang over a bloody gush. A red, mashed orifice that can utter no sound. He flops and thrashes about, like the rasping screams that thrash but cannot loose themselves from the pen of his throat.

On the other side of the pit, opposite the creature, a mouth full of laughter tilts back at the sky. Every time the head rights itself, between bursts of laughter, to get another look at its handiwork, you see: Under the helmet – glasses, rimmed thinly in gold; a fair face, fresh-shaven; full-lipped, full-cheeked. Cream and crimson complexioned – the face of a young elementary school teacher.

They stand facing each other. Behind the one, a row of guffawing helmets,

machine-guns thrust forward. Behind the other, a quadrangle tight-packed – the men of Metropoli.

An oblong pit separates them.

"Snap it up! Snap it up!"

Death prowls around you, regards you, sizes you up.

The strange creature is dragged by its feet behind the wall of the nearest factory shed. The blast of a single gunshot silences the thick, wild howls that struggled to break loose from its throat. Somebody else is put in his place. Now the sun sprawls on a sticky, reddened blade of the shovel.

– "*Drek-zeke*! Make it faster! !"

Shots spew fire from the muzzles before your eyes. You're alive! Your spade continues to work. The bullets only whine over your head. Are they meant for the massed quadrangle behind you? You steal a look through the space of your flexed arm: the legs, as before, stand without stir.

You know them. They are the legs of the business titans from Commerce Street; men who knew their shrewdness and ingenuity to be an unassailable fortress; who kept every single second of their precious time behind the massive iron-doors of their vaults.

You know them – legs of the famous physicians and lawyers from Park Street; men who knew that only a duel would settle the merest slighting of their honor.

Legs of porters and packers, men who stood on bustling street corners, heavy ropes girding their waists, pillar-like in their stance.

Legs of wagon-drivers and butchers, men who knew that the steel of their muscles was proof enough that they were always right.

Legs of underworld characters, fast as the switch-knives in their pockets – You know them all so well. Why, they're the men of Metropoli.

They watch, keeping silent.

Shots streak over your head. "Faster!" "Faster!"

Instinctively, your spade pulls back; a little worm has lost its way home, and it hurries, terrified, from under the blade of the retracted shovel in your hand. Shots streak over your head: "Faster!" "Faster!" While here, right in front of your eyes, life has flashed suddenly out at you from the innards of the earth.

Life! Why should you dig yourself a grave with your own hands? Aim your spade like a rifle! Leap over your grave, and –

Eyes stare up at you out of the earth, eyes that you left behind at home,

pleading for your return –

"All the men outside!"

"Any man found in his house will be shot!"

You wrenched yourself away from her embrace; you left her, fist against open mouth, stifling her scream, her other hand reaching out after you.

Now, her eyes stare up at you from the earth, paralyzing your arms, so that they do not brandish your spade against the row of guns trained on you.

Here it is: life! Crying out at you from your own grave:

Live!

Dig and stay alive!

"Beloved, don't do anything to prevent your return to me!..."

Here it is: life! Can you hear its cry?

"Oh my love! Don't bring it about with your own hands!..."

"As long as your hands keep digging – you live!..."

"Dig and stay alive!..."

Here it is: life! This is the way its cry rings in the ears of all those standing there, crushed together, behind you.

When you bend way down to lift your spade with even greater zeal, you can see through the space bounded by your flexed arm – their legs. Thousands upon thousands of legs, standing, motionless.

"All the men outside! !"

Every single one of them had come out of his house, leaving behind: home, wife, child. You know them –

They are the citizens of the first town to fall, a few miles from the German border, a few days after the outbreak of the Second World War.

A scream of command:

"Spades to the ground!"

"Backs to the pit!"

A single volley of shots smashes out behind your back. No!

You didn't go down. Nobody in the row went down.

A square sea of eyes. Eyes that look at you. A sea of heads, frozen amid blue sky. Rooftops sunk into the horizon like a city sunk into the bottom of a luminous sea. And maybe you've been shot, and in an instant you'll fall?

"Three steps forward!"

The movements of your feet as they step forward awaken the agony of your

life's departure from you. Mortified you stand before the sea of eyes watching you. Eyes that know you. You are ashamed to raise your eyes and look your life in the face. You are now becoming the agony of your life. In a little while, you'll see the most intimate, most hidden in you slipping out. You will lie on the earth in broad daylight. All the eyes will watch and see the gaping spasm that death will have sculpted of your mouth. You won't even be able to cover it up. You, the grown man, obediently take three steps forward, as ordered.

"Three steps back!"

Nothing exists anymore. All vanishes: buildings, sky – all gone. Your eyes are now transferred to your back. Set at the spot where your life stares down the muzzles of the guns, hugging your last breath close like a mother her infant.

All is nothing now. Except for that one spot in your back into which the bullet will slam.

"Shoulder spades!"

A row of fifteen men, spades on shoulders, is stood aside, as if on parade. In their place another row is stood – fifteen men, back to pit.

"Three steps forward!"

... The Germans are having fun. They're toying with our fear. You can see they're only shooting in the air. So take firmer steps. Nothing to fear. You saw that nothing happened to the first row. They're only joking around, playing tricks on us.

"Three steps back!"

Back? Let it be back. Just a little kidding around. And even if they shoot –

Fifteen men like supple trees. Fifteen lives toppled to the pit's hollow. You look at their faces – well you knew them. You look at the earth that you shovel on them – earth, too, that you knew.

A car drives into the factory lot, draws near. An officer steps out. You fling the shovels full of earth as fast as you can. But the face of your close friend gazing up at you from the pit, that one face you cannot cover up. Your eyes cling to his features:

Why, why did they do it?

"Heil Hitler!" The taut face of the young teacher reports:

"Fifteen shot, one punished!"

Why did they do it?

"Heil Hitler!"

Heil Hitler! Two words. A slogan. Is it possible that a whole nation –

Noonday. Still the sun lingers supine on your shovel's blade. Soon the pit will fill, the earth will appear as it was before.

You are outside. On top of the earth. You weren't buried in the pit. Somebody else was. Who now is the free one?

You stand on the earth's surface. At the first common grave, in the first conquered town, a few days after the outbreak of the Second World War. Behind you, herded together, stand –

The men of Metropoli.

4

Operation Old People

On both flanks of the main street the snow-sweepers stand aside like a guard of honor –

Operation Old People is passing by.

They are being taken to the cattle-cars.

In the dead of night Operation Old People was carried out in the ghetto. They were collected from their houses and the old folks homes. Men and women. To the last one. Yanked from their pallets and from the fierce embraces of their grown children.

Now, they're on their way to the cattle-cars.

To both sides stand the snow-sweepers – brought out of the ghetto to sweep the German-inhabited streets and avenues – their wooden snow shovels upright at their sides. They make way for Operation Old People to pass through.

The day looms like frost-white marble, polished, translucent. They march inside it.

Whiteness roundabout. White silence ringing them, hoop upon hoop. All that can be heard is the creak of feet on the dry frozen crust of swept snow. Rhythmic as the patter of glittering drops.

Snowy stillness all around. White silence. They march in this hushed translucence as through a crystal tunnel.

Last white walk –

They step: couples, arm in arm, erect, statuesque. As if the frosty blaze of

their last march had straightened their backs, the way flame straightens out bent twigs.

They step: faces sealed white; heads thrust forward; gazes fixed upon the scintillated reaches of a glass-horizon, on the circular hoary end of the tunnel –

Where death stands, waiting.

All is overcast with silent, blinding whiteness. Bedecked and draped in honor of their last march. Nothing left for snowfall to cover.

They walk in the center of the road. Ladies escorted by gentlemen. Gentlemen escorted by ladies. Carrying the icy death in the crystal gaze of their eyes. Carrying it majestically, with measured steps. Day moves before them – an empty white catafalque, drawn by six pairs of horses from the kingdom of frost. Silver blossoms wreathe its edges, diamond-points glitter at its horses' hooves.

The Germans carry their guns in lowered hands. Nobody will escape. This is Operation Old People. They flank the procession as in a silent ritual. Whitish vapor puffs from their mouths, mingling up above the heads with the breath of their captives.

Along the roadsides the snow swells on the naked branches of the trees. Branches like crystal chandeliers, suspended from on high. The day, ivory-robed, glides like a sexton from chandelier to chandelier, in silence lifting hoarfrost hands, kindling them violet and vermilion, dazzling white and icy blue –

Till all along the road they blaze with light.

Operation Old People -

They walk as if picked in fate's lottery. Their foot-steps sign in the snow a dread agreement with death. If there's to be an "Operation" in the ghetto - they're the obvious ones to go. They know: their going spells life for those left behind in the ghetto, the younger ones, their children.

Couples, arm-in-arm as they march. The black fur hat rests on Mrs. Wolfson's white hair like a snow-jewelled crown. Her arm, entwined in her husband's, holds him close to her side. Both of them – slim, tall. The good Wolfsons, everybody in town knows them. She presses her mate's arm even closer to her body. They gaze straight ahead. They are aware of each other now as they never were. He and she. By themselves. Marching. Roundabout – all is blanketed white. All veiled. Nothing. Nothing but he and she. She and he.

Marching.

Snowflakes flutter down, silvery stars drifting like confetti, wafting majes-

tically onto their heads, padding the road at their feet – a diamond carpet.

On each side, all the length of the road, the chandeliers beam violet-white, as at a festive ceremony.

It is their diamond wedding.

They march, arms locked. At the end of the road stands their nuptial canopy. He and she. She and he. Joined.

They pass on. Ladies escorted by gentlemen. Gentlemen escorted by ladies. Black-uniformed SS Germans in their wake, shadows staining lighted earth. The guns in their lowered hands swing in time to their steps.

Nobody will escape.

The falling snow erases the prints of the feet which just passed. The snow-sweepers bestir themselves. Shovels ready, they fall upon the road. New energy courses through their limbs. What they've just seen gives their hands fresh strength. They're thinking: Old People Aktion! Come to think of it, it makes sense. Those old ones are too weak to shovel snow twelve hours at a stretch. They're not fit for it. That's why the Germans are taking them to Auschwitz. But we can take the work. We can do it. Why would the Germans want to send us to Auschwitz?

Why?

5

Operation Children

Roundabout – jaundiced, sandy fields, closed by wasteland-lit horizons. No one above for the eyes to lift to. The ghetto is holding its breath –

Operation Children.

The wide ghetto-square is deserted. Window-panes of the ghetto hovels stare frozen at death unsheathed. Germans, guns in hand, sleeves rolled up, stand outside at their posts. They're everywhere: on every corner; in every sandy, deserted alley.

Soon the thing will start.

Inside the hovels, mothers clasp their children's heads to their bellies, hiding behind fathers. All eyes freeze to the dim opening of the huge van parked outside.

Heads: steel helmets, devoid of faces. These are no human beings. All your eyes see are black uniforms and trained guns. Very slowly the barrel of a machine-gun swivels around, prying, sniffing the sand-frozen alleys of the ghetto, back and forth, back and forth.

Here there is no place to hide. Empty, shambled hovels, like tents. Sand below, ghetto-sky above. Here you look death straight in the eye.

Children push against their mother's belly, as if seeking to get inside once more. Their scream, embryonic, unuttered, howls out of the mother's eyes.

Operation Children.

Here they come, out of an alley. A long file of them. Two by two, two by two. The tots from the Children's Home, their little hands clasped. Brakha,

the kindergarten teacher, leads them along.

Two by two, two by two.

Some of them pick their little heads up. The noonday glare is too strong. Their eyes squint as they view the readied guns, the silence roundabout. Brakha, their teacher, leads them.

Girls' heads. Boys' heads. Kindergarten tots. Bare feet of children. So many tiny feet step naked in the yellow sand.

Straight for the van.

Up in the dark opening of the van, stands a German. His hands snatch the children flung up to him. One after the other, one after the other. Silent are the heavens, silent the yellowed fields; silent the readied rifles, silent the ghetto hovels.

Inside the hovels, behind the panes, terror throttles the voice in the throats.

The van is full. Now they lug the infants from the Nursery. Lug them in lax hands, like bundles by their wrapping-strings. An infant to each hand. Babies whose mothers and fathers have gone away in transports; gone away quietly, since their children, left behind in the ghetto, would live.

The van is full. The bleatings of the infants hang spitted on the upright rifle-bayonets. The German standing in the van lowers a long sack to the ground. The baby-carriers stuff their burdens into the sack. More. More. Until it's full. The black boot crushes down into the bulging sack. Again. Again.

One sack tied – tossed into the van. Another sack tied – tossed into the van. Fast. Fast. Sack after sack. Sack after sack.

No longer can you hear the bleating cries. It seems as though everything has sunk beneath the shattered surface of a pond. Then, the pond's mirror smooths shut. No one above for the eyes to lift to.

Operation Children.

Clouds of dust cover the receding vans, erasing all traces of their having been here. The ghetto holds its breath. Soon the last of the Germans with their levelled guns will leave, too.

Eyes stab at windows: it's over! Must have been an Aktion against parentless children, with no one to feed them. But children whose parents work in shops essential to the war effort – they couldn't possibly take them!

Look, they're on their way out!

It's over. Death has eased his stranglehold and breaths flow freely: they're gone. Suddenly, the children in the hovels burst out sobbing. Fathers turn prosaic eyes to them: What in the world are the left-over children crying for?

6

CYANIDE IN THE GHETTO

Winter passed, summer came. No one even noticed it. In the ghetto they had long forgotten to notice such things. The sun does not dry tears, as the poets have it. For they kept flowing ever fresh as from a well that, it seemed, would never run dry. In the ghetto streets no children played. In the ghetto there were no children. There were small Jews and there were big Jews – all looking alike. The children wore on their little sleeves the same Jew armband as the elders. Just as with the yellow patch sewn against the heart. Dvortche, Hayim-Idl's wife, embroidered a tiny yellow hexagram, like a Star of David, and sewed it to Bella's dress over the heart. "How sweet! How charming!" Hayim-Idl couldn't stop rhapsodizing. And the tiny patch really had poignant charm, like the first wee white shoes of an infant.

That still another summer was passing, nobody in the shoe shop noticed. But everyone did notice that the canteen man had gotten himself a new partner. The turnover in the canteen in the shoe shop attic grew by leaps and bounds. Lately the canteen has branched out like a secret holding company, with invisible shareholders somewhere outside the shop walls.

Originally the semi-dark attic was just a cloakroom. The canteen man handed out checks and took care of the shop workers' clothes. At the same time, he also carried a sweetish soda of sorts. What else was available in the ghetto? Even this cloying drink was a luxury only the rich "screwturners" could afford. By now the canteen has become a big operation. There you can get the choicest dishes: roast goose, cheesecake, beer, and potassium cyanide.

The choicest – cyanide.

In a corner of the attic, behind the door, stands a man with a sphinx-like expression, hand buried in his trouser pocket. With him there is no talk. With him the transaction is carried out wordlessly. Just with the eyes. The incomer extends a tremulous hand. Not raising it, but holding it by his thigh, palm up, he extends quavery fingers. One pair of eyes asks: "Sure it's all there?"

The second pair of eyes replies: "Yes."

"You're not holding out on me?"

Sphinxface in the dark corner puts a reassuring hand on the doubter's shoulder, pats him lightly, intimately, and sends him off stating with his eyes, "Relax. It's all there ..."

After this mute spiritualistic rite, the cobbler is ready to go ahead and eat cheese-cake.

A cheese-cake industry. Where do they get such cheese-cake nowadays? Cobblers didn't see such cheese-cake on their table even before the war!

From the darkness behind the coat hangers, the canteen man's head keeps materializing out of the floor like an apparition, dispensing slices of cheese-cake. One of the partners stands on the margin between the dark and light, whispering continuously at the floor:

"Quarter."

"Bubbler."

"Goo."

The canteen man sprawls somewhere on the floor, weighing slices of cake, ripping chunks of roast goose, uncapping beer bottles – and dispensing. There is so much to be done. The customers are in line waiting their turn. He doesn't let out a sound. He just dispenses. Here's the quarter – a quarter of roast goose; here's the bubbler – a tall glass of foaming beer; and here's the goo – a half-pound slice of cheese-cake. All without a word. Hands reach out of the dark and serve to the heart's desire. The cheese-cake pans are concealed in the hollow between the attic floor and the machine-room ceiling. On the wooden floor lies a pile of clothes, ostensibly brought in for ripping.

A day-long pilgrimage to the attic. Those going up, those coming down. They pass each other on the stairs, not saying a word, not exchanging a glance. Each knows why the other is on his way up to the attic. By the entrance they stop and wait silently for the others to come out. Each knows why the other has come here, and why they are all standing here. So they wait in silence.

7

A Mysterious Melody

He paced the room like an animal trapped in a cage. The forebodings of 1939 came back to haunt him, laced with the dread that he was caught again in the selfsame web, and was about to repeat the same mistake. Everywhere he looked, the clods of earth were being tossed into the grave ever more thickly, with the merest crack left to see through; one more moment and he would be sealed in with Death. But today – what could be done or undone? Things were not like they had been back in 1939. Where could they run to today?

The young woman, sitting on the pallet in the corner of the room, was preoccupied with the same thoughts, but her practical mind was looking for a solution. Logic was what guided her every move, she said, even in this Age of Madness, while he was unable to listen to decisions dictated by the voice of reason at a time when the very foundations of the world were crumbling.

"We've seen it again and again," he tried reasoning with her, "that everything happening in this inferno is sheer anti-reason. The first victims were those clear thinkers, the ones who acted rationally. They were the first ones to be thrown into this *auto-da-fe*, the first to be sent to labor camps and the first sent to Auschwitz. Back in 1939 logic told us our hands were too delicate for physical labor in the Holy Land, but we surprised ourselves when they proved to be stronger than Samson's."

Seated on the pallet, her body taut as if in physical pain, she spoke as if to herself. "That means that now, after three years in the Ghetto, when it's almost over, I should do the very opposite of what logic dictates. You're right that those who acted logically were the first to be put on the trains. But at this

moment, when everything's hanging on a thread, to decide to sneak out of the Ghetto at night trying to reach the borders? I say no! Because even if we did manage somehow to get out of the Ghetto, what would be waiting for us outside? Every step on the ground would give us up, every stone would point at us, 'They are Jews ...,' because every stone outside is under the control of the Jew-hunters."

"And what about right here, inside the Ghetto," he argued.

"Inside the Ghetto? Here at least I know what to expect. I have no illusions. But the police notification about our papers might be here any minute now, and then you'll be off to safety. How can we throw away our only chance, flimsy as it is, to walk straight into the trap outside? Like fish escaping the net to flop into the sand?"

Back and forth he paced the narrow space at the foot of the pallet. "Just the way I felt then," his voice was low, to himself, "that time too ..."

She flew up and held him tight, not letting him go on. "Please don't ever remind me of that! Please! I'll do anything you say, follow you with eyes shut..." She fell silent, then, "but that doesn't mean that my mind is shut. Your plan means taking a leap in the dark to risk what's dearer to me than life – you..."

It was Saturday. He wanted to get out of the Ghetto that night, but she, clutching at a straw, begged him to wait until Sunday was over. Sunday had never been an *Aktion* day; that was the day when even Death rested. But the Post Office was open on Sunday, and perhaps this one day would turn out to be their salvation?

He was silent.

She tried again, using every argument logic could devise. "Why can't you understand what every child in the Ghetto knows, that there is no need to hide on Sunday. Tonight and tomorrow we're safe! There's no danger on Sunday. So what's the hurry?" In her heart she was already regretting that she had agreed to his desperate plan. "Anyway, the *Aktions* may stop. Even the distorted German logic would not want to shut down a workshop producing goods for the army and send its workers off to Auschwitz. Especially now, when they're preparing all those uniforms for the Eastern armies, with the storerooms full of clothes and ten wagon loads waiting to be unloaded and processed. Oh, I know that as soon as the job is finished we'll all be done with, but as long as they need working hands they won't touch us. And all we need is to gain time. And who knows! Maybe just at the crucial moment the news will come that the Wehrmacht has overthrown Hitler, as they are saying in the Ghetto. With some luck it might happen in a month or two, and mean-

while things could change. So why risk everything now?" ... She would have gone out gladly, it was her constant concern for his safety that held her back. For that she was ready to take the worst. She begged him, "Wait at least until tomorrow night ..." He bit his lip and said nothing.

*

On Saturday at midnight it was his turn to do guard duty for two hours. The Ghetto alleys were deserted as he patrolled up to the Long Road, which cut through the length of the Ghetto, the hovel-strewn alleys branching off on either side.

After two hours of guard duty with nothing but the multi-toned snoring for accompaniment on either side, seeing that no one came to relieve him, he had no choice but to do another shift.

The spirit of the night moaned round him in the wind, as he drifted along, entangled in its phantasmagoric spell. He had come as far as the craggy uninhabited mountain, yellow up-slanting layers of rock with the crevices seeming to exude the aged secret of caves. Perhaps for the sake of some exercise, or to give his mind a break from the tormenting thoughts of these last few days, he began climbing the mountain. All at once, from in among the crevices, a faraway dot of light was twinkling at him. At first he took it for a cigarette being smoked somewhere, but who would come all the way to the mountain at this hour of night? Staring at the glimmer more closely now, he saw it was not a cigarette but more like the flutter of a burning candle. Was somebody living in there unknown to anyone? He kept drawing closer, his ears straining to listen. He faintly heard something like a melody. The closer he drew, the nearer grew the wistfulness of the melody, melancholy and forlorn, and soft with the humming of many voices. He stopped. Could this be some acoustic mirage of the night, simply his own imagination playing tricks on his ears? But what his ears made out were distinct notes, rising as if from the very bowels of the mountain. He strained his every sense, intent on getting to the root of the mystifying harmony, so poignant in its ebb-and-flow, haunting, plucking at the heart. Eerie notes originating in some other world, neither their cadence nor their tune suggesting anything of the oriental or the gypsy, or the shepherd, or the sailor. Their mysterious quality rang out with a uniquely powerful bewitchment, flowing in from a secret source, beyond the spheres of life –

He found himself standing before a wooden shack. The glimmer was emanating from a crack in the wall, and so was the melody. Peering in, he saw a strange tableau, stirring his heart as much as the melody itself.

Seated around a long table, by the light of burning candles, were prayer-shawled young men, most with but the tenderest shading of beard fringing

their cheeks, their long side-locks dangling to their shoulders, satin skullcaps on their heads, their faces more luminous than the lambent candles. At the head of the table sat a black-bearded rabbinical student, oblong of face, his nose long and eagle-like, his mustache a black wick above the wing-like contours of his red lips. Close by him, in an open wooden box against the wall, stood the Scroll, the Holy Torah, in its royal blue velvet.

Eyes wide and fiery, they were swaying as they pored over the tomes before them, the rabbi's voice seeking a way through secret regions in quest of the ultimate borderline separating life from death:

"Ai... ai... ai... ai... Where are the places of sacrifice in the Temple?..."
- (*Talmud Zebahim, chapter 5*)

And the fellowship responding in concert, an ardent response imbued with unearthly reaches; the rhythm of an echo resounding from the ultimate Abode of the Souls:

"... sacrifices holy in the highest degree?..." - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

And the Rabbi following up, nodding fervently, as though in justification of the judgment, with the martyr's acceptance of the Measure of Love:

"... were slaughtered on the North side..." - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

And the fellowship responding in a harrowing, turbulent common chord, full of a fundamental perplexity at the comprehensiveness of cause and effect:

"The sacrifices holy in a lesser degree are slaughtered in any part of the Court...

... lesser degree are slaughtered in any part of the Court..." - - - - - - - - -

"Ai... ai... ai... ai... slaughtered in any part of the Court..." - - - - - - - - -

The youngest, almost a boy, following in silvery-voiced solo, his beardless face ascetic, chaste:

"Ai... ai... ai... ai... slaughtered in any part... in any part..." - - - - - - - - -

He peered in through the crack, marveling at the bizarre scene. Who were they? Where had they come from, and when? Where were they during the Assembly Points? What shops were they working in? What kind of Special Cards did they own?

The roar of a motorcycle shook him out of his wonder. Darting up to the mountaintop he saw, in the gray light of dawn, a motorcycle racing along the road, its rider, an SS man, in full battle dress.

A quarry pursued by a hail of bullets, he raced into the torpor-steeped Ghetto, cutting through the multi-toned snoring from the open-doored kennels on both sides of him along the length of the Ghetto until he reached his

hovel.

He stood by the pallet, gazing down at her, her face pure in sleep. Every second counted. Death was at their doorstep in the Ghetto by now. He touched her, stroking her face to wake her. "Get up... beloved, get up. Get dressed, down into the bunker..."

She leaped up, "What is it?"

"Nothing, just throw something on and we'll go to the bunker."

Their hovel had no bunker. They had to go to a bunker nearby, and outside the German shots could already be heard. The Ghetto was surrounded on all sides by the German machine-gun fire.

Who could have expected an attack – and on the verge of Sunday at that?

That was the last time in their lives that they were together.

8

THE LAST TRANSPORT

This is the road you all walked down, loved ones –

I now follow in your steps.

It's the road to the cattle-cars.

The sun shines from horizon-low, firing the iron triggers of the readied machine guns to a red glow. How easy it would be now to break out of the herded columns. To spit a curse into the black faces of the herders and pitch headlong into the flaming sunset.

We are the last transportees of the last ghetto. How did it come to pass that down this road went the flower and splendor of a whole nation?

To die now is not heroic. The most heroic deed now is – to live.

The last columns of the last transport are marching, to Auschwitz.

Auschwitz –

The way of escaping from death that leads to a death undreamed by Death itself.

Auschwitz –

The bearing of the last flicker of your life to Death's hinterland; your life – an innocent dove hidden deep to snuggle within the breast pocket of your defiled body; your life, which nothing could ever turn you against.

The black transport-herders are infuriated. How they would love an uprising now! How they'd love to watch the running feet get riddled, buckle in flight, the arms fling themselves into the sand afire with the sinking sun.

This is the road you all walked down, loved ones –

I now follow in your steps.

This is the road to the cattle-cars.

9

WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING

In a little room in Mila Street, Warsaw sat a group of young men and women. Sanya said:

"I'm sorry that we are unable to make the first attack on the German murderer, because we do not have the tools. But the moment they attack the ghetto we will go out to face them in open battle, and with our lives we will wipe away the shame and make amends to those who have fallen so far. So every moment is precious now. The order of the day is: to arm ourselves. To arm ourselves! To arm ourselves!"

Eli, influenced by Sanya, takes the floor: "Now at this crucial moment we must not waste our strength arguing with the ghetto Jews to persuade them of the rightness of our way. Sad to say, the Germans will do that for us. But then, when we light the fire of revolt every Jew will come with hands outstretched asking us for weapons and we will have none to give them. Therefore, our one duty now is to arm ourselves! And again, to arm ourselves!"

2

Urgent news from the counter-espionage to the headquarters of the JFO (Jewish Fighters Organization): "Signs of mobilization in German armed forces. Armored tanks arriving at the German garrison. Gestapo forces converging on Warsaw from all around."

Sanya is agitated. Two deliveries of weapons should have reached the ghetto by now. She sent Eli hurrying over to the Aryan side and he came back with

the answer: they are having problems smuggling weapons into the ghetto. Therefore, Sanya decided to go out herself to the Aryan side and hasten the transaction.

On April 17, 1943 Sanya came back to the ghetto knowing that the matter was settled: within two days the weapons would be in the ghetto. She made her way to the secret address in Mila Street, but found no-one there, then to Mundek's hiding place, no-one was there, either. This was very strange. She ran back to Mila Street, perhaps she would find some code message there. Arriving, she found Eli waiting for her return from the Aryan side. He told her that the leaders of all the Jewish organizations had gathered together at that moment in the hall of the Jewish Mutual Help Society, and they insisted on the JFO's presence.

Sanya was furious: "Who needs this now? Now, when danger is so near, do we have time to listen to speeches? What will they talk about there? Now is the time when our entire organization must be mobilized! The commanders! The signalers! The whole HQ staff must be in a state of highest readiness! Every moment, every moment! Time is short, mobilization!"

The ghetto revolt counter-espionage: Alert: "The Germans are preparing for the decisive battle. War operation. Offensive."

The JFO strategic points were manned according to plan, following the order from HQ. Weapons were handed out, everybody waited impatiently for the two wagons that carried the dead out of the ghetto, in which the weapons were to be smuggled in. Without these weapons the battle was lost. The JFO did not possess even one machine gun, and only a few grenades, rifles and pistols.

The situation was critical. Night passed and the arms had not arrived.

Sanya ordered: "Quick, prepare Molotov cocktails! Everyone to work! Make as many as possible! Get the materials together quickly!"

These were now the JFO's only weapons against Hitler's German Armed Forces.

Dawn, April 19, 1943. Urgent message from the outposts: "Heavily armed German advance forces sighted marching past Tebens-Schultz-Gebeit towards the Central Ghetto, motorized SS troops ready for marching orders."

In an attic at the end of Mila Street Sanya Schmidt lay under the rafters, not a woman but a storm, around her waist a belt with bullets and grenades, holding an automatic pistol in her hand, with Molotov cocktails all around her. Her head peered out between the rafters, her eyes like two panthers ready to spring, Sanya eagerly awaited the great moment that would purify and cleanse the pain from her soul.

Sanya was to give the first signal for the uprising. German troops had already reached the end of Mila Street. Sanya was silent. The Germans saw clearly that the Jews were not even dreaming of resistance and revolt, it must have been idle talk. So their steps became more confident and they began shouting in their usual German fashion, soon they would, as always, collect the Jewish *drek*, all of them, all of them, the remnants of the Warsaw ghetto, herding them to "Umshlag-Platz", to be loaded straight onto the cattle-cars, straight for the incinerator. Drunk with murder-lust, as always, with wild German voices: "Raus ! ! Raus ! ! ! Out of the rat-holes ! ! ! "

Sanya was silent.

The murderers burst into Mila Street. Sanya was silent, and as if by command the whole street was silent. The houses were silent, the attics were silent, death spread its wings over Mila Street, everything was silent. Silence. The Germans were happily preparing for the slaughter, and when the last German had turned into Mila Street Sanya stood up with two flamebottles in her hands, and let forth a dreadful scream:

God of vengeance! Oh, God of vengeance, God will revenge us! Oh God, come down and wreak vengeance!

The two flamebottles hurled by Sanya exploded at the end of Mila Street, turning it into a burning gateway. The signal for the revolt had been given. At that moment the other end of Mila Street burst into flame, forming another burning gate. Mila Street was closed at both ends by two gates of fire.

At the same moment the skies were filled with a hail of burning iron and granite, from all the openings and windows of the houses, from attics and cellars, from rooftops and from hidden crevices in the walls. From every hole the fire spat destruction and vengeance on the German Angel of Death. The heroic child murderers ran towards the end of the street, but there was no way out. Sanya guarded the gate of fire at her end.

On a roof at the end of Mila Street, under the skies of the Warsaw ghetto, stood Sanya Schmidt, survivor of "Mittelstein," the ghetto from which her beloved Harry Preleshnik, tortured in the Gestapo dungeons, was taken to Auschwitz. There she stood with flamebottles in her hands, she herself a banner fluttering under the burning skies. From her lips burst the cry of rebellion of a ravished people:

"Fire for fire!... Honor for ravishment!..."

3

The next day reinforcements arrived from the Waffen-SS, with machine

guns on armored vehicles, artillery, tanks. The German army fully armed for the battle against the Maccabees.

The Warsaw ghetto became a battlefield.

The enemy set fire to the ghetto houses, house after house, step by step, the Warsaw ghetto burned - smoke and flames covered the sky.

The enemy deployed and concentrated its forces in Schvienta-Yerska Street, the road where Abram's group of fighters was posted. From here the enemy prepared to attack the central streets of the ghetto.

When the enemy forces arrived at no. 34 and the defenders had no place to flee to, Mundek, the popular sportsman, jumped from the roof, a bundle of heavy explosives tied round his athletic body and in his arms another load of explosives.

The force of the explosion in the middle of the German masses was stupendous. Iron and ammunition flew up into the sky above the Warsaw ghetto, mingled with torn bodies of the enemy. The hangman's forces were blown up by the utterance of the Holy Name on the lips of the new Samson, the young Jewish fighter of the Warsaw ghetto.

On that day the German Angel of Death fled the ghetto battlefield, leaving behind him torn and mangled corpses.

On the third day of the battle the enemy began bombing the Warsaw ghetto. Waffen-SS and German soldiers attacked the young Jewish men and women from behind a protective wall of tanks; face to face they were afraid to show themselves.

The ghetto burned day and night. The German army spat fire from the sky and from the earth. Panzer tanks rolled into the yards of the ghetto houses and heroes with explosive charges tied to their bodies threw themselves behind the enemy tanks.

On May 8, no. 18 Mila Street was blown up by the German forces. All the people were buried under the debris. The enemy threw poison gas into the bunkers. The last remnant of the revolt fell.

The sky over the whole of Warsaw was filled with the flames of the fire that burned day and night in the Jewish ghetto. The people of Warsaw stared in wonder towards the ghetto:

"What is it over there in the burning flames? What is the mysterious strength hiding there that the German conquerors of the world cannot defeat? Not even a trace of such fighting rebellion had been seen in 1939, when Rids-Shmigly's Polish army was defending Warsaw ...

What would have been the outcome if the weapons they were waiting for

had reached the ghetto before April 19, 1943?

The Warsaw ghetto rose to the heavens in fire and flames, the handful of survivors went down into the sewers that spread as a network below the whole of the city. Tired fighters floated like broken fragments in the excrement and dirt of the Warsaw sewers.

Somewhere in a street in Warsaw, far away from the burning ghetto, a manhole opened and from out of the earth rose: hands, shoulders. It seemed as if the entire globe rested on those shoulders.

10

The Move to Another Planet

The train arrived on the new Planet and stopped. The doors were shoved apart and humanity drained out of the cattle trucks onto the vast platform.

Night was all around, swathing the destination in black. No screams here, no speech. The Site of Silence. Soundlessness was all around, engulfing the outflow of humanity from the cattle trucks. The different laws governing here were instantly tangible; the air was different; the platform lights here shed a different glow. Night here had an essence all its own. Night here was at the beck and call of an omnipotent sovereign, a sovereign supreme over the Planet. Night muffled, stealing inaudibly on tiptoes to envelop you, inaudibly, so as to keep from trespassing upon the terrifying silence reigning supreme.

No speech, here. Demons but glancing at you and you are converted; instantly made to feel you are no longer you, but an all-of-you, totally transmuted into a focus of glowing intent; intent upon the bidding of the eye glancing at you.

Harry stood among his people and saw the captive denizens of the Planet; all one – round-headed, hairless. Livid, rounded skulls; and the garb – pants, shirt, and the little cap perched on the skull-tip – all one, light-colored and striped.

The Stripees were just as soundless – like fish. Swimming, too, across the platform like fish in an aquarium – swift, nimble, and as soundless. Not a

walk, but darting, back and forth. The Demons standing apart, their glances activating the little fish to dart, to flutter, soundlessly.

Stripees took to arraying the importees in rows, and the newcomers instantly obeyed, just as voicelessly. An execution swift and silent, until, from among the Demons, one approached, to move his finger right then left – a finger-dialect the Stripees were completely at home with. In a darting race they snatched at the newcomers, classifying them, right, left, nimble and voiceless.

The newcomers recalled having witnessed something similar in the previous world. There this had been done not at the nod of a finger but at the motion of a bamboo cane, with blue-white caps to act on its command. That, however, had been in the human world, where life had gone on, with people around to scream and weep and tear at their hair. But what was the connection with this world of the Hereafter? With this Afterlife Planet? What was going on here? Life was nothing but a dream here – or, rather, death was.

The mute ritual now over: of the humanity riding from the other world, about 50 percent had suffocated in the cattle trucks; of the remaining percentage, 40 were stood to the left, ten to the right.

Harry's lot fell with the 10 percent.

Mammoth vans, monster-eyed headlights aglow, materialized before the 40 percent, swallowing them up.

The 10 percent were marched off from the right. Where? Fear shaken up with curiosity. Now entering through a wide gate. Dawning upon the eyes – endless shapes of barracks, oblong, windowless, mystifying – dawning upon the eyes.

Now made to enter one of the oblong structures, the eyes seeing its emptiness, except for a brick oven bisecting the void from end to end. The length of the terrifying oven alerting more than one: that's the oven ...

Whereupon a new bunch of Stripees was upon them. Except that these spoke a unique kind of speech, which made the hair stand on end. One of them skipped up on top of the center of the oven, and the newcomers could now actually hear the first syllables of the new Planet addressed to them:

"Boys!" yelled Stripee to them. "Anybody with 'hard' or 'soft' stuff on him, any 'pebbles[1],' better cough 'em up now. You won't be needing anything where you're going anyway."

Good G-d, Yiddish! What's going on here? Mama's tongue, here, on this Outland? And Stripee – a landsman[2]? They were ready to kiss him, their eyes shiny with tears. Think of it, Stripee's just an ordinary Jew, like any one of us.

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1. Pebbles: Gold coins, dollars, diamonds. *2.* Landsman: fellow countryman.

But: "hard" and "soft" stuff, Good G-d, in the afterlife? Oh mama, quick, what is this? Where have we landed?

"Cough em up, boys, let's have the loot!" Stripee was prodding.

What in the name of Heaven is he talking about? Loot – in this place? He must be mad! To take along "hard" or "soft" stuff on the exodus to the Hereafter, who could have thought of it? Everyone squeezes closer toward Stripee, heads, eyes and mouths surrounding him with questions:

"Don't they burn you in this place?"

"Do they feed you here?"

"Hey, friend, no more Assembly Points in this place?"

"Wives and children here too?"

"How long have you been here yourself?"

From his post atop the oven, Stripee's boot singled out one from among the inquisitive mob to give him an answer in the face so decisive that the curious one just spat out his front teeth, like so many extra pebble stones: "*Vögel* off, *hure-son*. Up your *hurein*' mother's *loch*!"

The tone now was different, totally divorced from the voice Stripee had previously employed when requesting them to turn over the "hard" and "soft" stuff.

"All of you, strip!" he thundered.

The newcomers trembled: To speak Yiddish, then, doesn't rule you out from being a tyrant on this Planet?

They had not finished stripping, when Stripee's knout, flaying over their heads, made them instantly naked, then, made them sprint in their nakedness out into the cold darkness of the night.

Tall chimneys could be seen looming in the distance, emitting heavy knots of smoke. "That's them stacks, *huresons*. They'll help you make your way up to heaven!"

Knees shook and jumped in a dance, teeth joining in step.

A first group was taken to the "Sauna" for disinfection. Like a sleepwalker, each crossed the threshold naked, mouth agape, arms stretching out splayed fingers, a bunch of Stripees meanwhile feeling the most private parts of the body's orifices for hidden "hards," "softs" or "pebbles," while more than one, put to the Sauna probing process, regarded its showers as a momentary camouflage, to be followed by Death the Unknown, whom they'd soon see with their own eyes, not realizing that Death took its own sweet time in coming, here.

The "Sauna" turned them out all looking alike; even the hair one never parts with during an entire lifetime, now shorn. Patched pants and a shirt barely covering the shoulders – the garb and shrouds issued on arrival to those gone to kingdom come. Bare feet, bare back, bare skull.

A flock of Stripees, papers in their hands, busied themselves with the registration: what each had, on the sinful earth, done for a living; what country each had for origin; what nation he had been part and parcel of. Perfect German Order, it seemed, was not left out anywhere, not even in the Hereafter.

During this mass question-answer processing, there was one who could not contain himself: "Please, forgive ... Uh, I beg your pardon ... do they live here?"

Anyone wanting to live here's got to kill somebody else, came the answer.

A peculiar scribe was posted by the last long table, a peculiar pen in his hand. He was inscribing, but not on paper; instead, the newcomers, one at a time, would extend the left arm, as if letting a tailor measure its length for a sleeve, whereupon the peculiar scribe would dip his peculiar pen into peculiar ink, and, rather than write, would stab the left arm's flesh and numbers would leap out: 135633. The scribe stabbed as he spoke: "Get this, *hureson*, Hymie Cohen isn't your name any longer. You're dead. Name's exactly what this number says on your arm. It's what they call you by when the furnace wants you. Got it?"

On removal from the scene of registration, total equality had been established – all were in one image, and dispossessed of the last distinguishing mark brought along from the other world – the individual name. Harry Preleshnik, no longer Harry Preleshnik, but turned into a number, was one of a collective kind, one of a collective name – Ka-Tzetnik[3].

3. Ka-Tzetnik: K.Z. (in German pronounced 'Ka-Tzet') are the initials of Konzentration Zenter (concentration camp). Every K.Z. inmate was nicknamed Ka-Tzetnik.

11

FACE TO FACE

Naked march into the night.

Midnight silence of Auschwitz.

You cannot hear a single step from all the bare feet marching on the ground. You do not know the length of the column in which you march, where it begins, where it ends. Around you breathe naked human bodies, marching. Six abreast. Six abreast.

A transport is being led to the Auschwitz "Bath House."

Over your head vaults a star-sprinkled sky, and before your eyes a smoke-stack thrusts skyward. Thick, fatty smoke gushes out. Sparks beyond count. Sparks scatter and flash across the starry sky, mingle with the stars, and you cannot tell whose light is the brighter.

Unnumbered naked bodies. Auschwitz under your bare feet. The column marches towards the smokestack.

Night about you. Auschwitz about you. Death holds your life between his hands – a circular mirror held up to your eyes. Death in person you don't as yet see. His face is hidden behind the mirror. His breath alone blows on you, the way wind blows on a spark in ashes –

The better to see it go out.

On both sides walk SS Germans, silhouettes of silence mantled in night. No longer are you free to choose your own death. Already, you've been handed over. Death, your master, is now taking you to his abode.

Walking under his long cloak, you scent his smell. No longer can you change places with anyone. He knows your flesh by now. He has seen you. Naked, you come unto him.

No longer are you free to choose your death. This is – Auschwitz. Already your feet tread the corridors of your death. In a moment, you'll go inside and see him face to face:

Him, your lord and master, Death-of-Auschwitz.

Hush. No one here dares breathe a word. Words are no more. Sparks slip out of the smokestack. You squeeze the bit of soap in your fist. Countless feet. Naked feet. You can't hear their steps. Night leads you unto itself. Stars vanish over your head. Nothing is yours anymore. Even your head's hair has been taken away from you. This hair is still worth something – you are shorn of all. Except for a single spark you still carry within you. Death has bought it on the Jew-Market. It belongs to him. Soon it will shoot out of the smokestack.

Auschwitz.

What kind of factory has death established here? Of what use to him can be sparks leaping from the smokestack?

12

INSIDE

A network of pipes above your head. From the pipes just shower sprinklers. Row upon row of sprinklers. And in the sprinklers – pores.

From somewhere in among the sprinklers, rusted opaque light drains down, illuminating what is imminent.

The open gate thrusts into the night. Still they keep coming in, an unbroken stream: naked bodies. More and more. Human beings. All of them looking alike. More, still more.

It's getting packed. Bodies – nude and cl[illegible]y, around you. Naked skin on naked skin. At each contact your body sh[illegible] But a[illegible] the shudder runs over you, you suddenly thrill to a feeling of repr[illegible]

It wakens a sense of life in you. You still have a body! A body of your own. As if you had it thrust anew into your arms. Never did you love your body so. You feel: fear whetting knife-blades on it.

Soon it must grapple with a faceless death. Soon you will see him – face to face. He sits on high, inside the sprinkler-pores. Any second now –

All eyes are fixed on the sprinkler-pores overhead.

The gates of the "Bath House" lock. Even night is no more.

Naked bodies enclose your body. Trembling, the way your body trembles. The tremor runs from end to end, like wind through cornstalks in a field. The ends you cannot see, but you can feel the shudder of all the bodies through your own. The gates are sealed. Even night is gone. Nothing but bodies. All bodies are now – your body, just as the death of any one body is now – the

death of your own.

Inch by inch all bodies turn to stone. A crust of hoarfrost jells over all. Petrified, all.

Necks.

Not a head to be seen. Not a face. Nothing but necks. Necks thrown back. A plateau of necks flung back. Headless.

To start with – a torso; on top of it – shoulders; on top of the shoulders – a neck.

And atop the neck – pores. Dark pores.

Sprinkler-pores of the Auschwitz "Bath House."

Rust-clotted light eddies between the necks and the shower pores. In this light, death hovers. About to swoop.

Necks like cobblestones. Death steps upon them as on stones of a deserted street. Here, he is all by himself. Here, he is on his own grounds, alone. This is his abode. Here, he casts off his veils and his face shows. Here, in the sealed "Bath House"; here, in this inner sanctum of the Temple of Auschwitz.

And you see him.

Heads flung back to the nape, like chickens' heads in the slaughterer's grip. Mouths wide open. Necks stretched out. To the slaughtering knife on high.

You see his face.

Death's face.

The necks take no breath.

Suddenly:

A wisp of white steam. Unhurried. Leisurely. Lightly twisting and weaving. Gracefully curling against the sprinkler-pores as if circling a floor in dance. And gone.

The necks take no breath.

Then from the pores swell – drops. Single drops. Pendulous. Pear-shaped. Unfalling. Suspended above the eyes –

The necks take no breath. Petrified.

Suddenly:

Thin, scalding streaks, vapor-encoiled. White-hot whips. A moment – and off they break in mid-air.

Gone.

Once again, empty pores, dark and secretive. Shower-pores of the Auschwitz "Bath House."

Suddenly:

Thin, freezing streaks. Biting whips of frost. A moment – and off they break in mid-air. Gone.

Empty pores, dark and secretive. The shower-pores of the Auschwitz "Bath House."

Over again,

again,

and again.

All at once a wailing shriek crashes out:

"Water ! ! !

Man – water ! ! !

Necks suddenly beget heads – heads with eyes; heads with mouths. Head wheels around to head. Eyes transfix eyes. Mouths fall open in unison:

"Water ! ! !"

"Water ! ! !"

"Water ! ! !"

Bodies leap up into the air, howling and screaming, tearing their scalps as they would tear hair. Drenched in tears they bawl out their happiness in wild, uncontrollable weeping:

"W–a–t–e–r ! ! !"

At the walls, fingers pinch their own body; raving mad they scratch and grovel at the blank walls:

Water ! ! !

As if corks had all at once blasted from their stoppered throats. All as one, they wail with twisted mouths, weeping and flailing arms gone crazy with joy.

"W–a–t–e–r ! ! !"

One, the Know-it-all in every crowd, shouts back at them: "Shut up! Of course it's water! That's all it is – water!"

But not one of them pays him any attention. The mouths sob at him, shrieking insanely:

W–a–t–e–r ! ! !

Until the gates unlock.

Outside, the night foams and bubbles with the mirthful guffaws of SS Germans; it rolls on the waves of their laughter, breaking over black-horizoned shores. The Germans stand in the dark and look on, the way spectators

watch a comedy enacted on a brightly-lit screen – and double up in laughter.

The naked bodies stream out, as if spewed onto an unfamiliar shore. Opposite them, the sparks stream from the smokestack and vanish over the starry sky. Stupefied, they stare at the laughing maws and do not understand –

They do not understand that truly happy were those who got, not water out of sprinklers, but Zyklon cans jetting blue gas into their lungs, instead.

They do not understand that truly happy were those who at the very threshold of Auschwitz were turned into these sparks, now spraying out of the smokestack opposite –

W–a–t–e–r !

They are alive –

And they go marching, drunk with joy, toward the blocks of camp called "Auschwitz."

13

Dawn in Auschwitz

Backs.

Backs and eyes –

In Auschwitz, everyone tries to draw his back as high as he can, as if the back were a woolen blanket you could pull over your head to keep warm.

On the narrow back path running along the blocks.

More than ten thousand shadow-men.

No beginning, no end to them. There is no beginning, no end in Auschwitz. Everywhere around, beyond the walls of barbed wire surrounding your camp, range more camps. No end of camps. Isolated from each other, like stars. A galaxy, as yet beyond human ken and exploration. To the right – "B" Camp, to the left – Quarantine Camp, behind – Women's Camp. In front the Milky Way, down which the packed vans roll without cease, without cease, to the crematorium.

And above all – the final hour ...

The final hour of the night. Ten thousand pairs of eyes spill out of the blocks every day at this hour, the hour before dawn, into the back path. Cleanliness. The German loves cleanliness, so now the block orderlies "clean out" the blocks they are apportioning the bread rations. Instead of four, they'll cut eight and ten rations from each loaf. The loaves they gain this way will soon be on their way to the latrine – the camp stock exchange – to be traded for cigarettes for the Block Chiefs. Four cigarettes to the loaf. And outside, on the back path running along the blocks, ten thousand and more shadow-men

hop a hypnotic jungle dance, foot up, foot down

The cold earth of Auschwitz sucks through the soles of bare feet the last remains of marrow from the bones.

Eyes –

A river, over which rain-whips endlessly trace enormous, gaping water eyes; a stream which flows from the railroad platform to the crematorium. Ever the same stream, never the same drops. Drops ever changing, ever new. You see them in their sluggish silence flow past as they look at you with glass-sheened gazes, probing your face for some stir of their own lives which stream by – out of their reach – and see naught. Not even the camp they're passing through.

Eyes –

Eyes that for fifty years struck foundations for generations to come; and eyes of fifteen years, in first beauty of flowering, brimming with sap and vitality, finest of mankind, the crown of creation.

Eyes –

Eyes of lords of wealth, ruthless tyrants of international trade marts; and eyes of careworn shopkeepers, harassed and cowed, penniless tradesmen whose worries have been handed down to them at birth; where will food for the Sabbath come from, who will pay the teacher's wages?

Eyes –

Eyes of seekers, men of science, artists anointed with divine gifts of genius; and eyes of thick-tongued laborers, prayer books clasped in blackened, calloused hands. Grey as the days of the week, nondescript as the chemicals fructifying our earth.

Eyes –

Eyes of self-designated lordlings, society's upper crust, whose names the clash of cymbals always heralded, yet miserly, insatiable, enviously ill-willed if ever success shone in through another's window; and eyes of men of soul, delicate spirits, noble, modest – the aroma of our lives.

All along the road, from the Auschwitz railroad platform to the crematorium, these eyes all now beg the answer to one question: When will the soup ration ever be handed out?

O, Night-of-Auschwitz on backs and eyes!

Hour of awful despair and pity.

Enigma of an hour when night wraps in one black robe SS man and campling alike.

Far, far off lights speed down the main road. You know: each pair of lights – a packed van heading for the crematorium. Many a time you have wished to be taken to the crematorium at night. Better by night than by day. At night you can cry. Never did anyone weep on his way to the crematorium by day. At night, tears come from your eyes.

Awesome mystery of Night-of-Auschwitz, never to be fathomed by mortal man –

Until night is drawn from your lids, like black scabbard slipped from the sword. Slowly the chill blade of Auschwitz day gleams bare.

To the west, the red bulbs still glow along the barbed-wire – a coral necklace on the flesh of Auschwitz night.

To the east, the new day already shows ashen grey in among the block roofs, as if the mounds of ash had quit their posts near the crematorium, falling into line here, between one roof and the next.

The SS sentry climbs down the watchtower ladder, rung by rung: first, the black boots, then rifle slung across back. He carries the night with him, folded and shrivelled. Like a black cross, night roosts on his shoulder. He turns over his post to his Kamerad, the day sentry, who climbs up the ladder, rung by rung: first the hands, white hands, soaking into the new day – your day.

Every hunched-up back in Auschwitz now proffers your eyes to your own loneliness. Each pair of eyes gazes at you with the pity for a life that once bore your name –

Dawn of Auschwitz on backs and eyes.

14

A Tear in the Death Camp

Upon his transfer from Camp Sakrau to Camp Niederwalden, Harry suddenly found himself a "physician."

Against the background of the labor camp, the whole matter of the "sick bay" seemed like a toy in the hands of a maniac. The room was two by nothing and to begin with was set up as a whim of the Camp Commander, so he could brag to the Kameraden in the nearby labor camps: In his camp he has a sick bay! The only bed in the room was a crib. The Commander had picked it up some place because it was white. It was the color that sold him on it. Makes an impression. Just like in a hospital. Even a small glass cabinet had been installed, and on each of the three shelves stood myriad little bottles. First and foremost: bottles! The Camp Commander gets a big kick out of seeing a lot of bottles. Full or empty – it's all the same. The main thing: the little white labels inscribed in Latin.

To Harry it all seemed as though he were dreaming of a dream.

The whole camp was like a phantasmagoric dream. Although the people within it did not sense it. They were incapable of sensing it. They moved through the camp, as over the surface of the labor area, both on their march-out at dawn and on their march-in at dusk, like creatures whose will had been completely drained from their veins without their being aware when and how it was done to them. Like hollow men; empty containers bobbing at sea. They went where they were taken and stood where they were put. Like inert train

cars that continue rolling down the tracks after the locomotive has been detached. To a stop. Death drew its curtain over their eyes. Eyes which were already unseeing, but only reflected everything around them with the sheen of dead glass.

But as medic, Harry was comparatively well off and his senses were fully capable of clearly seeing and feeling the horror of the dream about him. And viewing himself in the sick bay, and all the rest of it as a whole against the general backdrop of the labor camp – he felt he was dreaming a dream-with-in-a-dream.

He, of all people, had been chosen by fate. Queer. He can't remember ever having been a pusher, ever having sought the limelight, ever having sought to attract attention. Not in fantasy, nor in real life. Never. His close friend, Henry Baum the painter, once told him, "You know, Harry, you don't have elbows. But that's all right. You have wings which will carry you much further than those who elbow their way through ..." Strange that the same thing should happen to him even here, in the other world, in the German labor camp. True, before the war he had begun to study medicine. He liked the profession. But then, there are doubtless many like him at camp, some even graduate doctors, who bit by bit are spitting up their tortured souls on the Baustelle[1].

His first day here, on returning from the Baustelle at dusk with the labor platoon, the Camp Commander called him out of the ranks by name, and sizing him up from head to toe, then and there dubbed him: Physician.

"Physician! We'll build a sick bay in our camp ..."

Well, what was he supposed to say to that? First of all, on the march-in from the Baustelle it had already become clear to him that a few more such days and he'd come back a corpse on somebody's shoulders. Besides, the Camp Commander's tone of voice didn't seem to call for any comment on his part that might disappoint His Excellency and the upshot of which would be – immediate death by flogging.

And he wanted very much to live.

God in heaven is his witness that he's ashamed to look the prisoners in the face. It's hard for him to meet their glances at dawn when they march off the Baustelle and in the evening when they come back. Before it's even dawn, after roll call, they are marched out to the Baustelle, a march which is as good as walking to their death, while he – he heads for the toy room. In the evening they come back bearing the day's kill on their shoulders, line themselves up on the assembly ground and wait for roll call. While he, the Physician, who also has to stand roll call, comes there from the sick bay. From their tattered

1. Baustelle (pronounced Baushtelle): labour area.

rags the Baustelle breathes like fang marks of a beast on the shredded garment of its victim.

God is his witness that he feels ashamed in their presence. He knows he's no better than they. By what right does he sit idle in the camp all day? What makes him different from them? By right, they should loathe him, shun him with disgust. But it isn't so. Just the reverse. They look up to him like cowering dogs, with veneration: The Physician! They are lined up for noon soup and see him go right to the head of the line, come back from the window with a brimming bowl of soup in each hand – and their veneration mounts. It stands to reason: the Physician shouldn't stand in line with all the others. The Physician is a V.I.P. He has his own private room. He doesn't get flogged, doesn't go out to the Baustelle, isn't as tattered as they. He's no common riffraff like them.

As he passes with the two bowls of soup in his hands, someone in the line risks the question, "Mr. Physician! When is it all right to come in and have a foot bandaged?"

"Any time you feel like it," Harry replies.

The questioner's eyes light up. He is pleased. He got out of the question all in one piece. With the Jew-Chief or with the Kapo[2] you never know when instead of an answer you'll get a tooth knocked out or a kick in the crotch. But not the Physician. To him you can talk. The questioner feels good. He is elated. His face beams: First of all, he's on the soup line – his twenty-four-hour-a-day dream is about to come true. Secondly, he has just completed a successful conversation with one of the camp elite. Out of the dismal abyss, luck has flashed him a smile – and he is beatified.

Odd. Of all of them, fate had chosen him to go on being alive even in the camp. He doesn't understand it. His looks may have had something to do with it. The Commander fusses with him and pretties him up as if he were an item belonging to the sick bay. He even brought him a white linen coat, which must have been taken from a new arrival.

"Physician! Fix yourself a white smock from this, and let everyone see there's a physician in camp!"

Another time, the Commander brought him a red sash.

"Physician! Sew yourself a red cross on your sleeve. A big cross, so it will stand out."

During roll call, he stands apart from the rest. Even the Jew-Chief has to line up among the others. Not to mention the Kapo and the rest of the func-

2. Kapo: labour overseer.

tionaries. But the Physician in his white smock, with the big red cross on the sleeve, stands apart. He is the prince among the camp nobility. Everyone marches to the Baustelle. Many of them will come back dead on their fellow's shoulders. At the evening roll call many will lie on the ground, in a separate row, alongside the first row. They'll count the living, add up the corpses arranged on the ground: all present and accounted for.

Everyone marches to work, while he goes back into his sick bay. Fate must have marked him out for herself.

In the medicine cabinet the bottles are arrayed in even rows. But on the table, too, there are bottles. It's prettier this way. More impressive. The table has a glass top, on which stand jars of all varieties with medicaments of every sort.

Many of the transportees took medicines along with them when they set out on their trip. Mothers' hands had packed them in with tears, wrapped them in white cloth and given them to their children heading for the German labour camp: "It'll come in handy if, God forbid, you scratch your finger at work."

Whenever a new transport arrives, the Camp Commander comes striding into the sick bay with the good news:

"Physician! A real haul for the sick bay. Go to it!"

In the corner of the block[3], where arrivals are searched for the last time, there lie on the floor, off to the side, bandages, gauze, cotton, iodine, valerian, ichthyol, boric acid, zinc ointment, calcium pills, aspirin, pills for constipation and diarrhea – a real haul for the sick bay.

Upward of a thousand human bodies which, like stuffed dummies, you do not know what's inside them, and you can't get to know what propels them forward still; their whole being motivated by one will, "Eat!"; their lacerated bodies festering with gangrenes as big as the belly, as big as the back – sores to which they have become used as one grows used to polish on manicured nails. Overnight they swell like barrels. Now what: can't pull the pants up the legs. Stark naked they march out to the Baustelle, their jackets tied round their genitals. Their bloated nakedness glistens against the clear sky like an inflated toy balloon. But oh, the privy parts are covered.

"Tahitians!" the Germans snicker.

"Tarzans, forward march!"

And the "balloons" march forward to work.

Overnight they suddenly shrivel again to long, scraped bones. You don't know how and when the miracle came to pass. You don't recognize them in

3. Block: barrack.

their skeletonness, just as you didn't recognize them in their swollenness. Their human semblance has long since been obliterated, as routed out with a plane. Even the identifying marks that distinguish one body from the other are completely blurred by now.

"Physician! A real haul for the sick bay. Go to it!"

On the glass top of the white-lacquered table, more and more toys move in: shiny aluminum boxes, fancy made-in-Germany medicine bottles, spools of adhesive tape. The empty boxes mustn't be thrown away. Were the physician to do so, he'd have to answer for it with his life. A chart hangs on the wall, on which is entered, with German punctiliousness, each and every addition to the collection. On the table everything must be aligned just so: large with large, small with small, measured and sorted by height and by width:

Order! Symmetry! Discipline! Let's have a good show!

The steel-gleaming surgical instruments are the Camp Commander's favourites. They were sent to him by the Service Corps HQ personnel as a gift for the sick bay. They, too, must be arrayed on the glass top according to category and size – a precise, even row: the tweezers, pincers, scalpels, and one sixteenth of an inch between each instrument and the next.

If it were possible to let at least one of the people rest in the sick bay for just one single day – not, God forbid, in the white crib! What a preposterous idea. Everyone knows that the white crib was put in the sick bay solely and exclusively as a show-piece. It is not to be touched! But if at least they'd let someone lie on the floor for a day, it would do him more good than all the best medicine in the world. But it's prohibited to be sick in the camp. That is why the Commander set up the sick bay, so everybody should be healthy.

In the evening, after work, a long line winds before the sick bay door. Those who can still feel hunger sucking away at their life's blood line up for the doctor after they have swallowed the watery soup and have licked their tin plate inside and out. But those who take their soup ration out of sheer reflex – they no longer line up for the doctor, though their body be threadbare as a shredded floor rag, it no longer bleeds blood anyway. They crawl up into their hutches and wait there to hear again the waking gong, when they will again file off to the Baustelle. They don't even know if night has passed meanwhile; don't feel whether they slept or didn't sleep. It's a sort of continuation whose beginning is beyond recall and whose end is not in sight. It's the Mussulman[4] phase, during which things no longer register in the mind, but are only reflected in the glassiness of the eyes.

4. Mussulman: A prisoner whose bones were all that held him together.

Eyes, the setting of whose own life only mirrors itself in them, at a distance.

Often, when the bedtime gong is heard, they come crawling down from their hutches, go out of the block and line up on the assembly ground in precise, even rows. As if by command. They think the gong has sounded morning roll call, and they are ready to march out to work. They have to be driven back up into their hutches. And they don't understand. Why the change? They no longer distinguish between the dark of night and the light of day. Their calcified brains clearly heard the knelling of the gong, and they don't understand. Why aren't they marching out to the Baustelle?

In the evening, the sick bay is crowded with naked legs and arms. Legs. Legs of every variety. As if the whole world were made up of nothing but legs. No bodies. Just long, jutting limbs. At times a pair of eyes flickers. The eyes had fallen upon an open box of white salve. The salve recalls – margarine; or cheese. The eyes want to swallow it. To sink in it the naked crags of teeth protruding from the fleshless gum bones. Better move the box further back on the table.

Harry unbandages a swollen leg. The infection has spread in a big circle over the whole width of the leg. It reeks of rotting flesh. The leg exudes a rank heat, as a mound of rubbish whose top layer has only just been removed after a long while. The flesh is brown, as though it had been roasting, porous and nodose as a sponge. But a sponge is quaggy, and this decay is hard as rock. What is he to do? The wicker wastepaper-basket is again already full of chunks of scoured-out rottenness. Usually there's not much to do. Especially with fingers. It starts with a rotting nail. It branches through the palm, or into a nearby finger. So he amputates the cankerous finger and a few days later the hand gets well. That is, if the prisoner hasn't first had the life knocked out of him by a Kapo at the Baustelle or the Jew-Chief at camp.

They don't cry out. He lances and probes into the living flesh, as one probes with a knife point down to the core of a rotten fruit. He scrapes and gouges with the scalpel, deeper, deeper. When will he hit bottom? There's no end to it. What is there beyond the swollen rottenness? Is there no bone there at all? Where in a man is the core of life? Here, a man in the chair, his leg slung across Harry's knees. The scalpel delves deeper and deeper, and he sits there as if the leg were not his at all. Tomorrow this very leg will march him out to the Baustelle! The same leg is about to carry him out of the sick bay and up into his hutch. Is this flesh alive, or not? And if not, where in a man is the core of life?

At times someone will sit in the chair, opposite.

"Where does it hurt you?"

He is not swollen – which leaves him nothing more than bones sheathed in yellow, transparent skin. Not a wound on his body. His mouth is open, he wants to speak, but doesn't find his own voice. Like a person suddenly struck blind who grabbles with his hands, he gropes for his own voice and lands nearby. At last he indicates with a finger:

The lashes of his eyes hurt him ...

In any other camp such a one would at once have got a whack across his hollow skull that would send him rolling out of the sick bay into the electric barbed wire. Who's he trying to kid? It's getting late. Any minute now and the gong will sound bedtime. Outside there's still a long line of patients, and this jokester – the lashes of his eyes hurt ... He sits and cheeps like a bird. His pupils are frighteningly dilated, filling out his boundless eyes.

What's to be done with him?

The scalpels lie ready on the table – but there's nothing in his body to cut out. The ointment jars stand ready – but there's no wound on his body to heal, no matter how hard you look for it. Unless you cook him up a malady. His mouth cheeps, but it appears that it's not his open mouth but his enormous pupils that plead for life. Before, he was quiet. Two hours on end he stood outside, unheard. But hardly was he seated before the Physician, than he began convulsing as though poisoned. Hard to make out just what he wants. Very feebly he cheeps:

Please, will someone help him shed a tear – he'll feel so much better – he just knows it. Would the Physician please help him to get just this one tear out?

His convulsions gradually subside. The pupils of his eyes dim. He remains sitting on the chair – still, tranquil, extinguished. The lips of his eyelids are yellow, arid as scorched earth.

Here it is, life! Here! Poised on the threshold of his body, like a bird at the portal of its ravaged nest before taking wing. Who is so blind that could not now tangibly see the sheer, naked life of man? It now pauses outside him, as if wanting to cast one last glance at the place it is about to leave, for ever. Who knows how many years it had warmed this nest; how many carefree days it had had there, how much pain and anguish? But for all the pain and anguish, it remained true to the walls of its abode and would on no account forsake them. Now this body sits there – a desolate, charred ruin. Life turns to go its way, like a humiliated, banished bride.

To the sick bay had he come. Two hours stood in line. It had given him no rest. Please, would the Physician help make it possible for him to cry?

Is there a man alive who will ever know how vast was the pain in his

parched eyelashes?

He had felt the moment drawing near. He knew he must give up his chaste bride. She was leaving him. But before their parting, he hurried to the sick bay for help in bringing out a tear from his eyes.

He wanted to offer this tear to his departing life as a farewell bouquet of white roses.

But where, in the German camp, at the last moment, are you to get a tear? When the bones are desiccated, the blood vessels empty. A tear. In his last moment – a tear! Who could now get him a tear?

Hippocrates of Concentration Camp Universe! Prescribe this patient a remedy. There will be need for it yet.

"Block orderlies! Carry this corpse out behind the block! Don't forget to report it immediately to the Jew-Chief. Tomorrow, at roll call, the numbers must check."

15

Father And Son

Fishl Apfelbaum was lying on the boards of a hutch in one of the Auschwitz blocks, Camp Section D. With the last of his strength he strained to climb down, but fell back in a swoon against the planks of his hutch.

In his gnarled Mussulman's hand, within the bony clench of his skeletal fingers, he was pressing a scrap of paper inscribed with its sign of life, that his Dovidl, his boy Dovidl, is alive and in Auschwitz, Camp Section A.

Fishl Apfelbaum unclenched his grasp. Again and again he brought the paper up close to his eyes. He wanted to see the letters D–o–v–i–d. He wanted to see the handwriting: the letters of the name, the name of his child; a sign that Dovidl lives. He gave up his day's bread ration to the Kapo of Camp A, and if that Kapo would retrieve a sign of life in the handwriting of his child, the prize would be a second day's bread.

Two bread rations he had given for this.

Nightfall in Auschwitz. A thousand cramped camplings per block, lying on barren hutches. Darkness opaque between them. Fishl Apfelbaum calls upon ultimate strength to make his feet reach the floor one more time. Maybe now he'll succeed in leaving the block. He just wants to make it as far as the latrine. There, where a small lamp is burning. There he will be able to look at the letters and see the writing: Dovid. Again he sees his Dovidl, he sees his child clearly. Dovidl floats as in magic out of the letters of his name, his signature. He feels he could embrace him, hold him in his arms. He sees his Dovidl alive before his eyes. He can talk to him. Console.

"My child, give a sign that you are living," – Fishl Apfelbaum had written

on the Kapo's scrap of paper: "Below my words, write your name."

With all his last strength he now climbed down the hutch and tried making it to the exit gate of the block. Hollow stalk legs could no longer carry this skeleton; only in Fishl Apfelbaum's flaring hot skull burned a father's quiver for his child in Auschwitz. A quiver still throbbing but spluttering like the flamelet of a dying wick in a dried out petrol lamp.

The night watch, wrapped in a blanket and seated on a brick stove, raised sleepy eyes to see one more Mussulman dragging his feet to the latrine – for the most part their feet never find their way back, so he let his heavy head drop.

Once outside, the Auschwitz night wrapped itself around Fishl Apfelbaum. He couldn't find his way to the latrine. The knees of his feet were breaking. The earth pulled him towards her and he slumped near the wall of an alien block.

Two last bread rations sped the end of a Mussulman in Auschwitz, but the scrap of paper between his cramped fingers sang back to him from somewhere in the depths of his soul a melody of once upon a time; a melody laden with secret yearnings; of eternity, a melody not from here.

Fishl Apfelbaum, once a table-sitter at the Rebbi's court, hears now from deep within himself, a father's voice trembling, saying:

"Remember, Dovidl, I wanted your Bar Mitzvah to be celebrated by the throngs of the Rebbi's court? Remember, Dovidl, remember?"

"Now, you, my child, have become Bar Mitzvah'd in Auschwitz, just having turned thirteen."

"Remember, my child, how, on the eve of every Saturday and holiday, we'd wrap the food bundles together, and you, my hearth's child, you carried food by the bundles to the hungry. You put the little food package near the door of a hungry family, then quickly ran off, not to be seen, not to be known, in order not to shame the hungry. Remember, Dovidl, remember my child?"

"Now, I so want to send you my tomorrow's bread rations, but I don't know, my child, how to fix it so you will not know that it comes from your Pappa."

"I want you to live, Dovidl."

"Oy my child, my little heart, how I want for my child to live!"

"I want you again to feed the hungry."

Fishl Apfelbaum was weeping a last weeping.

Opposite his eyes thick smoke from the crematorium chimney coiled up into Auschwitz skies. From time to time sparks sprayed out from the smoke-

rings spreading over the Auschwitz heaven like twinkling stars. Flaring and dying.

With day rise the block orderlies dragged the skeleton of a Mussulman by its feet to the carrion pile behind the block.

Later the Carcass Kommando tossed the dead onto carts for burning. Among them a Mussulman with a tightly clenched fist gripping a small scrap of paper which said:

"My child, give me a sign that you are alive –"

16

A KINDERGARTEN IN AUSCHWITZ

It was only the day before yesterday.

Everybody had run out of the blocks. Everybody had dashed to the barbed wire by the back path to behold the marvelous sight, the miracle.

Block Chiefs hurried from their cubicles without their truncheons, shoving arms into sleeves of hastily snatched jackets. Cooks in aprons, sleeves uprolled, had left the steaming cauldrons just before the margarine was to be thrown in; smooth-faced clerks had hastened from the Camp Office; potato peelers ran with paring knives in muddy fingers; merchants just closing major latrine deals – all streamed to the barbed wire by the back path. And like in a torrent sweeping everything with it, the Mussulmen, too, were carried along. They swirled amidst the hurrying mass as upright straws in a whirlwind, gaping glassy-eyed at what was going on here. Everybody shoved to look. All faces were turned to the adjacent camp just the other side of the barbed wire. Short ones stood on tiptoe, craning their necks this way and that to catch a good view between shoulders, above heads.

"Children!" "Children are playing here!" mouths breathed ecstatically. "They've been brought from Theresienstadt!" "Whole kindergartens with the teachers!"

"Boys!"

"Girls!"

They caper about there as in a large schoolyard. Boys in short trousers, girls in little frocks. Hair!... Not bare skeleton-heads, but hair under this Auschwitz sky!... Wide ribbon bows woven into brunette hair, blonde hair, chestnut hair; bounding hair – braided, curled, pony-tailed. A sun has burst over Auschwitz.

Sated faces of well-dressed Prominents, whose presence none dared approach, now mingled with campling riffraff and gaped with the same moist-eyed fascination as they – and the common camplings – stared, stared, as though suddenly they, too, had become people. Together they stood, lowly campling skull by Block Chief shoulder. The Millennium.

Young kindergarten teachers, silk stockings on shapely legs, ran after children who in the excitement of the game of tag had dashed to the forbidden zone near the barbed wire. SS sentries in the watchtowers, who usually itched to let go a bullet at such strays, waved their fingers before their noses in fatherly warning to the youngsters: "Now-now. *Verboten*!..." The teachers seized the children by their little hands, drawing them away from the forbidden zone, and with shy, sisterly smiles returned the greetings of the male camplings watching them from the other side of the wire wall. The girls were just as startled at this incredible surprise of Auschwitz.

Why, there's life here! ...

A sun had splashed upon Auschwitz. Children clambered up the rungs of the play ladder. Reaching the top, they shouted gleefully as they zoomed down the long slide into the yellow sand as into a soft lap. On the seesaw, bare little girlish thighs revealed themselves as short dresses parasoled open and shut in the blue-skied breeze: see, saw, see, saw. Why had it all been set up? Where had it all sprouted from?

Men, women. Coming out of the blocks there as in a summer resort. Whole families. Here and there a mother approaches her child in the playground, unwraps a goodie, feeding it into the little mouth, holding the wrapper for a saucer under the chin. Mustn't let the crumbs go to waste. Children form a circle, and with their hands go clap-clap-clap. Inside the circle a little girl dances near the feet of her circlemates, piping a song – *just like in Miss Zoshka's kindergarten*, Moni's heart quivered.

... Only the day before yesterday.

Now the block gates there gape empty. Silent. You do not see a living soul there; there is none.

They took the whole camp of them last night. An entire camp – all at once. All night the lorries pulled out for the crematorium. Mothers and fathers together. Children with their kindergartners. All together. Out of the bowels of the dark, far, far off, carried the stridor of the Auschwitz brass band, and

the cymbals sucked up the wailing of infants at the crematorium.

Empty blocks. Only the day before yesterday they had been full; just two days ago people were sitting inside them writing letters all day, as though by command: to acquaintances, to friends, to family. All over Europe these letters are now being delivered – the letters of the Theresienstadters, all bearing the same message:

"Life goes on in Auschwitz!..."

This is why they had been brought here; this is why they had not been taken directly from the wagons to the crematorium – to write the letters first in their own hand.

It is all emptiness there, now. The open blocks are airing themselves of the din of the outside life which they had left behind like a strange after-smell. Only the play ladder and its slide stand in the center of the compound. Tiny footprints in the yellow sand. Silence ...

Only the day before yesterday. Lungs of Funktioners had suddenly inhaled the air of a human world: Auschwitz was no longer a lost planet spinning away in oblivion. Auschwitz had suddenly landed on earth to become a part of it. Orderlies and Block Chiefs had suddenly discovered human feelings in themselves – and they were staggered. The feelings had overwhelmed them like oxygen which they had not breathed for so long they had forgotten its savor.

Now the Block Chiefs were more terrible than before. Much more terrible. They were furious at having been tempted for a moment to believe in illusions, like shameful Mussulmen. Now they know without any doubt: the planet Auschwitz is as far away from the land of humans as it is from the sun. Tomorrow or the next day they will throw into the crematorium all those who witnessed their momentary weakness. Nothing will remain of their disgrace, and no one will ever know that there was a moment here when the Block Chiefs believed that Auschwitz was a place like any other place in the universe.

17

PRAYER IN AUSCHWITZ

A cataract of yellow, dried bones.

They pour, blots of yellowness, one over the other, down, down, to the center of the block.

From all the cracks and crevices, over the posts of the triple-tiered hutches they shove out, scrambling, streaming from above, down, down.

A thousand skeletons all at once opened their eyes. Opened them wide.

Dry bones risen to sudden resurrection of the dead.

Faster! Faster!

The skeletons hurtle forward, leaping from the planks upon which they had lain inert but a moment ago. Hungry flames spurt from their eyes, faster. Faster –

Soon the noon soup will be dished out!

Bones rustling. Bones clanking. Bones untangling, lining up in one file. Skeleton back of skeleton. Each skeleton craving to be first. Bones butting against bones. They're alive! Alive!

Faster. The soup barrels are here already!

Like the stiffened back of a snake, the brick stove spans the entire length of the block.

Nobody here can tell you whether this queer stove has ever been stoked. Nor can all the myriads who had been here the past winter tell you that, for they've gone long ago to stoke, with their own bodies, the furnace of the cre-

matorium. But what every pair of bulging eyes here can tell you right away, and what you can read in each pair of gaping pupils, is the picture preserved frozen within them: a naked skeleton, head dangling down, flung over the brick stove – the Block Chief's cane thrashing out the last white quiver of his spinal cord –

The last quiver which persuaded him to get into line a second time for soup.

Before going to the crematorium, he wanted to savor, if only this one time, the taste of two soup rations. Two rations of soup at one time! The treasured dream of every one in Auschwitz. Come what may, he could not leave his dream behind – unrealized.

A cataract of bones.

On the ground, roundabout the long brick stove, crashes a mighty torrent of yellow skulls, of lust-sparked eyes. Wave driving wave – foaming, rolling, churning forward to that longed-for shore; to the front of the block, to the spot where, silently forbidding, terror-crowned, a demonic master-magician looms among the barrels of soup, ladle in hand – he and none other – the Block Chief!

He waits, gaze boring into the depths of the long block, the ladle in his hand, its cup resting on the rim of the barrel. He stands, wreathed in steam from the barrels, materializing out of them as out of flames. The gruesome devil. Death-of-Auschwitz enshrouded now in clouds of soup. Incarnate in soup! He, lord of the barrels! He, savage soup-god!

He waits. His gaze bores into the depth of the block, rattling the dry bones, puffing life into them. And they spill from both sides of the block, breaking over the posts of the triple-tiered hutches, gushing from every crack and crevice, spilling down, down. Faster, ever faster.

On top of the brick stove, by the barrels, stand the orderlies, holding tall stacks of soup-bowls like chimneys towering over their heads. All kinds of bowls: deep, shallow, wide, narrow; rusted tin-plates, from cellar-dwellings of poor Jews; white enameled children's plates, from old, wealthy homesteads. Mothers, dragged in the mid of night out of their beds to the Auschwitz transports, snatched frenziedly – one a pot, another a dish: "We'll have a bit of home for the children!" – and left them all behind, piled on the railroad platform of Auschwitz before marching off to the crematorium.

Bowls and pots –

O, Jewish bowls and pots, heirlooms of generations! Mouths of mothers were spoon-fed from you when they themselves were only babes! Bowls and pots, chipped and worn – not good enough for the Germans to ship to the German people – here you are heaped now, high in the arms of the orderlies.

And a thousand pairs of eyeballs bug out at you. A thousand hearts writhe. A thousand mouths murmur one prayer:

Please God! When I get to the orderly, let a big bowl come my way!...

Everyone knows that in a big bowl you don't get more than in a small one. Block Chief Sigfried has the ladle, and Sigfried gives the dose. Even so, life flutters within your skeleton: "Oh God, please, a big bowl!..." With a big bowl eating is something entirely different. When you finish eating, there's more bowl to lick. More important yet: when you leave the barrel with a big bowl in your hands, you can be sure that not one drop of your soup-ration will, God forbid, spill out. "Oh God, don't let that happen to me!..."

Sometimes: you leave the barrel with the boiling-hot soup in a small bowl. The mirrory surface of the water-soup is up to the rim, it scalds the tips of your fingers. You are on your way back to your hutch, and you've got to shove your way through swarms of prisoners standing in your path, staring. The life within you hovers at the tip of your breath. You feel your eyes are bursting from their sockets. Yet you cannot, you dare not take them off the watery mirror sloshing at the bowl's rim. And around you, all they do is jostle – and stare. "Mussulmen! Stinking Mussulmen! What the hell are you blocking my way for?! Filthy Mussulmen! Burn to hell in the crematorium. Get out of my way! Out of my way!..." As for them, all they do is cut you off, and stare. Suddenly – a slight nudge in the elbow, and...

Skeletons hurl themselves at the ground. Bones snarled on bones. A gigantic writhing hump. The teeth of one mouth bite into the teeth of another. Tongues suck up the black earth, lapping at the smell of the spilt soup until it's gone.

That is why, a thousand lined-up pairs of eyes bug to the stack of bowls in the arms of the orderly. A thousand hearts breathe prayer, a prayer from the deepest depths. A prayer in all the languages of Europe, each summoning it in his own language, each after his custom. No, it is not summoned – it blurts on its own:

"Please God, a big bowl..."

So that when you leave the barrel, your eyes can behold the soup contained in the bowl, safe.

For this is not soup in your bowl – it is your life. Your life? More than your life. Far more. You don't tremble over your life that much. Your life you've forgotten long ago: the life of your wife, of your child, the life of a world that was – all those you've forgotten ages ago. None of these is within the bowl. Not a fragment of any of them. There something holier rests, something more sublime, exalted beyond measure. Therein is a ration of soup!

A whole ration of soup!

And what could make you feel better, happier, or be more wonderful than the certainty that not one drop of it will spill.

Hey! What the hell are you blocking the way for?!...

Those who have already downed their soup and licked the rusty bowl inside and out, instantly join the throngs keeping watch on those just leaving the barrel with bowls in hand. A procession of soup bowls: small brimming ones, which reveal the soup at first glance, and deep ones out of whose empty tops only steam can be seen rising – you've got to thrust your head forward to see soup. What good will looking at somebody else's soup do you? That nobody knows, but not to do so is impossible.

After you've swallowed your own soup and licked your bowl clean, you just have to run and watch the others pass with soup bowls in their hands. A compulsion. It's impossible to keep from doing it. Though what's in it for you? What good will it do you? Nobody figures this out. It's as clear as Auschwitz day, as logical as Auschwitz logic. There is this compulsion to run and watch. Could you see yourself sitting in your hutch, your tin-bowl licked dry, when below in the block all they do is carry back those bowls of soup?!

The hands holding the bowls fade. You don't see them. You see only – a procession of soup bowls in mid-air. Hundreds of bowls. A superhuman urge drives your gaze to what's in them. To touch, with your eyes, the soup in every one of them.

At times, you see the hands, at times you don't. Bowls of soup glide at you. All of them – at you. Mucus runs from your nose, spittle from your mouth. And through your eyes bowlfuls of soup pour straight down into your empty gut. Endlessly.

Someone passes by you with a small bowl.

You see it, the soup. So near you can touch it with your hands. Steam rises from the tantalizing mirror. The bearer doesn't raise his eyes. He shrieks into the brimming bowl: "Filthy Mussulmen! What are you standing in my way for? Get away! Away!..."

You think to yourself: If only that bowl would tip over and fall to the ground! You could be the first to fling yourself down and shove your teeth into the puddle! But no sooner does that very howler lap his own bowl clean, than he immediately shimmies down the hutch to join those watching the full bowls leave the barrel. As if the soup just drunk contained some potion that instantly fires a craving to scurry for the sight of another's bowl. A magic power, mightier than your mind, stronger than your will.

A thousand pairs of eyeballs bug out to the stack of bowls in the orderlies arms: A small bowl scalds the bonetips of the fingers. A small bowl can be knocked out of your hands.

O, God! Don't let a thing like that happen to me! Please, God! Please, God!...

Prayer in Auschwitz –

To a deep bowl, with wide rims.

18

Covenant Between the Crumbs

From my bread ration today I kept a crumb for you. See, beloved, it rests here in my palm as in a bowl of crystal.

Night over Auschwitz.

Sleep cradles my bunk mates as on soft, dark veils. Outside, stars flare above the block roofs. Flare, and die. Today more than ever I wanted you. I so wanted to bring you the most precious offering of Auschwitz. I said: This bread crumb is in holy trust for my beloved. Here it is, in the palm of my right hand.

Where are you now, beloved?

Like me, perhaps you now sit somewhere in a German women's camp on the boards of a bunk, and like me, you too are looking at the crumb in your palm; for today more than ever you wanted me, and you said: This bread crumb is in holy trust for my beloved.

See, beloved! The teardrop in my other hand is as big as the bread crumb.

Come, let us go outside, let us stand together beneath the dark of the same Auschwitz sky. Our love will pass between the two bread crumbs and transfer them to the other's hand. You will eat mine and I will eat yours.

See, beloved! Those are not stars twinkling above the block roofs. They are stray sparks, from the crematorium chimney, waning and gone.

Only the light of your face will forever be in my tear which has turned to crystal.

19

BLOCK CURFEW

The gate of Block "1" thrusts open. The Camp Senior's runner sprints out. He darts ahead, leaping gutters and obstacles, cutting through hordes of prisoners who suck in their ribs, scrambling out of his path. Mussulmen drop at his kicks, like shards of mud from feet flying through puddles. He heads for the middle of the camp's main road, where the huge circular gong hangs, plate-like, framed in timber. His hand seizes the iron rod. The gong shudders, wild and alarming:

Block Curfew! Block Curfew!

All at once every block entrance jams with bodies crushing inward. Every one knows that at any moment Ludwig Tiene, the Camp Senior, might step out from Block "1", and every one knows what will befall him should Tiene's eye catch his back outside the block.

Pandemonium. Stampede. From every path in the camp, from every distant corner, from all assembly-grounds: Block Curfew! Block Curfew! !

Inside.

The block gates are sealed: the gate to the main road at one end, the gate to the back path at the other. Three-tiered hutches of plank. Ten men to a hutch. Five hundred along one wall, five hundred along the other. Heaped on board like tattered greens on a grocer's shelves.

A thousand men, huddling voiceless in the block. Down the center of the block, from one end to the other, runs a brick structure, thirty-two inches high, twenty inches wide.

Hollow within. Called, stove. A stove never lit. But every one knows its purpose in the block.

A thousand men. Huddled in the hutches. Unseen. The block is soundless. Empty. As if no living soul were in it.

A thousand men. Only the block orderlies pace the top of the long stove, to and fro, to and fro. Each in his ambit. Each with his truncheon in hand.

In the cubicle, near the front gate, is the Block Chief. His presence is felt in the air.

Block Curfew.

You never know why, out of a clear sky, when everything runs its normal course – Death, bent on his daily Auschwitz business; the prisoners scattered about the camp, picking over their last moments – why the alarm suddenly rings out: "Gong!" "Gong!" And just as you never know when and why Block Curfew has been called, you never know when and why it will be called off.

Outside – no one, a camp swept clean. Silence. Green, rectangular blocks; blind, windowless. Steep tar-roofed blocks, set hushed in rigid rows, spaced at precise distance from one another. The day strides along in silence: the camp road – empty, the assembly-grounds between the blocks – desolate, the narrow back path – abandoned. Auschwitz holds its breath. Block Curfew.

Everywhere, spotless ground. Here, on the earth of this planet, you won't find a scrap of paper. Here, you do not see any paper at all. You don't even remember that it ever existed. And should the wind sweep, from somewhere, a shred of paper to this place, hosts of starving mouths would instantly bolt it, for bread. Here, whatever a human gullet can swallow has long ago been swallowed. Here, all that's left is: dry sand, and the wood of the blocks. Left here is: electrified barbed wire around you, and the sky of Auschwitz over you.

Every once in a while you see a prisoner suddenly flinging himself at the post of his hutch, sinking teeth into the wood – teeth long and fearful, jutting straight from jawbone stripped of all gum flesh – until they snap, fall to the ground like long withered pits of dates; and his, gums devoid of flesh, biting, biting, into the wood.

Every once in a while you start in the dead of night with a scream of terror at your ears: someone has had raw flesh bitten from his shriveled leg. No telling who swallowed it.

Clean. Auschwitz is clean. The only spot of dirt here is your life. At curfew's hour, when all are penned within the blocks, the camp is spotless.

All is still. Ten heads to the hutch. Laid out, staring at the planks above. Bare, unplaned planks. Twenty inches from the eyes.

Ten heads. Nothing binds one to another, just as nothing binds the planks above your eyes. You yourself have been joined to your neighbors only with nails, here.

Ten pairs of eyes stare, each at the plank overhead which mirrors back a life of long, long ago – sometime, somewhere. Perhaps thousands of years ago, a world you seem to have belonged to. A world – sunny, boundless, lush with verdure, radiant as the festive whiteness of a family table.

Ten heads. Like drug addicts in their den. Together, yet each isolated. The same in every hutch in the block. The same in every block of the camp. The same in every camp of Auschwitz.

Block Curfew.

You never know why the gong suddenly goes off: "Block Curfew!" Perhaps the International Red Cross is visiting, and, as always, the showcase-camp is being displayed – the camp where there are workshops, where the blocks have doors and windows, where prisoner's feet are encased in shoes, their skulls covered by striped caps. Driving past the emptied camps, the guides point their fingers: These are our reserve camps. As for the closed blocks – they're empty. Notice how clean they are! How quiet! Ideal.

Or perhaps, at this moment, a transport of prisoners-of-war is being shunted into the "Bath House," and every precaution has to be taken that nobody from here screams out to them: "They're taking you to the gas chamber!"

Ten heads. Atop the brick stove, the block orderly walks up and down. From here, the bottom tier, you see only his legs. Suddenly: the head of one of your hutch mates lifts. One of his legs crushes against the other. The two bony legs grip together in a shuddering twitch. His fist, knotted, thrusts with all its force into his lower abdomen, at the triangle where the legs begin.

Nine heads perk up, watch: They could feel it coming! They know what it's all about.

They've caught him at it . He was the one to start. Nine pairs of eyes leveled against one pair of eyes. Against one face. Nine pairs of eyes tracking the slightest flicker on that face, the merest tremor in the glaze of those staring eyes.

A single pair of eyes against nine. His face is wrung by spasms of pain. The mouth opens. His breath is shut off. Thick clots of air rattle through the gaping mouth, in – out ... in – out ... His eyes bulge, strain from their sockets, fasten upon the nine heads as if locked with them in desperate battle. A battle of life and death. His eyes both grapple and beg them for mercy. He knows: in its battle there is no mercy. So he fights with the savagery of the doomed.

One against nine. His torso rocks wildly, rhythmically, ever faster, the

entwined legs grate more convulsively, the fist jams harder into his genitals, his other hand driving into the fist in support, his eyes boring into nine faces – and he rocks. Stares at them – and rocks. His clenched fist presses. Presses. He knows: if he so much as lets one single drop escape, all will burst forth as from a rent dam. He won't be able to hold back any longer. He knows it. As nine pairs of eyes opposite him know it. They wait. The instant it happens, they'll call to the block orderly:

Not us! Not us! He's the one that leaked in the block. Him! Him!

He knows it. He knows what he'll get for it. Every one in Auschwitz knows what a prisoner gets for leaking in the block. What can he do?

Nine pairs of eyes impaling one pair of eyes. A pair of eyes, anguish-shot, against nine pairs of eyes. No one says a word. A fight of life and death. Breaths are stopped. Teeth lock. Only one mouth hangs open, gasping on clots of air: in – out ... in – out ...

What can he do?

A fire rages in him. Flames hurl up into his brain, lick his eyes from within, sear the roof of his skull, strain to leap out – but cannot.

A fire in him. Flames course down his legs to his toes, scorching his loins, pressing to burst free. But, there, his fist blocks the way with all its might. His mouth is again sucking air as a pump draws water at a conflagration; he wants to put out the fire.

What can he do? Only a thin shirt and pants cover his body. Nothing more. No one wears any more. If he had some kind of heavy garment, he would rip it off, stuff it between his hands, and urinate into it.

What can he do?

Nine pairs of eyes. They observe every spasm in his face, every furrow gashing his forehead, every shudder of his knees and thighs. Their glances question: Did he do it yet? Did he? Or will he hold out until block curfew is over? Their teeth gnash. Clamp shut. Now, one of them latches leg over leg. But they know: he started it! Now, they all want the one who started not to hold out. After him, they too will be able to let loose a drop. They'll blame it on the first.

Eyes watch and ask: Did he? Did he?

A struggle of life and death. Nine are out to save their lives at the cost of the tenth. Before their eyes, a wick of life wavers lit, bound to the contortions of its wane, not wanting to go out.

A war between life and death. Until death grabs him by the throat, squeezing. Squeezing. Breath trickles out. The man looks death straight in the eye. Death gazes back directly into the eyes of man. Glance strikes glance. Eyes

ask eyes: Did he yet?... Did he?

– – he did.

Peace wafts across his face. As if the hand of God had brushed his brow. The inferno flames run out. He doesn't even know where, through what exit, the fire has left his body. The convulsions subside, release his face. His Body is taut beneath him, empty, like charred driftwood.

"Block orderly! ...Block orderly! ..."

He stands there. His ears echo the outcry. Chaste doves peer from his eyes.

Silence in the block. Stillness in the camp. Somewhere among the hutches, a block orderly rolls up a prisoner's sleeve baring the arm, glances at the number stencilled in the flesh, and heads for the Block Chief's cubicle.

Silence in the block. Stillness in the camp. The block orderlies pace atop the brick stove, to and fro, to and fro.

Block Curfew.

20

Man Lying On the Brick Stove

Long is the block and long is the brick stove. Empty, bare. Only mid-point on the stove a man's body bisects it, like a hoop.

He is ready.

Doubled over the stove, face down, his legs dangling on the one side, his arms on the other. The block orderlies got him into position. He is ready. Tense anticipation. Any minute now the door of the cubicle will open and Franzl will step out, with his cane.

Emptiness. From the hutches, each side of the block, heads of prisoners peer like chickens' heads rammed together in their wire coops. Coops lining both walls, from ground to ceiling. Packed tight with chickens.

Lying over the stove – a man.

From here you don't see his head. From here you see only his pants dropped, covering at earth's level his naked feet; both hollows of his uncovered buttocks; two spindle-legs long and dry, yellow as sticks of straw.

Tense expectancy.

From up front, the Block Chief is on his way.

You hear the squeak of his heavy boots. The ground gives way to his feet. He reaches the body tied there, waiting; passes him by, wheeling abruptly around to aim the cane in his right hand at the naked yellow skeleton. He glances briefly at the body, like a circus magician facing the object with

which he is about to perform. Promptly looking up, he surveys the hutches packed from ground to ceiling. Every last one of them – his. All spotlights now rain down on him. All eyes – on him. Sole figure, he, on the white platter of circus light. He and the object – the medium.

He rolls up his sleeve, the cane jutting from his fist. His glance roams around, probing ever-higher. Up on top, where the heads touch the rafters – is everybody watching? Isn't there a head missing? Leisurely he rolls up the sleeve, folds it, the white cane slanting from his fist. Franzl brought it from the unloading platform, took it there from a blind man's hand. A good cane, won't break. What would a blind man do with a cane in Auschwitz? The van he was flung into knows its way to the crematorium.

A man lies over the brick stove.

What could have been his sin? Had he, by chance, bought an additional ration of soup from a block orderly at midday in exchange for his evening bread-ration? Then, come evening, at bread distribution time, gobbled the ration he had pledged? But only too well did he know what to expect for not paying back that bread crust!

Or had he, by chance, leaked in the block during Block-Curfew? – But only too well did he know what to expect for leaking in the block!

What was his sin? From here you don't see the head. From here you see only his naked underpart.

Here it is – the stripped underpart of a man! The part of your body that you coveted above all other; the most intimate of your flesh; that part of flesh which to you was as Holy of Holies – God of love revealed his face there between the outspread wings of twin cherubs.

Here it is – the exposed underpart of a man!

Lying over the brick stove of the block in Auschwitz.

Body! Who are you?

Did you, Body, belong to a man in full spring, a young sun-god aglow in May's dawn?

Did you belong, Body, to man in full ripening flush, a frolicsome Apollo, to whom women's glances lifted like prayers?

Did you, Body, belong to a man seasoned as vintage wine, laden with strength as haystacks full at summer's end?

From here you do not see the head. From here you see only the stripped underparts: yellow wasted hollows in place of buttock apple-halves; and where the smooth, full-funneled thighs had been – two long, thin-bladed straws, driven apart, a gap in between.

The male testicle-bag droops limp between them like a long, empty beggar's sack, red stove-bricks showing on each side.

Here is your Holy of Holies! Invaded and desecrated! Red bricks of an Auschwitz stove where Glory dwelt.

The cane rises: Everybody watch now – magic!

Nothing up my sleeve! Take a good look! Here before you is a life. Right? In the twinkling of an eye you'll see –

The cane flashes, a lightning-white half circle in the air, rips into the two yellow wastes of the bottom, pauses.

Both legs jerk as if jolted by an electric current. But each leg is strapped on its own to an iron hood in the stove; on the other side the hands are strapped the same way, each to its own hook.

In front of your very eyes, a life.

Twenty strokes of this white cane upon its naked target, and the life will no longer be! See for yourselves, sleeve's rolled up. No tricks. Ten strokes and the legs will stop jerking. Fifteen strokes and the skull will start up once more as from slumber – and it's over! The yellow skeleton will from then on lie cored. The life will hover in the air, outside, beyond him. You'll see!

The wonders a white cane will work!

A cane, once a companion, support and guide to a human life somewhere in another world.

The magic of a cane! No bluff. Sleeve's rolled up.

But everyone knows: This is a bluff from beginning to end. Because the moment this body leaked during curfew in the block, then and there its life had slipped out. Not now. Then. Way back then he felt it. Knew it for sure. Everyone did.

Here in front of you lies a life. From here you don't see its face –

Life! Life! Who are you?

Did you belong to a young, burgeoning Sigmund Freud?

To an Einstein?

From here the head can't be seen. From here only the exposed bottom is visible.

Tell it, Life, fettered to a brick stove of Auschwitz – who were you?

Speak up, Einstein of the world outside! Could you have held back, not leaked, during Block Curfew in Auschwitz?

Speak up, Freud of the world outside! Had not you fled in time, wouldn't

you now be lying, strapped, your pants down, over the brick stove of Auschwitz?

Life! Life! Who are you?

In the hutches, both sides of the block, prisoners peer like crammed chickens heads from their wire coops; coops ranged along the walls, from ground to ceiling –

A man lying over the brick stove.

21

Evening Rollcall in Auschwitz

Strange longings sometimes stir within you at evening rollcall time. Overcome with your soul's ebb-tide, you stand in line, waiting to be counted –

What is it, my soul, you yearn for at evening rollcall in Auschwitz?

Silence.

Far down the camp's highway, the naked skull of the sun lies fallen to the ground in its own flames, the bottom strands of the barbed-wire dykes bathe in a pool of blood.

A day dies in Auschwitz.

Everywhere around, in all the camps surrounding yours, the prisoners now line up on their assembly-grounds for evening rollcall. Silence. Soon the gate of your own camp will open too. The German Parade Officer will appear. SS men will count, to see that no one is missing.

Across your field of vision, rich and spark-shot, the smoke gushes thickly from the stack of the crematorium. It sinks down along the highway, creeping to the edges of the assembly-grounds. You seem to see: the cremated, out of long habit, returned to line up for rollcall.

The dykes of barbed-wire blaze with the crimson of the setting sun. Endless strands of wire. Those of your own camp, those of the camps surrounding yours. Burning-hot strands. They stretch before your eyes, line upon line,

traced on the horizon like a page full of notes, the watchtowers like music clefs at their edges.

Composition Auschwitz.

Beyond the wire of your camp, far down the highway, a tardy women's labor kommando returns from work. The girls march down the road to their camp – an elongated, many-legged worm on the notepaper. The Kapoess leads them on, walking backwards, the cane in her hand raised like a conductor's baton. The whole length of the silenced men's camps echoes with her soprano, shrilling commands:

"Two-three-four-left!"

"Left!"

"Left!"

Kapo, and soprano voice.

Hushed hour of parting in Auschwitz. Hour of evening rollcall. Day leaves the camp in a chariot of fire. Your eyes follow it: what can be there, way off in the distance, beyond the wire ramparts – where day descends?

Can there be a world there, a world with freedom in it?

Your eyes are turned on the day: a long carpet of gold, incandescent over the sea, unrolling to an open gate of flame. The marching women of the kommando bear it furled on their shoulders. In a little while, they will reach the shore. They'll lower day like a coffin from shipboard. All eyes will see it off on its last journey into the land of freedom –

Till the gate of fire comes down on it.

A day goes its way. Your eyes follow it: thus a beloved gazes at the back of her lover, drawing away even farther on his steed. In her heart doom has set its seal: he will never return!

O Rider, carry your beloved with you on your mount...

At the other end of the camp the gate will soon open. The Parade Officer will arrive. Block Chief Franzishek will bawl out: "Ready! Block 15, at-tention!..."

The SS man will pass along the ranks. He will count the pairs of feet in the front row. In line with the last pair of standing feet lie the heads of the dead. At morning rollcall they were still standing in ranks. Now they are laid out on the ground in an even row. Jutting from the front rank of standing feet like the long pole of a flag.

The SS man will count the standing pairs of feet in one breath with the prostrate heads. Order is order. All must be present and accounted for.

At one end of the camp, viscous smoke coils up from the stack. At the other end, your day soundlessly expires. Eyes gaze after it: O Rider! –

Suddenly:

One steps out of ranks. The setting sun kindles his skull with flakes of gold. He moves forward to meet sunset. The yellow bones of his naked hands and legs are aflare. His arms are laden with the last gleanings of the sun. He scoops up more – by the handful, by the skeletonful, by the jacketful. His steps falter under their weight. He moves on, on. All eyes follow him. He staggers the entire length of the row of dead. No place for him here. So he drags himself still further, to the end of the row, slumps down to the earth like a weary wanderer returned to the restful lap of his home. He stretches out on his back, setting his body into line with the row of dead, face up to the Auschwitz sky – and is extinguished. Like red-hot iron in cold water.

One more yellow skull, one more skein of naked yellow bones. The flagpole has lengthened.

With the selfsame color.

Never has anyone stretched out like that at morning rollcall, nor did anyone ever get back to his feet after slumping down to the ground at evening rollcall.

O Rider! –

Strange longings stir within you at evening rollcall –

What is it, my soul, you yearn for at evening rollcall in Auschwitz?

Hush.

A day dies in Auschwitz. It, the day, won't be taken to the crematorium. It, the day, will not coil entwined in the fatty smoke out of the chimney. It expires quietly, so quietly, there on the shoulders of the women marching back to their camp.

That one marching over there, could she be your sister?

Mother?

Sweetheart?

Hushed hour of parting. Hour of evening rollcall. Far behind your back, out of the soundless air, uneven waves of cymbals clash and break against the shore of your ear –

tzatz ... tzatz ... tzzzatzaatzz ...

You know: this is the brass-band of Auschwitz; these are tattered bits of clangs from Orchestra Square. They carry over to you from the depths of utter stillness.

The most illustrious musicians of Europe are lined up in the square. A square empty but for them. The conductor stands on a stool. Sometimes a bottleneck develops at the crematorium. Long lines stand before the gas chamber, waiting. The furnaces roar at full blast. The gasoline lot, too, is filled to the bursting point with Mussulmen from all sections of the camp. And suddenly, out of the clear sky, a new transport arrives! Thousands upon thousands of them. These new ones are the worst of the lot. All too often, in this kind of a jam, one of them suddenly begins to scream in terror, and – on the spot – all chime in. That's when the band strikes up: trumpets! drums! cymbals!

The finest musicians of Europe. Each one of them gets a double ration of soup.

Before your eyes the strands of barbed-wire flush with the last sediment of sunset. They flail the horizon like sharp searchlight-whips. The girls' kommando moves among them, like a pilot lost in flaming enemy skies. Their bare legs are silhouetted as they march. On their eyelashes they bear away the silent demise of the day.

The one marching over there – isn't she your sister? Mother? Sweetheart?

"Left!"

"Left!"

"Two-three-four – left!"

Music, and crematorium.

Which of your family could have been brought to the crematorium right now? You rack your memory, struggle to remember: which of your kin, near or remote, was still left outside when you were taken to Auschwitz?

tzatz ... tzatz ... tzzzatzaatzz ...

Death music blots ...

Evening rollcall. Soon the gate will open.

The Parade Officer will arrive. SS men will count. Order must be maintained.

Hush. A day leaves the camp. Your day.

You gaze after it –

At evening rollcall time you are overcome with longing and soul's utter ebb –

What is it, my soul, you yearn for at evening rollcall in Auschwitz?

22

In Line to the Crematorium

Rows.

Naked rows.

Naked yellow skeletons. Set out in precise, straight rows, tall with tall, short with short –

"Attention!"

The day following the big Selektion. In a little while the numbers of those slated for the crematorium will be announced.

All are arrayed on the assembly grounds, each block on its own. One hundred abreast.

All Jews – line up!... Nobody knows as yet which numbers were taken down yesterday, during the Selektion. Soon it will be known. Soon the numbers will be read off.

The bundle of Auschwitz apparel lies on the ground at the feet, folded according to regulation: on the bottom, the jacket; on top, the pants – folded in a square. Rows of naked bodies above, bundles of apparel below, precisely. Precisely German.

The final roll-call. The final divestment. Everything has already been stripped from you. Nothing is left except that which is still secreted somewhere within your skeleton; that which you call life; that over which you

tremble so. The crematorium is about to pluck it from you. You yourself will turn it over in a little while.

It's bright out. Brilliant light. Suddenly you see a sky. A lucid sky. Until this moment nobody knew that in Auschwitz there is a sky. Only now, at final rollcall, it has disclosed itself to the eye.

At the very last moment.

A slab of sun clings to the wall of the block opposite. The assembly ground suddenly becomes dear to you, genial and warm as home. This monstrous assembly-ground, where you suffered such agonies of torture – you no longer recognize it. In a flash it has become dear to you. Everything here is now dear to you. This is home now, your world. Here you are alive. The ranks of naked skeletons shiver. Not a single one wants to be parted from the assembly-ground.

The highway is empty. All eyes are riveted on it. Nobody knows what's inside the crematorium, but everyone looks at the empty highway running the entire length of all assembly-grounds and beholds the mystery of the crematorium brought to light. It is there that the listed numbers will be taken shortly from the assembly-grounds.

Now, the highway is crematorium.

The same light, here as there. The same sky, here as there. Here, assembly-ground, there highway. Scarcely two score yards divide the two. The same light, yellow sand. Any second now the numbers will be called off the list. Eyes are fixed on the long front row. A hundred backs, skeleton-backs, arrayed one beside the next; a long strip of yellow cloth, worn and ragged, from which single threads dangle as if combed straight down. Each leg – a thread.

Everyone tells himself: I am not a Mussulman. I am strong and healthy. I'm not on the list. They say that the first thing the Camp Doctor looks at during the Selektion is the rump. More important than anything else is the rump. Watching the row lined up before him, everyone thinks to himself: I still have flesh there. He knows for sure he still has flesh. He's certain that his rump could not possibly look that way. Moreover: if that's what the others look like, the Camp Doctor surely didn't put his own number down yesterday. On the contrary, it's a good thing to stand among such specimens during a Selektion. Your chances are better.

Each scrutinizes the long row of rump-hollows ranged before his eyes, and is satisfied. Every pair of eyes hunts for deeper hollows; for thread-thinner legs. Hope pecks at the heart.

Silence. Skeletons arranged row on row, standing silent. It's day. Suddenly

one is aware: a day. There's night and there's day. After night, comes day. Yet one never feels this. But if after day there's never again to be another night, one suddenly knows: it's day. Most of all, Mussulman-bones nestle to this dayness, so warm and full of light.

Quiet. Brilliant light floods the assembly-ground. Everywhere, sky. Thirty-two inches between one row and the next, and sky crouches on the yellow skeleton backs in the front row. All is lit. On the empty highway one clearly sees – death.

Block Chiefs rush back and forth. The almighty gods of the camp are up to their necks in work. It's almost impossible to believe that all this fuss and bother is in honor of the naked yellow skeletons arrayed here.

A clear sky spreads over the shaven skulls. The light of day shimmers in the air like a golden pond. The silence spills into the ears and clogs them. All Auschwitz is silent. High above the block roofs a strait line of smoke rises skyward – blue and festive. A sky sheer and luminous, with a blue cloud of cremation smoke.

Death caresses your face with sunny light, with sky outspread, with voiceless hush:

"It won't hurt."

"It really won't?"

"You see how quietly the smoke rises to the sky."

Camp Senior Ludwig Tiene! Always that terrifying roar ripping out of him. Ludwig you never see. Ludwig you hear. There isn't a prisoner who won't run for cover when Ludwig's roar carries across the camp. Now nobody can run for cover. His screaming hurtles the world from end to end. There's no telling at what block he is. Whether he is out front or in back.

Now it's going to start. Thinking's over. Back to Auschwitz. Back to Selektion. Back to crematorium. Ludwig! Any minute now they'll be here to read off the numbers. The sky quivers on the bone-shoulders of the yellow ranks. All tremble. Teeth clack. It's cold. So cold. You don't know if it's your frame shaking like this, knocking against the naked bones of your neighbors, or if their bones are shaking, banging against yours.

Any minute it will start.

Sharers of the same hutch, fellows of the same transport, stand beside each other. Eyes turn to eyes. One pair of eyes asks:

"How do I look? ..."

The second pair of eyes runs the questioner's naked frame up and down. The eyes still remember him from back home.

"Fine. You look fine." The whispered answer slips hurriedly from his mouth, as if what's been said is not so important. What's really important is:

"How do I look? ..."

The eyes of the first grow calm with the reply they've just gotten, as though the Camp Doctor himself had given it. The answer hit at his innermost feelings. He feels wonderful. He feels so wonderful he trembles. Oh yes, he remembers: the other's eyes are awaiting his reply. He must answer the question. So he glances over the other's body: A dry skeleton, all bones –

"Fine. You look fine ..." And answering, he thinks: No doubt about it, he's on the list! Why, he doesn't look like anything human! He still remembers what that fellow looked like back home. He still remembers him from their first days in camp. As for himself, he's almost sure. His hopes are up. He can find no great change in his own body. A man knows his own body! Why, he examines it daily. No! Not the slightest change in his body. He can't remember ever having looked different. Every day he goes over his body with his hands. True, he can't see his face, but he sees the faces of the others and clearly recalls what they used to look like. So he makes his mind up for sure: I'm healthy! He feels healthy. There's no comparison at all. That other fellow's a bag of bones! Nothing human about the way he looks! But at such a moment, why tell him?

And it never occurs to him that the other is now thinking exactly the same thought about him.

In all the languages of Europe – Italian and Yiddish, Polish and Dutch, French and Greek – eyes now ask eyes one and the same question: "How do I look?" Different cultures. Different sound of language. But all with one and the same meaning in the question: "How do I look?..."

Smoke of burnt bones is one color, no matter what the language.

No longer was it highway. It was – crematorium. Everyone sensed it, those still standing on the assembly-ground, as well as those who had been moved to the highway.

No longer was this death – it was Auschwitz death.

There is Auschwitz life and there is Auschwitz death. This was the death of Auschwitz life. Everyone is familiar with ordinary death, here. Pile upon pile they lie stacked behind the block-gates. A dead man – lies. A hanged man – hangs. But for dead men to stand and look at you with open eyes?...

Here it is –

The fear before which Auschwitz-fear trembled. Now you see him. There he stands, on the highway, waiting for you to be brought to him.

Scarcely two score yards divide the assembly-ground from the highway. The block orderlies are lined up in two rows, truncheons in hand. As they wait, others jerk out of the ranks, those whose numbers have been called. The highway moves toward you: Crematorium! Block orderlies whack their truncheons over skulls. The Mussulman runs between them, holding the bundle of clothes above his head with both hands, like someone fording a river. He runs at a walk, walks at a run. The bundle prevents him from using his hands to protect his skull. But give up his property as he runs to the crematorium road? Impossible! It would never occur to him.

Once he has reached the highway, the Mussulman's eyes well over with gladdened terror, fear mixed with joy: he came through all in one piece! He stares with enormous pupils. From his gaping mouth runs a long thread of spittle, from his nose – mucus. He doesn't weep, but chirps with all his might, protesting to someone, one invisible, he tells him something, without pausing. His voice comes not from his mouth, frozen-agape, but from his ribs. His voice bangs in there like a condemned man's head banging against the bars of his cell. He chirps into the air with a voice that begins broad, flat, grooved like a nail's head, and ends long, rounded, sharpened to a point. He never stops shaking his head as if in secret rhythm, chirping with all his might.

By day and by night as he lay in his hutch, he sensed his standing here now. Eyes closed, he saw it. It flushed through the channels of his arteries, for blood. The pain of it lay inside him, and the dread of it hovered outside, before his eyes.

He saw it, nevertheless he hoped he was only seeing things. Him, perhaps, it would skip. Now, as he stands on the highway, he suddenly sees something the likes of which he never saw before: the terror has penetrated into his bones, and the pain hangs outside him, before his eyes. Not inside does it hurt him, but outside. The sky spread over his eyes – pains him. The day – racks him with pain. The assembly-ground between the two blocks, where those not taken stand – is pain unbearable to him. The horizon over the barbed wire extracts long sheets of light from him. The sheets stretch unendingly. He does not know if now is the end of all, or the beginning of all; if he now dies, or is born now. Soon they will take him to a terrifying Unknown. He is drowning in this Unknown as in a sea. No, it's no sea, it's – fear. His mouth is full. He cannot scream. But form somewhere within, someone screams a scream beginning wide, flat, grooved, ending rounded, thin, sharpened.

Fear screams on the highway of Auschwitz, its echo answering it from out of naked Mussulman-ribs.

On the assembly-ground stand those left behind, whose numbers were not taken down this time. They gaze at the highway skeletons, with whom they

stood shoulder to shoulder but a moment ago; with whom they shared the same hutch, dreaming of home in sunny Italy or bustling Paris. Dreamed of streets, trolley-cars, of curtained windows, and of a baby taking his first steps, pitter-pattering and toppling right into your open arms. But a moment ago you talked to them, and already there they stand, on the highway, gazing back with eyes so huge and dumb. They left you without so much as a farewell glance, without a sound. But they know where they're being taken. Why don't they scream?! Why don't they weep?! Why is it so quiet here?!

Eyes gaze into eyes: eyes of the highway into eyes of the assembly-ground and eyes of the assembly-ground into eyes of the highway. Impossible not to look. Left on the assembly-ground, you're suddenly seized with terror: How can a living man, whom you know, stand there on the highway, look at you with open eyes – and at the same time be dead? How could it be that you rubbed shoulders with him but a moment ago? His isn't a dead body. A dead body you know. With a dead body you can even cover yourself in the hutch so it won't be so cold. But for a dead body to stand there and stare at you with such open eyes?! God, why is it so quiet here?

"Gong! Gong! ! ..."

"Block Curfew! Block Curfew!!"

The roars of the Block Chiefs mingle with the terrifying clangs of the gong. Those left-over on the assembly-grounds rush back to the reopened blocks. Frenziedly they scramble up the empty planks of the hutches, hide themselves, curl up. Once again in their sweet home. The wood of the hutch is now soft as a mother's lap. The air in the places vacated by your missing neighbors wraps about you like a warm blanket.

You were left behind.

Outside, on the highway, the others still stand in line, waiting for the crematorium.

23

THE LAST ARGUMENT

Isolation Block

The wood of the hutches was no longer visible. The block no longer looked like a block. Naked knotty bones inundated all. Skeletons covered everything. They clung in clusters to the posts and sideboards of the hutches, all the way up to the ceiling. On high, they crawled and swarmed beneath the rafters, hiding them from sight.

Isolation Block.

There's a bottleneck at the crematorium. The vans are all busy transporting the newly arrived multitudes from the train platform to the crematorium, shuttling back and forth. And until the vans are available, these skeletons have been crammed into the three Isolation Blocks. When things get a bit slacker at the crematorium, they'll be picked up. Today maybe, or tomorrow. Meanwhile they're locked up here.

Isolation Block.

Here there's no longer anyone to fear. Here you're already free of the rules that govern the normal blocks of Auschwitz. Here you're no longer watched. Here there are no block orderlies, no Block Chiefs; no Kapo nor Camp Senior. No one to fear any more.

Here they all screamed and howled; as if, at the very last moment, they wanted to exhaust the last dreg of their voices. A mighty yellow flood of bones surged up from the ground, washing over the brick stove. Nothing else was visible. Everything blotted out by yellowness of naked bones – the walls,

the ceiling, the ground – a murky tide of bones.

Each one scaled his way up to the hutches.

Nobody wanted to get trampled down below. All hunted for a bit of space to rest in, if by chance they might stay the night. Each wanted to outwit the other, to outdo him, to outcrawl him. Naked hand-bones worked their way up over naked arm-bones, over naked leg-bones, over naked skulls.

Arms outflung, straining up, up.

Those lying on top shoved patches of forehead into the narrow window-slits, screaming at the top of their lungs. Let them have their bread ration for today! If they're not going to be burned today they've got the ration coming to them!

Those lying at the walls pounded the wood with their fists, howling through the chinks:

"The ration!"

"The ration!"

They won't keep quiet about this. They know that the Block Chiefs will take their bread, and barter it as usual for cigarettes later on. They've known all along what's going on, but they kept their mouth shut. But now they're not scared any more. They're going to the crematorium anyway. Now they won't let them get away with it. They'll raise a big stink! They'd better get their rations right away! They demand what's coming to them!

"The ration!.."

"The ration! ! !"

His back to the wall, stands Ferber, the dream of his twenty-two years trembling flamelike before his open eyes. The first memory he has of himself is his desire to reach the Land of Israel, a yearning which seemed to have come with him from the very womb of his mother. All of his life was preparation for making the dream come true. The sap of his best years he offered in its service. He kept aloof even from the poetic gifts he was endowed with the better to pursue his ideal. In the ghetto, when all seemed lost, he began to prepare the Jews for an uprising against the Germans. He rebuked and urged. He argued that there was absolutely nothing to lose, but there was the world to gain in human dignity. Yet, the Rabbi of Shilev opposed him: an uprising in the ghetto would be suicide.

And, according to the law of Moses, a Jew is forbidden to take his life.

Now, the coverless skull of the Rabbi of Shilev is squeezed to Ferber's skeleton-torso. Together they were transported to Auschwitz. Two separate, divergent worlds. Yet in Auschwitz they were put into the same block; in the

same hutch they lay together; they went together through the same Selektion. And now, together, they will be fed to the crematorium.

Jostling and tumult everywhere. Wherever you look – stark naked skeletons. Each skeleton shoves for something to lean against. Nobody wants the burden of another's bones. Everybody wants to be up above, where the hutches overflow. Bony hands, fingers splayed, all flail up, up.

"Admit now, Rabbi of Shilev, the God of the Diaspora Himself flounders here in this snarl of bones – a Mussulman!"

The Rabbi's face is scrofulously mottled. His skin – green-mould, pink, yellow – flakes away like the dry scaly bark of a withering tree. Strange: Even now, whenever Ferber looks at the Rabbi of Shilev, he sees the face as it used to be long ago: cowled by a thick, gold-brown beard, sidecurls glistening full. He simply cannot take the scabrous, boylike skeleton-face in the place of the face of the Rabbi of Shilev. It always seems as if the Rabbi were talking to him from behind a weird mask.

"What was it you were saying, Ferber?" asks the Rabbi of Shilev.

"I say that no one will ever breathe life into these bones again. Never. We've committed a great sin, Rabbi. Confess now; we have sinned by not rising up against the Germans!"

The eyes of the Rabbi of Shilev lift to Ferber's face:

"Can't you see, Ferber, God's spirit hovering here now above this Destruction and Creation? Can't you feel that Jacob – in our bones – now wrestles with the Angel? We are the sinew of his thigh vein in this struggle! Be strong, my son, at this moment you must be strong ..."

Hands thrash up, up. Naked skeletons over naked skeletons. A furied wrestling of tangled bones for the merest sliver of space to rest in. Rest. Just a little bit of rest.

Ferber could see the end. Great terror engulfed him. All are going to the crematorium.

He among all. He like all. Only now did he really feel the end. Until now he saw the end outside of him, in the uninterrupted stream of mankind flowing like day and night from the railroad platform to the crematorium. Now, for the very first time, pity for his life unlived rocked him with its anguish. His twenty-two years now flocked to him as babes clinging to their mother during a children's operation in the ghetto, begging him for protection. They're so frightened of the crematorium.

"Oh Rabbi! ... Rabbi!..."

He was weeping.

The screams grew with more shrill, more urgent: "The ration! ... The ration!..." The Mussulmen kept banging the wooden walls for the bread-ration due them today.

The Rabbi's eyes rested on him. All of a sudden: this was no longer the Rabbi of Shilev of the Ghetto, nor the skeleton next to whom he had lain in the hutch. This was – man! Man, naked, on his way to the crematorium. And in the eyes of that man he all at once saw – unfolded and clear – the secret of immortality. He saw; that which had animated this skeleton returned already to its Source. No one here in Auschwitz, had the slightest hold on it any longer. Ultimate awareness now shone forth on him out of the depths of two boundless eyes of man inside the Isolation Block of Auschwitz. He asked:

"Rabbi of Shilev, for whose sake does Jacob wrestle with the Angel, if his children did not cross the river, but stayed here in the blackness of the night?"

"From the very blackness of this night Jacob will bring forth the name 'Israel'. Before that, the morning star will not rise."

Light of full understanding flashing within Ferber: his brothers, there, in the Land of Israel! Revelation bared itself to him. For a split second only. Roundabout him all was distillate, pure. No longer did he feel himself in his own skeleton. At that moment he was utterly oblivious of his body's existence. The Rabbi's eyes were like two open gates –

He entered in unto them.

24

THE DEATH MARCH

Midnight rollcall. Auschwitz is holding its breath. All swiftly assemble on the parade grounds. Left behind in the barracks are the lifeless bodies. This time the dead are not forced to be counted during rollcall. Also left behind in the barracks are the skeletons no longer capable of standing on emaciated leg bones, fragile as straw.

He catapults his skeletal body off the boards of the shelf with the last of his strength. The barracks is empty. He drags himself toward the opening and peers out to see the others, lined up along the length of the long camp road. For two years he has survived on this planet of fire calling itself Auschwitz.

Two years, every second of which has been an eternity. Only the power of his vow has upheld him that should God lift him out of the Evil One's pit, he would recount to his last breath that which his eyes had seen, so that no man created in the image of God would again be seduced to assume the image of the Evil One.

He can feel his strength forsake him. He has reached his end. Failing to stand outside in their midst, he will not march out of Auschwitz with them. He has become a Mussulman.

Every second of those two years in Auschwitz is now weeping in him. Every second that he had withstood being burned, becoming floating ash in the red night sky. He sinks to the ground.

He looks for the last time at the assembled, preparing to march out of

Auschwitz, then he turns his body around toward the darkness in the barracks and crawls toward the boards of his shelf. He knows he will be extinguished in the dark of this night. He begs for the end to be painless.

Suddenly, out of the thick darkness, materializing before his eyes, stands the apparition.

Invariably, for two years of Auschwitz, the apparition would surface the moment the slaughter knife was pressing against his throat; invariably, when Dr. Mengele was making selections for the gas chamber, and he was standing in line, naked, a Mussulman among Mussulmen – quick, quick – advancing past the inspecting eye of Dr. Mengele, who – quick, quick – kept flicking his index finger, meaning gas chamber. Except when it came his turn, and he would stare straight into the eyes of Dr. Mengele, because in there, suddenly, was the apparition prying his glazed Mussulman-eyes open with a shock of amazement. His stare must have overwhelmed the Angel of Death himself: Where does a Mussulman get such a luminous look in his eyes?

Now a shudder shoots through his body. With both hands he covers his eyes, not to see the emerging apparition. He feels her beckoning him to stand up and join those ready for the exit march outside, since the Germans will leave no living evidence behind.

She is commanding his body, and he is attempting to protect himself from her commands. "Please... I'm too weak... can't make it to my feet... I'm Mussulman..."

The apparition is seeing him through the hands covering his face, forcing him on. He tears his eyes away toward the opening of the barracks to avoid her gaze. But she is standing there, in the light of the opening. Her will masters his. He follows, dragging himself.

He is dragging a blanket along with him. The apparition keeps moving; he follows her to the barracks door, out to the parade ground, until he is swallowed up among the mass of inmates lined up to be marched out of Auschwitz.

He, among all. Wrapped in a lice-infested death camp blanket. The apparition vanishes.

It is January 17, 1945. Day and night, night and day, no interruption in the relentless Polish winter. A march of human shadows flickering along upon an endless, white, snowy surface. Those falling asleep in mid-march sink down into the white snow. A rifle shot. A red spot, blood on the white snow. The shadows quietly flicker on.

Endlessly, they fall asleep mid-march; endlessly they become the dead

shadows on white snow; endlessly they sink down because leg bones won't carry torso bones; endlessly they lie still on the white surface.

He drags on, a sleepwalker in the death march. He can almost hear the friction from his hip sockets. He feels nothing but the one desire: to let his body sink to the ground and luxuriate in the white snow. He yearns to be extinguished in the white, restful stillness. He envies those sown by bullets into the white snow now lying scattered along the distance of the road. Sleepwalking along, eyes dragging across the white endlessness, he is ready to sink, rest... rest...

Then over the snow-trampled white surface the apparition is back, looking at him, entreating him: "Please don't let go of us... not at this moment... we've suffered together for so long, refusing to be parted... please don't let go of us... not now... oh, beloved, not now..."

Day and night. Night and day. A procession of endless shadows upon a white endlessness. The dropping ones are shot, shot, shot. The Germans will leave no living evidence behind.

He feels his last strength forsake him. He lingers in the last rows. The death march proceeds alongside a forest. As the first rows drag into a clearing, a German command bellows out:

"Face down!"

The last rows, where he is, have not yet reached the clearing to "face down" as commanded, when suddenly he hears the scream within:

"Run!"

This time he does not see the apparition, only hears her scream inside him.

"Run into the forest!"

He shudders. His name. For the first time he is hearing her scream his name. The names he had were uncountable. Names in the underground. Names on forged identity cards in the ghetto. Names on which his life had hung when, tortured for three sleepless days and nights, he would be shaken out of stupor with the roar, "What's your name?" and somehow know at once to utter that name which happened to be on his identity card when they arrested him. Names that in extermination camps were simply digits.

The one name, the one name he has long forgotten – his real name – now he hears her cry it out, and the command: "Run into the forest!"

It is the voice of his beloved screaming inside himself to save him. In a flash, his whole life passes before his eyes. Again he hears her last words when she was taken away from him to the crematorium: "Beloved, you must live!"

In those endless two years in Auschwitz those last words of his beloved were transcribed into an ultimate will and testament, an unequivocal command: "You will live!" Now, as when the slaughter knife was pressing his throat: "Beloved, run into the forest!"

And he runs.

He hears the shots behind him and does not know whether the shooting is for him or for those lying face down in the forest clearing. He is zig-zagging at a run among the trees, the way her voice inside him is directing. He feels his breath leaving him. He falls to the ground.

The machine guns are hammering at his brain, shattering his skull. No strength to distance himself from this shooting. And her voice – pressing within his skeletal being, urging: "Beloved, this is the last moment... Take a deep, deep breath... it's the air of your freedom... Hold out a few more moments, just a few more... see that tall tree there with the thick branches, go up and hide in there..."

Peering down from the treetop, he watches the Germans bury their SS uniforms and rifles and put on the striped Auschwitz rag-shrouds they have stripped from the bodies they have shot.

All night long the forest whimpers with the dying voices of the fatally wounded, while in the far distance the approaching Red Army makes the forest reverberate with its artillery.

He climbs down the tree trunk, a naked skeleton's skull, bones frozen, mouth agape, teeth bare, eyes glassy. Wrapped in the lice-infested blanket, he stands there leaning against the tree. Immobile as the naked winter tree.

Suddenly, the apparition. Gazing at him in their parting moment when she was being taken to the crematorium. Addressing him:

"Come out of the fire... you are now being born... Open your eyes and see your mission...

His bony hands reach out to her. He wants to touch her. Then before his eyes she is gone.

Crawling along between the trees he feels himself drinking in the air of a new, unfamiliar world. He gulps the air as someone in the desert parched with thirst throws himself at a pool of water. He is drunk.

He runs and falls. Crawls, stand up, runs, falls.

Entranced. Any moment now he may fall off this world that is neither heaven nor earth. He runs, not knowing that earth is under his feet, until his eyes see the mound: the shot-to-death marchers piled up.

He is running toward this mound of shot bodies that are blocking his way. He now finds himself among the dead, returned to the fold. From the distance a Russian tank is approaching, its barrel muzzle fixing him like an eye.

Rising to his knees from amid the mound of corpses he appears to be one grown from their midst...

25

LIBERATION

He stood, alone. He looked up: white chill horizons.

Everywhere –

Void.

The gate stands open. No one walks out.

There is no one.

Empty.

Planet Auschwitz – the ball of fire where he had dwelt – now stretches cold, burnt out, and he stands upon it. Alone. Alone –

A relic.

The earth stretches before his eye as if crusted with congealed, dead lava. Here, breath of life no longer blows. God abandoned this earth; Devil too, turned his back on it.

Far and wide range the blocks – lifeless stone ridges. Inside the blocks, among the skeletons piled on the ground, a Mussulman not-shot stirs here and there. Soundlessly, tortuously, he inches his torso out, snaking free of the carcasses like a white wisp of smoke from a fissure – remnant of a world that had been alive here, once.

An entire world!

Now dead emptiness reigns everywhere. As if the sea had frozen in mid-moil.

All the gates of all the camps of Auschwitz stand open. No one enters in

them. No one leaves through them. There is no one.

The white horizons loom as stone in the gates.

He wanted to cry: Liberation! It's come!

Where is it, this liberation?

As the remains of an archway in some excavated city say naught of which side was entrance to it and which exit – so you know not now which side of this open gate liberation stands. Here you are, at the foot of the mound of ash, returned to your own. Back of you sprawls Auschwitz – fossil-dead, empty. Don't look for anyone there, you'll find no one. They're all here. Here, in the mound of ash. Here you've found them. Day and night you long for them. They were all of your hope. They were the ones you sought. You had been wrenched away from them and now, once more, you stand at their side. Now you see them. They are here, every one of them. Again you are united. For this is liberation.

Where, which side of the open gate, is liberation?

Nothing inside the crematorium, rock-immobile. The iron furnace lids gape open, cool.

The long iron shovel leans dreamily against the crematorium's dark maw. But a moment ago, everything here was at Auschwitz-pitch; as ocean mountainous in typhoon, so the tidal waves of terror smashed over you by day and by night. Now all is hushed. The long shovel of iron, like a baker's shovel, leans idyllic on the furnace edge; the furnace lids – dumb, extinguished metal.

Between the strands of barbed wire the air hangs in frozen slabs. Those same strands of charged wire. Now you can touch them. From any side you want. They no longer confine anyone, they no longer release anyone. No one inside, no one outside. All are here now – in this mound of ash.

"Dear ones! My darlings! This is the liberation! – –"

He flung himself upon them. Took them in his arms. Held them tight. He was lying on the mound, his arms deep, deep in ash.

"Dear ones, oh beloved! Liberation is here! – –"

Back of him lay Auschwitz – mute, petrified. He screamed. Heard a voice.

Startled, he looked around. It was his own voice bounding back at him.

He picked himself up from the ash. His eyes swept over everything in sight: only he, of all in this place, has a voice to command an echo. He knew: locked in the pupils of his eyes was the planet Auschwitz before it had turned to stone. And only he, of all in this place, can take these pupils out with him.

The gates of the camp stood open.

He was walking –

– and with him the soundless blocks of Auschwitz and the piles of Mussulmen within them; the deserted assembly-grounds and the dykes of barbed wire all around.

And at the head – the mound of ash, to point out his way.

– and, with him, the horizons of Auschwitz and the echo of his own voice, rebounding:

– I vow on you ash embraced in my arms, to be a voice unto you, and unto the Ka-Tzet now voiceless and consumed: I will not cease to tell of you even unto the last whisper of my breath. So help me God, amen.

He walked –

Lone.

26

THE SURVIVOR

He was on his way.

Behind him, the sky still held low a clot of night; ahead, the light of a February dawn was flaring. Harry was headed east.

It is said that a day comes when the murderer returns to the scene of his crime, but no one knows that the murdered too returns to the place where he was murdered. It is, perhaps, the spirit of the victim which summons the murderer to this encounter.

He was on his way from Auschwitz, back to the ghetto from which he had been snatched.

For it was not in Auschwitz, but while still in the ghetto, that his soul had been killed. He had passed into the planet Auschwitz a dead man, as other dead men pass into the ultimate unfathomable. Now he made his way back over the snowy road, stumbling along it as the ghosts, seen and unseen, stumble into our world from some other to wander among us. Millions of voices within him wailed at the murderer, summoned him to this encounter.

Dense forests of pines on both sides of the road accompanied him, trees capped by snow turbans. From among their trunks the German threat still sputtered its final spasms onto the road, but he could no longer sense it. For Harry, indeed, the danger was unreal.

By this time, almost all of Polish Upper Silesia had been taken by the Red Army, but broken remnants of Waffen SS battalions still lurked here and there in the surrounding woods, disguised in striped, lice-infested Auschwitz garments, which they hoped would help them slip away from the Red

Army's iron fist.

Freedom roared in upon Harry like a tidal wave, pounding and surging. Yet, like the drowning man who cannot see the sea in which he founders, he did not perceive it. Somewhere inside the shell of his body the pulse of life still throbbed. Such is the law of nature on this planet. In each town and village through which he had passed yesterday, freedom beckoned to him from all the windows, offering herself to him. But like a space traveler whose ship has disintegrated, he had been shot out to a gravity-free nowhere, unable to reach the earth again, equally unable to find the orb of his destination.

The road was long and empty. A forest of snow standing on both sides. Naked winter trees, naked like the Mussulmen skeletons on the roll-call grounds at Auschwitz, standing with spiny arms raised in the air, their bony gazes fixed on him. He walked between the rows, a bleached and sterile tunnel to the horizon. And their eyes went with him.

He broke into a run, fired by a ray of sun ahead from the east that burst upon his bare skeletal brow. In that instant he felt wings beneath the blades of his back, felt himself rise aloft and hover there, watching his skeleton run beneath on the road surface, a Ka-Tzet uniform, borne by the wind. At that split second he seized freedom, hoisted it on his back like a dripping hunk of sun, and raced with it toward the ghetto. For there, only there in the ghetto, could he savor freedom in all its fullness. In the ghetto she would run to him with hands outstretched, her hair streaming in the wind. She would fall into his arms, kiss his shaven skull and whisper into his ear, "Beloved, I knew you would come back to this place. I've been waiting for you here..."

* * *

The ghetto lay silent, beneath a pane of snow. As though purposefully silent. Purposefully white. Shh... Nothing has happened here. Nothing has ever been here. The snow isn't hiding anything here.

No one ran to meet him. Somehow, all along, he had known it would be this way. But the glare of liberation had been blinding; it had sparked him from some hidden part of his mind — whence, he knew not. Somewhere, on his way here, for a fleeting moment between truth and illusion, there had throbbed inside him the pulse of a new life after Auschwitz, blurring the hairline boundary separating one from the other.

Vacuum everywhere. Clotted white vacuum.

He lifted his feet with effort and plunged them, one after the other, deep into the snow. He felt like a blotch on the white expanse. As if it had been his doing, this sin of atrocity. Why else should only he remain alive on this bleached and lifeless plain?

Millions of voices wailed within him for the murderer, summoning him to the encounter.

O God! What yardstick to calculate revenge?

He stood in the darkness of the bunker hole in the ghetto. Here he had seen her for the last time. Here they had parted. She to Auschwitz. He to Auschwitz. Separately. He touched the stones of the wall against which she had leaned; he embraced the empty air as if she were in his arms.

Here in this black hole hands had strangled the infant who didn't know you must not cry when Germans are searching outside for hidden Jews. Eventually, they were all dragged out anyway, the dead and the nearly dead; no one survived.

He knelt to the ground. As he had done once before, he crawled out through the air hole ripped in the bunker wall. Outside, the ladder was still raised to the attic as it had been two years ago, and on it he climbed up again. In the corner, beneath a rafter, lay his sister's notebook exactly where he had hidden it, rotten and mildewed, gnawed by rats. Only the title on the first page was still legible: The Diary of Daniella Preleshnik.

All at once, reality was forced down on him like the straitjacket on a madman, and the terrible pain of clarity sliced through him, pain like the ripping away of a tooth with a dull instrument.

... Preleshnik. Harry Preleshnik. The names he had had were uncountable. Names in the underground. Names on forged identity cards in the ghetto. Names on which his life had hung when, tortured for three sleepless days and nights, he would be shaken out of stupor with the roar "What's your name?," and somehow know at once to utter that name which happened to be on his identity card when they arrested him; names in extermination camps that were simply digits. More than once these names, enfleshed as dread vampires, came back to haunt him in his dreams.

Harry Preleshnik! The only one of his names that let him be, the only one of his names he had long ago forgotten. His own, his real name.

O my beloveds, where have I lost you?

He stood alone in the ghetto's dead white void. Revenge! The voices within him wailed. He lifted his hands to his eyes. Gazed at the splayed stuttering fingers. Skeleton fingers on his hands. Their silhouettes fell across the snow like the footprints of an ailing bird.

He pleaded, "Please, God, light me a way."

* * *

The Red Army soldier was standing by the cab of the truck that headed a

long military convoy. The massive trucks loaded high, arrayed one after the other beneath the branches of the trees along the roadside, were going to the front. Overhead, machine-guns clattered at Messerschmitts, their volleys rapping like hail on empty tin pots. In the wintry skies the planes looked like stray birds who had lost their way back to the nest. The Red Army man rolled a papirossa between his fingers, casually observing the battle of planes in the sky. He took a deep drag on his papirossa and responded to the man in the Ka-Tzet garment. "O.K., I'll take you with me to the front."

The roads of Upper Silesia were filled with the liberated from German labor camps, pushing along in ecstatic caravans: Frenchmen, Yugoslavs, Czechs. Each people with its flag, hastily fabricated from tattered frocks and German bedding; rainbow patchwork banners jouncing in the breeze. On makeshift sleds, swiftly thrown together, they dragged numberless trunks and bundles. The French, wearing black berets, walked in dance, hands raising bottles to the sky. Freedom! Liberation! At home they're awaiting their return. Each one of them knows his home — and where it is. Each wayfarer's lapel is decorated with his national colors. Liberation has come! Singing and dancing, they surged onward, each to his home, his own home.

The truck cut a path through the carnival throng. The Red Army man at the wheel stared ahead through the windshield and let fall a question to the man sitting next to him:

"Where are you from?"

The mob cleaved like waters before the prow blade of a motorboat. Finally the truck emerged. Now the highway ran to meet them.

"Where do you come from?" the Red Army man repeated.

"I come from the White Ghetto," he said.

With one hand, the Red Army man passed a papirossa over the tip of his tongue to seal it. "What's your name?" he asked.

The side windows of the cab gulped snatches of forest from both sides of the road. The treetops capped with snow assumed the form of the faces of his family and loved ones.

"My name was burned with all the rest in the crematorium at Auschwitz," he said.

The Red Army man took a deep drag and, staring ahead at the road, said, "O.K., I'll give you a machine-gun."

* * *

They stood face to face: the Nazi naked to the waist, hands upraised, back to the wall, the exposed SS tattoo peering from beneath his armpit.

And opposite him – he, the Jew, in death camp rags, the gun aimed in his hands.

From outside, through the doorway, the roaring cheers of the Red Army flooding German soil broke upon his ears. Zhukov's troops had reached the Oder; drunk with vodka and victory, they were smashing open the doors of German homes.

On the floor by the Nazi's boots lay a striped Ka-Tzet jacket: it had just dropped, on order, from the Nazi's body. In the forest, hiding in a tree, Harry had seen the SS men bury their uniforms in the ground and put on the Auschwitz garments of the prisoners whom they had taken along for liquidation on their retreat. In this disguise, taken from the murdered prisoners, they disbanded, each returning to his home. And, if asked about death in Auschwitz, they could speak of it as eloquently as any survivor.

"Unschuldig ... unschuldig ..." the SS man begged for his life.

Through a trap door in the floor came the whimper of the German child in the cellar. The SS family had hidden down there. But who better than he, the Jew, could know where to find them? That he had learned from the Germans. The first to emerge from the cellar was a young German woman who immediately displayed an inviting offer on the white teeth of her terrified smile. Confronting the loaded gun pointed at her by a skeleton man from Auschwitz, her trembling hands inched her dress above her white thighs.

Now she was lying in the next room. Soldiers who had stormed into the house like a gale from the steppes of Russia, red kolpaks on their heads, their breath the cutting winds of Siberia's tundras, had swept her into the adjoining room, to bed.

"Unschuldig..."

On the wall, behind the bare, upraised SS arms, the pendulum of a clock was swinging – back and forth, back and forth.

And he, all he wanted was to scream at the upraised SS arms, "Look at me! I am the Jew! The filthy Jew, the lice-infested Jew! I am an Untermensch! And you are a German. You're a supergod. You decree who shall live and who shall die! Scream that you're human, and I'll be able to see that your blood is as red as all the blood you've spilled! Now roar at me your German roar, as you did yesterday and the day before, and I'll spray you with the fire of your own crematorium ..."

To drain his soul to its essence was what he wanted. Yet his finger on the trigger held back.

From outside the doorway, a volley of shots slammed into the half-naked body with the uplifted arms. The man in the Ka-Tzet garment turned his head.

Frenzied soldiers stood in the doorway, one holding a rifle that still smoked. "He was ours," they roared.

The wall in front of him was splotched crimson with a splash of blood. The pendulum of the clock continued swinging over the bloodstain, left-right, left-right. He bent to the floor. He picked up the Ka-Tzet jacket. On it, near the dried bloodstain of the Auschwitz prisoner from whose corpse it had been stripped, a fresh blot had begun to spread. In a moment the blood of these two would touch.

He looked at the Auschwitz number on the jacket. Six digits. Like the serial number on his own jacket. For two whole years its owner had held out in Auschwitz. Probably someone like himself, one of those herded into the forest by the Germans to be liquidated on the death march. And there, on the edge of liberation, death caught him. This Nazi at his feet – was he the one who had shot him before stripping this jacket from his corpse?

He let the jacket drop from his hands. Had not he himself at the last moment escaped from the death march into the forest, his own jacket might now be lying on the floor.

Outside the window, on the sill, stood an empty flowerpot filled with the white of snow. The window was draped with a transparent curtain, and through the pores of the Gothic letters embroidered in its center, "EIN FUHRER – EIN VOLK," a white sky blanched in.

Outside, the Red Army troops were surging on like mountain cataracts. Armor. Heavy artillery. Giant tank-monsters. Cavalry officers charging past on steeds at a lightning gallop, white-red kolpaks cockily aslant on their heads, bold faces, inflamed with fire and frost, liquor and victory. Iron. Iron. Iron. Without number. Without respite or hindrance. Onward. Onward. To the storming of Berlin.

He stood there in the chaos and the blood, among the walls of a German home. The cries of the baby rising from deep within the opened cellar sawed at him from one side; the shouts of the soldiers in their orgy with the German fraulein in the next room hammered at him from the other. He could no longer stand it. Suddenly he felt himself excruciatingly alien here. Belonging to no one here; no one here belonging to him. He felt no sense in the victory, no sense in the revenge. He was as lifeless as the corpse lying before him.

The baby in the ghetto bunker had cried exactly this way before they strangled him. He did not know why there was no joy of victory and no joy of revenge within him.

The roads were a mire of slush. His feet stepped on the corpses of German soldiers, run over and flattened by thousands of giant tanks pushing forward.

Soldier's corpses ironed out to paper thinness, impressed like tiles into the muddy snow. The hairy growth on their mangled chests looked heavenward, like the trampled memory of man. The sooty ruins of gaping walls jutted this side and that the whole length of the road. Annihilation and destruction where once there had been human life.

He went on. The wind seeped through the Ka-Tzet garment to his bones. The melting snow soaked through to the soles of his feet. And in his hands he bore the heavy load of loneliness and the sealed secret of revenge.

The wail of the Jewish baby from the ghetto bunker rang again in his ears. Not the crying, but its abrupt falling into silence after Jewish hands had strangled it. And he asked himself whether the blood of the German infant in the cellar could have hushed, if only for a moment, the wailing of the Jewish baby in his ears. Only the murderer's blood has the power to wash away the stain of blood borne on the flesh of the blood redeemer. But how will blood wash away blood on a body whose flesh has been burned to ash?

An anguishing void extended around him. No longer was there anyone to whom he could return, his hands soured with the murderer's blood.

He choked with longing for some familiar face, a face from then, from a world that had been and was no more. He was crossing a sea of death spreading over the face of this earth. Would his soul's cry for revenge never be stilled?

As though in response to a voice calling him from a hidden beyond, his legs led him on. Where could he seek revenge? And what revenge would it be that could restore to him all he had lost?

Flying high on the houses of Upper Silesia were the red-and-white Polish flags. He knew that more than one Auschwitz SS man had grown up in these very houses. But now, instead of the Fuhrer's portrait, they had hurriedly hung pictures of Polish freedom fighters on their walls. And the women, whose husbands at this very instant were still prodding Auschwitz prisoners in evacuation to the depths of Germany, these same women had suddenly forgotten all about the honor of the Master Race, and brazenly, with choppy Slavic words hauled up from the recesses of their memories, were shoving their naked flesh into the arms of soldiers numb with vodka and victory.

Alone, he walked along desolate roads. Heavy winter skies crouched over the ruins. Evening began to fall over the slushy field of slaughter. In this vast expanse he no longer had a single stone beckoning him to rest his head.

He lifted his eyes to the pale horizon. In all the world he no longer had a single door waiting for him to come and open it.

The mildewy sky sagged over his shoulders. And, like a submarine sky

scanning above the surface, his head cleared a path for him through the murky waters of the sky.

His feet led him, and he followed. Where are the obscured radar ears in man that pick up the voice of destiny calling to him from a hidden beyond?

He left Sodom and Gomorrah behind. He did not turn his head. He was on his way.

27

LEAVING

He was sitting on the rotting straw. The stable was bare, open to the winds, its doors missing, wrenched off. So much had been taken for firewood during these last winter days it was a wonder that the three wooden walls were left intact.

Moist, grimy snow fell outside. Seemingly endless, open ground stretched before his eyes. Every now and then it seemed the falling rain was transformed in midair into murky, stagnant pools. The sky appeared to have sagged earthward after the extinction of the last spark of hope.

The girl was sitting beside him on the straw, silently following his outturned gaze. On the ground near the opening of the stable lay the corpses of four Auschwitz survivors. Before dawn the last of them had relinquished life, and his screams for help had died with him. All night long they had lingered in their death agonies. It seemed as if their wailing would never end. Now – stillness.

Four Auschwitz survivors. They had fled the death march during the retreat from Auschwitz. Once the shooting subsided, they crawled out of the forest. Perhaps they had hidden under the heaps of bullet-ridden bodies in the forest, and were thus spared the Nazi bullet. As if sniffing at the footsteps of their own death, they had made their way to this place. Outside the stable, two days ago, a Red Army field kitchen had been still in operation. Field Marshal Zhukov had a makeshift bunker hastily dug for himself and his staff officers. Then he had gone on to the final storming of Berlin.

Four Auschwitz survivors. Starved, they had fallen ravenously upon the

cauldrons with their floating chunks of pork, gulping more and more of the melted pork fat into their taut, cobwebbed bowels. They had scrambled after the kitchen truck as it pulled away, the cooks throwing chunks of pork to them as they ran. As long as they gulped – they lived. With nightfall, they screamed in agony.

Now – stillness. Outside, the horizon pressed against the stable. It was impossible to tell the hour. Time, like the rain, stood between heaven and earth. The girl's eyes followed his gaze fixed upon the grayness without. From here the tanker train that stood on the tracks opposite was blotted out. Everything was shrouded, as though under water. But she knew: no sooner would the engine blow its first whistle than he would leap from the straw to slip into the oil car and vanish as suddenly as he had appeared.

He felt the touch of her hand on his arm, "Don't leave me alone," she whispered.

He looked at her as though he were now seeing her for the first time. The wisps of straw tangled here and there in her golden hair aroused his pity. From behind two blue eyes, her young and fluttering life begged mercy. He did not know from which death camp she had come, just as she did not know from which death camp he had come. But both knew well the "where" they had come from and the "whither" they had reached. They recognized each other like a pair of arms recognizing the body from which it has grown. He did not know her name; she did not know his. Nor did it cross their minds to ask. Both had fallen from that planet where men have no names. Now the two met here in this world. They were the first. One male and one female in this new world into which they had fallen. Next to them the four corpses, who had just returned to the place from which they had come.

"Don't leave me by myself," she pleaded. He looked at her. "I no longer belong to this place," he said.

Her lips trembled. Her voice was low. "There is no one on this earth who can understand us, except ourselves. Only we can understand each other, we who do not talk in the language of speech. But with the others? The outsiders? In what language could we explain to them? What could we say that they could possibly understand? And if it is now decreed for us to go out among the living, then we must hold on to each ..."

She did not finish. She looked at him with a world in her eyes that, except for her, only he knew. The gates of that world stood open in her eyes, and through them he entered and was back. Once more he was *there*. He did not see her now. It was as if she had gone.

Slowly, she lowered her head to the straw. She whispered to him as a doc-

tor murmurs to a consultant at the bedside of a dying man, in a language intelligible only to themselves. "Now there is nothing I am afraid of any more," she said, "except living as a woman with a man. That is what terrifies me most. Because what can we give them? And how can either of us lie beside a woman or a man and at the same time exist in a world which they cannot ever enter and we cannot ever leave?"

He felt her hand reaching for his arm. How overwhelming was the lonely heart of this charred leftover of a life, cast into an empty world of chaos, yearning to cling to another of its kind, finding no one! He had no word for her that she did not know. Now she was more than he. Chastened and pure. A chastity purer than Eve's before the Sin.

She was the blessing in the curse of God

Outside, the pale rain fell harder. The torrential rains swept the body of one of the men from the opening to the lake which had formed outside. Only the dead man's face and his bare toes jutted above the water. The rain washed over the corpse, giving it the appearance of an exhausted swimmer floating supine who lets the water carry him on its back.

On the siding in the distance, the tanker train could not yet be distinguished; but, on the left, the plank ends jutting from Zhukov's abandoned bunker could already be made out, their tips like fingers of a hand thrust skyward by someone crying for help.

"What can we offer them," she continued softly, "when our souls are ash and our bodies are as ravaged as scorched earth? The climate of our souls will stifle them. And we too, will any of us be able to breathe without another like us by our side to whom we can return, the way a wary bird comes home to its nest at evening?"

His eyes were on her face. He saw her blue eyes, her golden hair. For a moment he imagined it was his sister Daniella lying near him on the straw. Before him now was the face of Daniella as she had been in the ghetto and as he had seen her, later, in the nightmare of Niederwalden. He shivered. He was cold. He was still wrapped in the Ka-Tzet tatters, and his skull was shaven and bare. He could have helped himself to the finest clothes in the houses he had passed on his way; there was not a thing the Germans would not now have eagerly given him, just so he would deign to stay the night in their home. Many German families were scuttling about nowadays to find themselves a Jewish survivor; a Jew in a German home was as good as a charm against evil.

She noticed the shudder running through him and did not understand what it came from. She got up and rushed to the opening of the stable. From one of

the corpses she pulled off a full-length Waffen SS officer's coat whose collar and lapel pins had been ripped away. She returned to Harry and put the coat around his shoulders. "Don't go in the tank car," she said. "Let's go together to Gliwice. There you can decide the rest of your journey."

"I will not take one backward step on this soil," he said. "Only onward. And you know where my road leads. My destiny and revenge are somewhere else. That's where I must go."

She tried to dissuade him. "Do you have to set out at once on such a long journey in the state you are in now?" But she knew that the tank cars, going as far as Rumania, were his only chance to push toward the east, a chance he would not miss. "Take me with you," she begged.

"The trip is too risky, and you won't be able to stand the ride inside the oil tanker," he said.

She did not reply. They both knew that no risk could match the conflux of dangers from which she had emerged. In her mute forlornness he felt the full pain of his own. As if he were now abandoning his own flesh and blood to this cruel loneliness. His hands reached for her. "My sister," his lips whispered.

Her eyes rose to him. The words "my sister" blasted at her from dim distances a scent of belonging and familial warmth which had long since been wrenched from her world. She inhaled this scent; she clung to it. She did not want to lose it again. "Where shall I find you?" she whispered.

"You know the end of my journey," he said.

She wept softly.

The rain had almost stopped. "I must be on my way at once," he said.

"As soon as I find transportation, I'll follow you," she said quickly. "For now, I'll head toward Katowice. From there, I may even be able to reach Palestine before you."

She walked behind him to the stable opening. In the corner, by her feet, lay the Auschwitz cap of one of the dead. She picked it up to cover his skull. He held out his hand to her. "We part here," he said, and went out to face the wind.

28

My Town – After

He stood in the tatters of the Ka-Tzet, returned from that other world. People passed him by. They glanced up at the "Electra" clock, but when they noticed him their glances stuck in their throats.

Sun on Park Street.

The naked branches of the twin rows of trees are powdered with fine, glittering snow. People walk on the sidewalk to the left, and the sidewalk to the right. The snow leans over the sign and windowsills, like brimming foam which does not flow down.

He stood, a denizen fallen from a foreign planet. Women passing him by quickened their steps, and on reaching their houses hurriedly slammed the doors shut –

A survivor came back from Auschwitz!

They said all of them were burned up there. These are the houses they used to live in. They sat around these tables, slept in these beds. Their linens are still folded in the closets, their clothes dress us and our children. All of them were supposed to have been burned up there. And look at this – they're returning!

He stood: skull shaven bare, a skeleton in the striped shreds of the Ka-Tzet uniform. From here your glance travels freely down the Boulevard –

He looked, and saw there the eclipse of his world's sun.

Sun on Park Street. The same sun. Here, nothing has changed. Except: when last he stood here – it was summer's end; now its the end of winter.

Time –

Behind him, on the "Electra" show windows, the blooms of frost droop in the glance of the sun. The same sun. And over his head, the same "Electra" clock. But his time has lost all connection with him. His time has broken out of its ambits, and runs on the cogwheels of a different world. Now, when the two separate worlds converge before his eyes – he suddenly sees the eclipse of his life's sun.

The same street. People walk on the right; people walk on the left. And suddenly, mid-street – "Operation Old People" passes. Dr. Lewison's wife raises her eyes to her porch, and continues on her way – to Auschwitz.

Time –

The boy sleds fleetly between the two rows of trees, cutting through the snow as with gleaming knife blades. He pumps himself with energy for a fresh plunge: right-left, right-left, and – a straight forward flight. Two twin grooves run in his wake like two silver stripes.

"Moni! You're putting plenty of mileage behind you today!..." he yearned to call after him.

An unending stream of passersby. When they catch sight of him, they lower their eyes. As if it were their own conscience standing beneath that "Electra" clock. They hurry away.

Why do they act this way?

He didn't come here to claim anything. There's no longer anything here for him. He only came here to knock on a door, the way he used to. He hungered to hear once more the patter of footsteps coming to the door. And then, at the threshold, the beloved face of – –

Eyes, staring with fright, the face of a strange woman, stiff and rebuffing. She slammed the door instantly in his face, bolted it.

Why do they act this way? All he wanted was for his hand, this one last time, to touch the knob of this door.

On the broad steps of the District Courthouse, feet climb up and down. Here, nothing has changed. On the building's front, above the main entrance, stands the Goddess of Justice, weighing in her scales with blindfolded eyes the white silence of the snow.

"Moni, you're putting plenty of mileage behind you today..."

His awareness of time left him, its dimensions distorted: Then, it was summer's end, 1939 – now it's winter's end, 1945. When this boy with the sled was born, Moni was no longer here. Moni, before he was stuffed into the crematorium, got twenty-five lashes from Kapo Vatzek on his naked bone-rump. Boy! Boy! Take a look at the sides of the sled. Aren't the initials M.P. carved

there? They stood for the name of a boy: Moni Preleshnik. He got this sled from his brother for his sixth birthday. He loved to use it here, on the Boulevard, between these two rows of trees.

A girl in a scarlet coat. Lissom. Ripe, a bursting red cherry in the snow. She vanishes into a doorway. Above is that window. That same window. But no! She couldn't be Renya Zeidner. Renya was transported to the "House of Dolls." Daniella found her there, an old woman, pulped, shriveled.

Nevermore will the Jew, phylactery bag under his arm, shuffle along this street. The Synagogue is gone forever, so is the Peretz Library; gone the Jewish Commerce Street, and gone the Jewish porters with ropes girding their thick waists.

In the entrance of Bar Polki alone you can see the same headwaiter. The sun still gleams onto the satin lapels of his black dinner jacket –

– In Berlin-town we'll lunch by noon ...

Sure, they'll have lunch in Berlin.

The boy as he passes raises scared, questioning eyes to his father: "Who's that?"

"A Ka-Tzetnik," the father replies.

The sleeve of his Ka-Tzet uniform is ripped to the shoulder. He gazes at the six digits of the Ka-Tzet number on his forearm. The blue outlines of the digits streak before his eyes: a blue river. His arm is the bed of the river. All the multitudes of them surge within that river. There, in the river depths, flow his days, his nights. Cities crowded with Jews, Jewish towns and hamlets. His own time is utterly divorced from him. Strange: his time flows at once there, within the depths of the blue river of his tattooed Ka-Tzet number, and outside, along Park Street.

The bone of his arm joins them as a bridge spans two shores.

Ka-Tzetnik! – except for this one name, not a trace of all those multitudes was left. They float within the six digits of the number on his forearm.

Ka-Tzetnik! The new hand on the clock face of his time.

The clock hanging over his head.

In Metropoli all the people set their watches by the "Electra" clock.

Here, nothing has changed.

No, he didn't come here to claim anything. Nothing is left for him here. Still, once your glance falls on the twin rows of trees lining the Boulevard, you cannot that easily pull it away. Why when all is said and done, this is where your cradle stood – –

29

WIEDERGUTMACHUNG*

My mother was – – my mother.

How can I describe to you – Mother?

My mother was – the most beautiful of all mothers in the world.

My mother said:

"No! My little boy didn't do this naughty thing ..." Lovingly she pressed the profiles of my head between her open palms, her fingers long and parted. Her eyes plumbed the depths of my own as she said: "I – I did the naughty thing! Because I am my little boy!"

Afterwards, I was always very careful to behave because I couldn't bear for my mother to do a naughty thing.

My mother!

Of all mothers in the world mine was the most beautiful.

On her way to the crematorium my mother saw my face. I know it because I, too, on my way to the crematorium, saw my mother's face.

Mother, now they want to give me money to make up for you.

I still can't figure out how many German marks a burnt mother comes to.

"My little boy couldn't have done this naughty thing ..."

Mother, I feel your open palms touching the profiles of my head, my eyes sink into yours: Isn't it true, mother, you wouldn't take money for your little one, burnt?

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*) Reparations.

My sister's hair was long and curly, the color of ripe gold. Mother's hands vanished in white-gold foam every time she washed it. Whenever she rinsed it, sheer gold cascaded down my sister's nape like a waterfall, all the way to the bottom of the tub.

My mother loved to plait ribbons into her tiny daughter's hair. She would sort them out, singing softly to herself as she did:

"Ribbon green for hair's gold sheen,
Ribbon pink for chocolate skin,
Ribbon blue for the eyes ..."

My sister's eyes were blue like the sky.

Sabbath morning, in front of the house, when the sun met my sister's hair, neighbors at their windows would call:

"Whose hair is that, little Goldilocks?

"My mother's," answered my sister.

I loved my sister's hair. She never lifted a scissors to it. She said, "My mother's ..."

Before my sister was burned in the crematorium of Auschwitz they shaved off her hair.

Seventeen years the golden locks lengthened on my sister's head. Long locks of gold. Seventeen years.

In a shipment of hair, in sacks, or in rectangular bales, tight-pressed like cotton from rich plantations, my sister's hair was sent to Germany. It was unloaded at a factory, to make:

blankets –

soft club-chairs –

upholstery –

Somewhere, in Germany, a young Fraulein now covers herself with a blanket. A single hair of gold, unprocessed, thrusts out of the blanket's weave. The Fraulein stretches out a bare arm, pulls, pulls –

"Fraulein! Give me back that hair!

It's out of my sister's golden locks – "

My sister, now they want to give me money for you. But I don't know how

many German marks your curls should bring.

"Whose hair is it, little Goldilocks?"

"My mother's ..."

"Mother, Mother, what do you say – how much is your little Goldilock's hair worth?"

My mother croons to herself:

"Ribbon green for hair's gold sheen
Ribbon pink for chocolate skin,
Ribbon blue for the eyes ..."

My sister had eyes like blue sky.

Among tens of thousands of shoes I'd recognize a shoe of yours, Father!
Your heels were never crooked.
Father, your step was always straight.

Each day a new mountain of shoes piles up on the compound of the crematorium. Remember when I was little? The first time you let me shine your shoes, I polished them tops and bottoms. Oh how you laughed at me then:

"There is, Sonny, a dirty side as well, on which a man must tread. When you're big you'll understand."

Father, I'm big now.

The sun bends over the slope of the tall shoe-mountain, illuminating it for me as with a flashlight:

Shoes!

Shoes without end!

A torn baby-shoe – like an infant's open mouth, eager for the full spoon in Mother's hand; a torn baby-shoe – an infant's head, eyes bugging from the shoe-mountain to the sun shining on earth.

Nearby –

A narrow, delicate woman's shoe, high and slender-heeled, brown-scaled. Open on all sides. Several entwined leather straps on top. The gold imprint on the steep arch glitters in the face of the sun.

Nearby –

A lime-spattered workman's shoe. The sun peers into it as into the mouth of a cavern hacked into barren mountain rock.

Nearby –

A mountaineer's shoe, its toe wedged in the side of the mountain, as if the climber had paused in mid-ascent, breathless: "Oh, what a view!..."

Nearby –

A leg with a shoe on its foot – prosthesis to the groin. Trouserless, naked to the sun.

Shoes!

Shoes beyond count!

Father, among tens of thousands of shoes I would recognize yours!

Your heels were never crooked –

Father, your step was straight.

Give me –

Give me back one single hair, of my sister's golden curls!

Give me back one shoe of my father's;

A broken wheel from my little brother's skates;

And a mote of dust that on my mother rested –

30

On the Way to the Land of Israel

Harry stood in the back of the truck at the rectangular opening into the driver's cab. The army truck, racing along the narrow mountain road, was covered by a tarpaulin on all sides. Harry's eyes were riveted on the Star of David painted on the hood, and his whole body trembled. His knees gave way, and to keep from collapsing he clutched the iron rail with both hands.

Survivors — charred sticks — lay on the floor of the truck, no longer grasping the nature of that somewhere out of which they had been spewed. Chips flown off in the hewing of a forest now lost and vanished, bearing within themselves the terrible secret of wood and forest alike.

He was staring at the Star of David, and the roots of his hair stung into his scalp. In trucks just like this one they had been shunted from ghetto to ghetto, from the railway siding to the opening of the crematorium. Into trucks like this one the ghetto babies had been tossed during a children's Aktion. You never knew what face death would have at the end of the journey. Invariably, the trucks took you; invariably, because sewn over your heart was the Star of David. The very same Star of David painted on the hood of this truck.

To begin with, they marked you with a Star of David. Thereafter, like a law of nature, as day appears and as day disappears, so everyone marked with the Star of David was bound to vanish in trucks exactly like this one.

Two soldiers from the land of Israel. In British uniform. Driving the truck

through the Brenner Pass between Austria and Italy.

The narrow road the truck sped along girded the flank of the mammoth mountain like a rope. One side of the truck was almost rubbing against the belly of the mountain and the wheels of the other rimmed along the edge of a chasm.

Two soldiers from the land of Israel. One, a dark-skinned Yemenite, little more than a boy, handling the wheel. An army jacket over his shoulders, its empty sleeves clasped about his neck as though he were carrying a wounded man on his back. Smoldering eyes fixed on the serpentine road, like an eagle in flight following the lightning flashing by its eyes.

And the second, outside on the hood. Red-haired. In a full-length army coat. No telling why he was riding outside. As if he were making a point of demonstrating his calm, to assure them that on this dangerous road he was leading them along there was no need for fear. They were in good hands. In the strong light of day, his fair head shone as though it were a beacon showing them the way. A scar gleamed on the edge of his brow, like a natural vein within a gem reflecting the light.

Standing at the opening into the driver's cab, Harry looked at the scar on the forehead of this soldier who had saved him from drowning in the frontier river between the Russian and Allied occupied zones. Then, too, when he opened his eyes as consciousness returned, the first thing he had seen was the scar.

For days and nights on end he had made his way, hidden in the tank car, and later on tops of freight cars carrying him across countries and borders eradicated by blood and fire. Months passed, and seasons. He advanced on foot and on any kind of transportation he could find; his body seemed invulnerable to any danger. Until he got to the river.

The frontier guard stationed on the bank had opened fire on them as they crossed the river. Before Harry's eyes, the head of the man swimming next to him sank beneath the water in a swirl of blood. Abrasha, his companion along the escape route, was drowning by his side. With his last strength, Harry had dived under and dragged the drowning man until he lost breath and consciousness. When he opened his eyes there was the scar on the smiling face of the soldier on the hood; beside him on the ground lay his comrade Abrasha, shot in the leg.

Where had this Palestinian soldier suddenly appeared from at the river? How had he happened to be there just at the critical moment? At once, he had plunged into the water to rescue Harry and his friend. Then, on his back, he had borne the wounded Abrasha all along that barren rocky road.

Whose hand was this, reaching out to save them at the last moment? From what world did it come to them? From whose home was it dispatched? Who was the mother rushing her son to rescue a brother from drowning? What was the source of this breath that blew new life into him?

Two soldiers. The Palestinian badge on their uniform. The one brown-skinned, his hands on the wheel. The other golden-skinned, leaning against the yellow Star of David on the hood of the truck.

And suddenly again — that truck, that same Star of David. Leading him off. The two visions spun in his brain, and he had no strength to contain them. He saw the corpses of the four prisoners lying beside the opening of the stable. In Auschwitz they had held on. There they had out-fought death. Yet, in the world beyond Auschwitz, the very food that sustains life had been their death. Would he be able to withstand the plethora of spiritual food streaming from this Star of David, flooding his brain? Wasn't his trembling the onset of his mind's death-throes?

He tried to calm himself: the hallucinations of his exhausted brain might be no more than a carry-over from the shock at the frontier river. Physical shock. That was the last border, he told himself. Above all, he must keep his spirit strong. For two Auschwitz years this Mussulman body of his had sustained him because he had guarded his mind to keep from becoming a Mussulman in spirit. In the depths of hell, it was his spirit that was in command of his body; therefore, Auschwitz could not break him. But now he could feel his armor falling apart as if it were wax melting around a candlewick in the blazing sun of freedom.

The truck was scaling a mountain-back. Soon it would reach the peak. Wisps of smoky clouds drifted in the chasms between the mountains. The engine ground as it boiled in steep ascent. Any moment, it seemed, the truck would arrive at the gates of heaven and be swallowed up.

With shaking hands he supported himself on the iron rail behind the driver's cab. He must get somewhere quickly, anywhere at all. Once there, he would be able to carry out the vow he had made to them in Auschwitz. They had left him behind on their way to the crematorium. In each one's eye was the command: Tell it! Do not forget! He had to keep going until he fulfilled his vow. Hold tight, hold tight, he pleaded with himself.

The face of the soldier on the hood broke into a smile. With hand gestures he was explaining to Harry that from this distance he could not hear what Harry's lips were asking of him, and in the same sign language the soldier let him know that they were nearing their destination. It wouldn't be long now.

Treviso.

Perched on top of the Italian boot is Treviso. Here a unit of Jewish soldiers was stationed, here the first cell of the underground's Operation Escape for smuggling out Jewish refugees was planted, and here was where the first waves of survivors streamed in. In Germany, the crematoria were still burning, but here, as over all of Italy, it was apparent in the expressions of the soldiers hanging around that the war had long been over.

The redheaded soldier extended his hand in farewell to Harry. "Nobody here owes thanks to anyone," he said in reply to the look in Harry's eyes. "You can call me Felix. And your name?"

What should he say? His name had been consumed in the mountain of ashes. His name remained behind on the other planet – that name he could no longer call to his lips. "And me," he answered, "you can call ... Phoenix."

"What an odd coincidence, almost the same name," the soldier remarked as he jumped into the jeep. "See you at home," he called out and, releasing the brake, was gone.

Harry stood there. The central square of the camp was bustling with soldiers. Life surged around him in the stir of words and laughter. Everyone had something to say to his fellow; everyone had someone to turn to. For the first time he longed for someone to turn to him, to look at him, to listen to his silence.

"See you at home," the scarred soldier had said to him. Loneliness was choking him. He wanted to feel the nearness of another human being, to see a familiar face. To be included, if only for a moment, within the circle of life; to taste; again what he had once known. He looked around for someone in whose nearness he might find shelter. No one here stood as alone as he.

At his feet lay the bundle he had carried with him along the route; his Auschwitz garment was in it. All the possessions of a lifetime were crumpled within these rags. No parting with them any more.

He picked up the bundle and headed beyond the barracks. A notice on the wall of the British PX announced that a Palestinian E.N.S.A. troupe would be performing that day for the soldiers. He was thinking of his friend Abrasha, wounded while crossing the river, who had been taken from the truck directly to the hospital. Soldiers passed by him, back and forth. Life billowed and splashed around him, his loneliness tossing in it like a dumb pebble. The language men use with one another had dried up in him as though it never had existed. And he, in his own eyes, seemed not to exist.

He drifted far beyond the barracks to the dusty road, which ran like a ravine between two sloping mountains. His feet, after Auschwitz, could not quench their thirst for walking. Weeks upon weeks he had walked after Auschwitz,

day and night. From city to city. From country to country.

At the end of the canyon, a broad plain opened before him. Suddenly he froze as a burst of laughter mingled with German words struck his ears. Walking past the opening of the canyon were two German prisoners of war. Solid shoes on their feet, Wehrmacht jackets slung loosely over their shoulders, mess tins in their hands. Apparently on their way to dinner. Their stride confident, bold, free. Like then. Exactly the way he used to see them through his barbed-wire fence at Camp Niederwalden after they had herded the prisoners back from the hard-labor area, where each German, with a shovel blade, had killed at least one Jew – his minimum for the day. There, too, in unbuttoned Wehrmacht jackets; there, too, with mess tins in their hands on their way to the kitchen.

And they laughed like this in Auschwitz. And he standing among the thousands of naked skeletons lined up for a Selektion for the crematorium. The same laughter, language, and smell of smoke rising.

Ahead of him in the distance lay an area surrounded by barbed wire. In high stacks within the compound, huge truck tires were piled one on top of the other. Countless tires. German prisoners of war were busy sorting and stacking them. Probably their POW camp, though it was evident at first glance that the barbed-wire fence had been erected not so much to imprison the Germans as to safeguard the tires against theft.

He could walk no farther. His knees buckled. He sagged to the ground, leaning against the mountain flank, the bundle between his upraised knees, his eyes staring at the barbed-wire compound. The columns of tires towered like black chimneys against the ashen horizon, and at their base – the workshops, which looked to him like the structures housing the gas chambers at Auschwitz. And around them Germans, at work.

He observed their every move. Everything looked right to him. Exactly the way it should. Familiar. The way he had seen them there. The same smell rose to his nostrils. He sank into the smell, was submerged in it to its bottom. He was back in the world from which he had come. Suddenly it struck him: Why didn't a Jew here make a run for it? The gate in the barbed-wire fence was open, and if he didn't run, those crematorium chimneys over there were ready for him. He felt the rush of blood in his veins, tensing him for flight. Then his senses sobered and he recognized the absurdity of his hallucination. Why, he himself was free, and it was the Germans who were imprisoned! He struggled to absorb this; yet the painful reality of Auschwitz for some reason persisted in him, as if he had not been the slightest bit mistaken. He was gazing at the barbed-wire compound, and he felt the frantic mix of time and sights and conceptions in one maelstrom of the mind.

His head was shaded by the cliff. Mute, sealed, furrowed mountain, preserving within its strata in eternal chromoscript the secret of the chronicles of time, the secret of shifting ancient dust, pulverizer of eons. He was sitting at the foot of the mountain as if he were part of its strata. He thought about the trailing dust of time that would cover both him and the visions of crematorium chimneys etched upon the pupils of his eyes.

He lost all sense of time, as though he had been withdrawn from its spheres. He looked around. Soon day would be gone. He rose, went back to the ravine between the mountains. Their twin slopes almost touched beneath his feet. He saw the ravine as the letter V, now the sign of victory. And he in its notch, dragging his feet, broken and alone.

He came back to the campgrounds near the end of the troupe's performance. He stood at the fringes of the crowd. At his back he could feel the barbed-wire compound swarming with Germans. He turned his head toward where the Germans were. His eyes were fastened on the horizon. White clouds, like smoky veils, drifted across the fading sky. Time blurred, trickling through the sockets of his eyes. Opposite him, chimney stacks spewing red-sparked smoke towered among the ashen clouds. He had withdrawn to another time. He stood and stood in it, until he felt a hand tenderly touching his shoulder. He turned his head. A soldier was standing there. Kindly eyes were looking at him. The soldier addressed him in a hushed, gentle voice: "I'd like to help you if you'll let me."

Harry could say nothing.

"I'm the director of the Palestinian E.N.S.A. troupe," he said. "My name is Eli. I know what brought you here. Permit me to help you until you get home."

Home. He felt drained. His only desire was that his strength should last until he fulfilled his Auschwitz vow to tell the story. He was afraid he might collapse before he managed to reach his destination. "Get me a place, any place. Isolated. Just a table. A chair," he said.

"I know how you feel," Eli said, "I'll try to get you what you want."

The cubicle in Naples, which was on the top floor, had three walls. The fourth wall, from the roof to the basement, had been sliced off by a German bomb. Harry was given everything he had asked for. And more. There was a field cot, too. But if he had imagined that this was all he needed to carry out his pledge, he now realized that what he needed most was still beyond his grasp.

How many weeks had passed since Eli, in Treviso, had said he would bring him here? He didn't know; nor did he know how much more time would still

go by while he sat hunched over the desk, staring at the blank notebook before him. No longer were his days divided into the measurable units of calendar or clock. Time had become one solid mass, and like an amorphous body it stood opposite him, across the desk, its palm covering the blankness of the notebook page. They looked directly at each other. He and time. Two foes. The death of his past world on the one side; his life in present suspension on the other.

"I'll drive you to Naples," Eli had said to him in Treviso. "One of the Palestinian units is stationed there. I know a few of them. They're our boys. I'll tell them and they'll help you out."

In the absence of the fourth wall, a gray rectangle from ceiling to floor gleamed at him like polished steel – the breach gaping at the sky. It could have been sea or sky on the horizon, there was no way of telling. How long had he been sitting here like this, and for how much longer could he go on? When night dropped a curtain of darkness over the breach, he would light the lamp on the desk. Now and then, a star sparkled on the black curtain. He stared at the halo of darkness encompassing the spark until the curtain changed into a filmy blue veil. Then he would put out the desk lamp. A new day.

"At this desk, Phoenix, you'll be able to carry out your mission. The boys here will see to all your needs." So Eli had said in parting. As if this were all he needed to carry it out.

Where was the word with which he could begin if that word itself was cremated within him together with them all? How could he voice the muted scream of those who were no more if he himself virtually was no more?

In Auschwitz, the world from which he had been ripped and his dream of return to that world had lived before his eyes. Now that he had returned, he saw that both his dream and his world had become ashes in Auschwitz. His yearning for the world of the living and the illusion of finding his beloved ones – both were denied him. Even to dream the dream of return was no longer possible. Reality stared back at him like a face within a mirror. Existing, yet not existing; himself suspended in between, existence behind and anti-existence ahead.

"At this desk here, Phoenix..." they had said to him. They introduced themselves. "My name is Felix..." "My name is Eli..." "My name is Sander..." And he would say "Phoenix." Suddenly he was assaulted by the pain of the name Harry Preleshnik, the pain of the world in which that name had existed. A racking pain so horrendous that only a shattering howl would free him of it. The tentacles of terror coiled about him. The name, his very own in the past, was strangling him. And to save himself his hand shot out in reflex for the pen, as,

at that moment, the first words screamed themselves out of him onto the page. He saw the letters of the words. They were flaming before his eyes. He connected them: HARRY PRELESHNIK. Then swept on: Harry Preleshnik was Harry Preleshnik, as every man is someone, with a name all his own, a body of his own. For such is the law of nature that, even though all men are created in one image, no two faces are alike. This is how it was before the train took Harry Preleshnik away...

No longer did he see the sky paling with the rise of day or darkening when the night descended. As though that other world, where neither day nor night held sway, had spread over the pages under his pen. He wrote without respite. Without cease. He had shed his here and now. Passed into the planet Auschwitz, which moves in orbits beyond the boundaries of time.

31

I KNEEL AT YOUR FEET

1945. After midnight. The seashore. Kfar Vitkin.

I knew that tonight Fella would be on the ship bringing illegal immigrants to Israel. Fella, Daniella's friend from the German "House of Dolls," was among those who had survived. I was the only one she could turn to in the whole world.

Yitzchak Sadeh, founder of the "Palmach" and the spirit behind the illegal immigration, was on the seashore.

From a distance I could see Fella, looking perturbed, deep in conversation with Yitzchak Sadeh. I could not tell what they were talking about.

It was only in 1989 that I learned the content of their talk that night on the seashore at Kfar Vitkin when the boat put ashore safely. Yitzchak Sadeh quotes that conversation word for word in his book, "Around the Bonfire," published in 1946 by the Kibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, in a chapter titled:

MY SISTER ON THE SEASHORE

Darkness. My sister stands before me on the wet sand, dirty, ragged and barefoot, with bedraggled hair, her head bowed – she stands and weeps.

I know: the tattoo is cut into her flesh: "FELD-HURE."

And my sister weeps and says:

"What am I doing here? Why did they bring me here? Healthy

young men should not risk their lives for me, I am not worthy of it. No. There is no place for me in the world. I should not be alive."

I embrace my sister, put my arm round her, and say: There is a place for you in the world, my sister, a place especially for you. Here, in this country of ours. This is where you must live, where you will be loved. Your beauty is darkened by the suffering that scorched your flesh, but you are beautiful. To me your beauty is sacred.

Darkness. My sister stands before me on the wet sand; dirty, ragged and barefoot, with bedraggled hair, her head bowed.

I know: evil people tortured her and made her barren. And she weeps and says: "What is there for me here? Why did they bring me here? Am I worthy for healthy young people to risk their lives for me? There is no place for me in the world, I should not be alive ..."

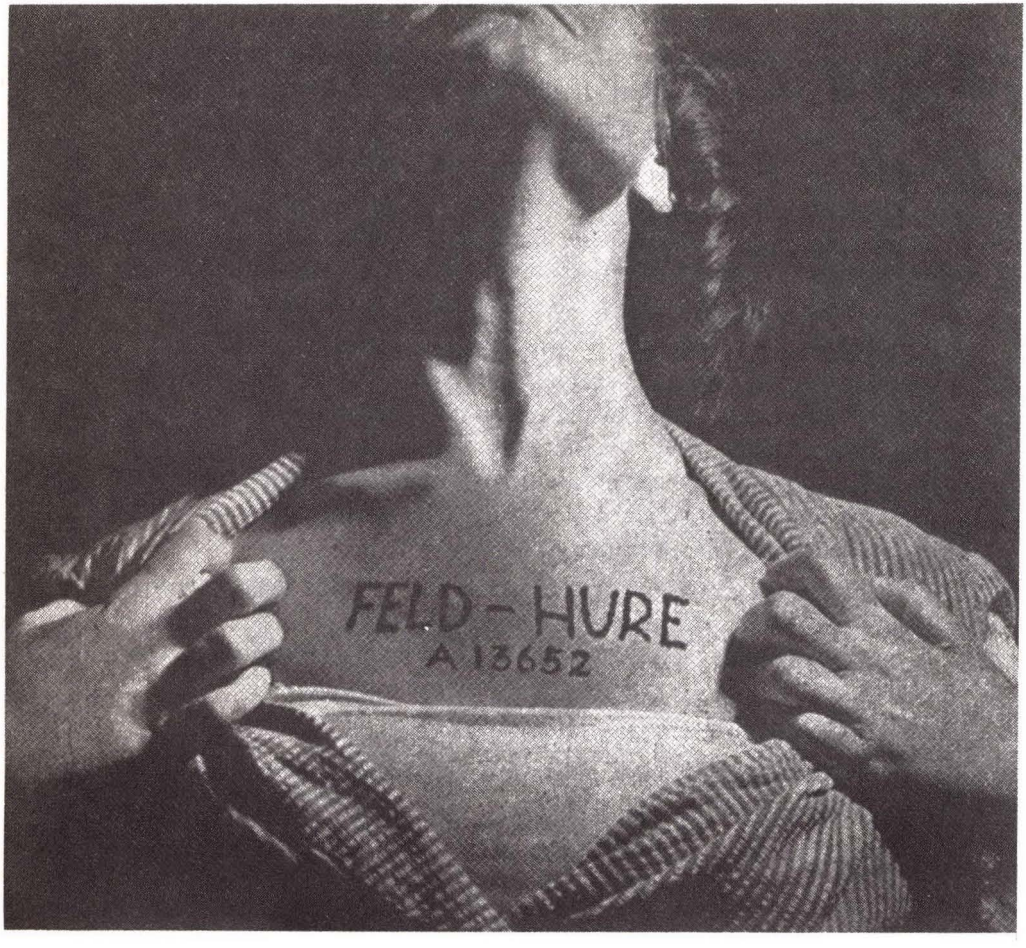
I embrace my sister, put my arm round her: There is a place for you in the world, my sister – a special place. Here, in this country of ours. Your feet have travelled all the paths of suffering, and tonight you have come home. Your place is here, with us. You have all our love, my sister; to us you bear all the glory of motherhood, the beauty of woman. You will have all our love, you will be our sister, you will be our bride, you will be our mother.

To these my sisters I kneel and bow down to the ground at their feet. And when I stand up I straighten my body and raise my head high, feeling that I know: for the sake of these my sisters – I am strong.

For the sake of these my sisters – I am brave.

For the sake of these my sisters – I will also be fierce.

For you everything – everything.



Authentic photo of Fella. Her life story is told in the book "House of Dolls" by K. Tzetnik.

32

DECLARATION OF THE STATE

"Your attention please! Your attention! The voting at Lake Success is about to begin!" The announcer's voice over the loudspeaker was pitched high with emotion.

Magen David Square that Saturday night was not wide enough to contain the human sea. In multitudes the inhabitants of Tel Aviv poured into the streets. Crowds of people standing shoulder to shoulder, heads upturned at the loudspeaker over which the radio announcer was narrating the proceedings at the United Nations General Assembly. The fate of the land of Israel. At any moment they would be voting.

A full moon hung above the square. Silvery night. A clear and lambent sky. The floodlights played over the crowd: Hasidim in furry hats who had forsaken their rabbis' banquets for the departing Sabbath Queen to be here in the streets squeezed against Orientals who had rushed out in their pajamas from their beds; elegantly coifed matrons pressing shoulders and sides against workmen in cotton sun hats – all eyes focused on the loudspeaker, as if it were a stethoscope held to the heart of the world, through which the throbbing pulse of history could be heard. They were like the maidservants in the Hebrew legend, favored to see G-d while Moses cleaved the sea, who in their visionary awe were confounded.

Among those massed in Magen David Square were Galilea and her parents. "Little Sabra." Professor Glick turned to his daughter, lost in thought beside

him. "Do you know why they postponed the vote from yesterday to November 29th?"

Galilea started and asked distractedly, "Why, Papa?"

"Because the United Nations knew that November 29th is your birthday, and they couldn't think of a better present than the Jewish State."

She wasn't listening. Her mind was not free to grasp her father's joking. Her gaze floated over the sea of faces, and her legs were impatient to get away from her parents – move on, move on. Why wasn't Harry here? Her birthday would be perfect if only he were here. Where was Harry? She knew she couldn't disturb him while he was writing, not even for this. But he of all people should be here to witness this moment.

All around the square, moonlight glinted off the open windows of the houses, packed with the heads of onlookers hanging over the window sills. As Galilea looked toward the loudspeaker on the platform above the crowd, she remembered the time she had stood there urging a similar sea of faces, in a voice edged with emotion, to fight a holy war against Hitler: "In Europe our nation is going up in flames! Our own flesh and blood. Who among us would refuse to step forth and rush to their rescue?"

Our own flesh and blood. She had no relatives in Europe. Her own family had been rooted in this soil for generations. But could her heart already have known then that Harry was one of those thrown on the pyre?

"Attention! Attention! The balloting..." Oh God, why wasn't Harry here?

Harry was among the throng in Magen David Square. He stood pressed against the close-knit clans of fathers and sons, neighbors and friends, who had come out to the streets together; at this inordinate moment of awe and exultation to be near one another, to cling together. Harry stood alone, his eyes raised to the moon above the heads of the crowd. In his mind's eye, he saw the forest into which he had fled on the death march after the evacuation of Auschwitz. The moon had been full that night, too. The same light had silvered the tops of the trees in one of which he was hiding. Now, as then, he was asking himself: What will the next moment bring – death or rebirth?

"State!... Jewish State!..."

In a split second, the human sea, fused in taut attentiveness, divided into rivulets of emotion. One person kissing another, one ecstasy clinging to another, as the eruption of joy swelled through the crowd. And standing solitary and immobile among them was Harry.

The waves of joy heaved and crashed around her as Galilea parted her way through the crowd searching for Harry. She sensed his nearness. Her heart told her that the lonely back she had caught sight of must be Harry's. Now the

surge of people pushed them apart; now it swept her almost within reach. Then she was beside him. She did not look at his face. Her body trembled. She felt his hand close to her own, and her fingers touched his open palm. Their hands recognized one another. They clasped in union.

The heart of a nation sang hallelujah around them, as though the very gates of heaven had burst open and the Lord of His People, His liberated wings spread above them, had descended to hover over their dancing heads. Our fathers danced in the streets that night, future generations would relate; had they but raised their hands, they could have touched angelic wings.

Through a roar like the surf, they walked away from Magen David Square. They moved toward the sea. A nation of people flooded the roads and sidewalks; the two walked in its midst. Only their palms were touching, and their hands said everything that could be said that moment.

They were standing on top of the hill. Away from the jubilant celebration of the city. On one side was the wide open sea at the foot of the hill, on the other the rooftops of Tel Aviv, luminous in the moonlight.

From the distance the sound of the horas, being sung and danced under the street lamps in Herbert Samuel Square, reached their ears – hundreds of dancers, thousands of dancers. Circle within circle. Like a rustle in the wind the singing was borne to the top of the hill.

She stood in his embrace, and he could feel the trembling of her knees against his legs. Incredulous, caught in the spell of this bewitching night, he held her to him. Through the stream of hair falling along her cheek, he could see the heaving moon-veiled sea. As she gazed at him, the depths of her eyes were like twin stars. Suddenly he knew that this youthful body had been waiting for him since time immemorial. And only tonight had he come back to her. The journey to her side had been centuries long. And now the rolling sea would wash his feet of the dust of his final wanderings.

They ran downhill to the sea as though they had grown wings. Along the shore she chased him and caught him; along the shore he chased her and caught her. Together, they were alone, unaware. With faces glowing, they swam in the gentle and benevolent sea, and the sea carried them high in its arms, held them up to heaven like an offering in praise of liberation. They were the first to come to the sea bearing in their bodies the tidings of liberation. The boundless sea was theirs. The sky, their sky and love, their love.

They lay on their backs, floating toward the shore. Side by side, they rested on the sea, on a bed of spangled light, the waves carrying them close in to shore. Harry planted his feet on the floor of the sea. He spread his hands beneath her back, and her body's length of loveliness was carried on the

foam. He stood submerged to his neck in the surf, and the reflection of the moon gleamed from her to him. The taste of the saltwater was like an intoxicating bubbling wine. Now once more, with intensified longing, with the elemental pull of the sea and the still restraint of the stars, and the yearning between the two. Till the sky poured out all its stars into the wells of her eyes. "Beloved..." her lips breathed

They were lying on the hill, her head on his belly. She looked at the drop of sea water gleaming like a diamond in the hair of his chest. All at once she turned to him: "How did we find each other in this place?" she asked, startled herself by the mystery her own question laid bare.

"Ages ago, we had a rendezvous to meet on this hill tonight, my love," he said.

"I want this to be our hill always," she said.

"It has been our hill since the beginning of time," he said.

"Beloved, do you also feel that we have been here before?" she asked.

"How else did our feet know to bring us here tonight?" he said quietly. He held her face between his palms and looked into the shimmering light in the depths of her eyes. "I once dreamed that when I returned to my father's home, I would fall upon the earth and kiss it. But my first steps on this soil were to steal across the barbed wire barriers of the British Coastal Guard in the dark of night. Let me tonight, my love, kiss the soil of this land." He lowered his head to her belly, and kissed it long.

33

Cain

Who made you, Eichman?
Oh, how great are You, Creator of man
Greater than the words in my mouth

You stood, Eichman, at your last moment
The noose around your neck and said
You said: We'll meet again soon...

And I stood face to face with you, in Katovich
You saw in me millions
And I was alone with only my own flesh

And you stood face to face with me, in Jerusalem
The noose around your neck,
I saw in you the millions
And you were alone with only your own flesh,

Eichman, my brother, we will meet again soon.

SIDE REMARK

The following lines are not meant to explain the poem nor do they presume to do so. Their sole purpose is to bring to the reader's attention the factual background that led to it.

K. Tzetnik met face to face with Adolf Eichman twice. The first encounter took place in Katovich, Poland, early in 1943. A Jew who managed to obtain an entry permit to any country in the world was allowed to leave.

K. Tzetnik was supposed to be one of those fortunate people. People in the outside world had succeeded in obtaining foreign citizenship papers for him. The documents arrived at the Gestapo headquarters in Katovich and K. Tzetnik was summoned to appear there in 1943, to arranqe his departure.

While he was standing trembling in front of the Gestapo officer the door opened and Adolf Eichman walked into the room, glanced at the papers and tore them to bits.

At that moment K. Tzetnik's fate was sealed, to arrive at the planet of Auschwitz and the crematoria. The annals of those years are chronicled in his books.

The second encounter took place eighteen years later. Eichman was caught and brought to Jerusalem. K. Tzetnik was asked to testify at the trial and he was supposed to tell the story of that first meeting, but he did not get that far. As he was taking the witness stand, he was overcome by a surge of memories and fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Now let the poem speak for itself.

Uri Sela, *editor*
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34

THE THREESOME

A MEMORIAL

We were a threesome.

Shmuel Nadler – we called him Munia; Elimelech Steier – we called him Meilach; me – when light of heart and head Munia called me "the Zi'nist." Why in quotes? Because Munia knew very well that I was not a Herzliyan Zi'nist but a Nachman Braslau Zi'nist.

We were a threesome. Meilach called us – "The Mezuman[1]."

Meilach Steier tore the lapel of his coat and sat in mourning in my attic room. His eyeglasses, which were in the habit of sliding down his nose, were wet with tears: "Munia... Munia..." He was inconsolable. "An evil beast hath devoured Munia..."

When the newspapers published the sensational announcement by the religious poet Shmuel Nadler at the Warsaw Writers' House, 13 T'lomatzka Street, that he was divorcing himself from his world of yesterday and entering tomorrow's world of Communism, Meilach Steier knocked on my door in the middle of the night. He had just arrived by train from his distant town of Mialitz in Galicia, and without a word fell into my arms, weeping bitterly like someone mourning a dead relative.

Until the end of his days Meilach refused to be consoled. To his mind, Munia was not like Ben-Zoma, of whom the Sages had said: "He glanced and

1. Mezuman: In Jewish tradition, three men are needed for the performance of many religious rituals, which are preceded by the words: "Hineni muchan u'mezuman."

was struck," but like Ben-Azai, of whom it was said: "He glanced and was struck dead."

"How does Munia's 'Besht (Ba'al Shem Tov) Symphony' and 'Way to the Sun' mix with the Bloody Sun of Nations, Joseph Stalin?" mourned Meilach Steier.

We were a threesome. Not one of us sent a poem to print before receiving the approval of the others. The days and nights of meetings of the "Mezuman" in my attic room were to lighten the dark and extinguished days of my life.

As I write this I see the three of us parting by my door after one of our meetings. "Give me your poems to take home," says Munia to me, "and I'll send them back to you after reading them in depth." But instead of returning the manuscript, Munia sent them back to me as a finished book of poetry published by the famous Warsaw Kultur-Liga. Munia, the only one of the "Mezuman" who was capable of this kind of trick, knew that this was not the way I had envisaged the publication of my poems, as a first-born. Therefore, he had sent them in secret to Yankel Patt, the director of the radical left-wing publishing house. This explains much about the later Munia.

Meilach Steier was an observant Jew – strict even where leniency is permitted. "Why didn't Munia tell us what he was going to do? We could have saved him!" Striking himself, "God in heaven, what a punishment!"

I said nothing. I could not tell him that Munia had opened his heart to me in my attic. Munia knew that Meilach would be unable to bear the earthquake in his soul, which had already completely changed the contour of his being. He came to me. To me, the graduate of the "Sages of Lublin Yeshiva;" to me, the graduate of the conservatory – to the Zi'nist, he came to ask pardon and forgiveness. And speaking to me, suddenly, in Hebrew: "Our 'Mezuman' is sacred," he said, "and I will never cut myself off from the threesome!"

In the Gestapo torture cellar in Paris, did Munia Nadler, the refined intellectual, poet and Communist, see the face of the "Mezuman" before he was shot? Did Meilach Steier, as pure in spirit as a baby, in his last moment in the gas chamber when his whole life flashed before his eyes like a filmstrip – did he then see Munia's face, and accept him?

Munia... Meilach... on the assembly ground at Auschwitz, in line for the crematorium, I saw your faces.

And the furrows will weep for them.

To Meilach Steier the paths of German literature were as familiar as the paths of heaven were to the Talmudic sage Shmuel of Neharde'a[2]. In a play-

2. Neharde'a: A town in Babylonia, renowned for its Talmudic College.

ful mood Munia would divide up the faculties of learning between us. To Meilach Steier – German literature! For himself Munia took the chair of French literature. (Interesting: straight after that announcement at Writers' House, Munia was appointed editor of the Communist newspaper in Paris. Had his heart foretold this years in advance?) And to me the Zi'nist Munia assigned the faculty of English: T.S. Eliot, Pound, cold lost souls.

Meilach often used to send us post cards: I take pleasure in inviting you to the "Mezuman" on such and such a day. "A walking library," Munia called him. And Meilach Steier really was a kind of walking encyclopedia. Munia used to say: the London National Library has a velvet binding; it lies under the velvet Galician hat on Meilach's head. And sometimes when we were in high spirits Munia would take down a volume of the Talmud from the bookshelf, open it at random, read a whole page and then Meilach would repeat the same page by heart – backwards. Word for word, backwards. Meilach has two brains in his head, Munia used to say.

He was a young genius, Meilach Steier. Although he was not much older than me, I drank at the magic fountain of his knowledge. I will never forget his philosophical analytic interpretation of Munia's work, "The Besht Symphony," when Munia first read us the manuscript. It was then that I learned how an interpretative critic should cast light on a work of art.

Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, beloved of Meilach in those days. Two almost polarized theories, both together in one mental searchlight focusing on the "Besht Symphony."

"Meilach," I didn't understand, "how can there be a synthesis here?"

Pushing his sliding spectacles back up his nose, Meilach cocked his head, looking me up and down like a teacher surveying a backward student:

"... Since the source Kierkegaard draws from," he explained ploddingly, "as opposed to Wittgenstein, is not mathematical logic (the left lobe of the brain) but strength of belief (the right lobe), then the point where they meet in the 'Besht Symphony' is the meeting of wholeness with itself – just like the wholeness of the peasant's boots on the feet of the 'Besht', or the rope on the sheepskin around his waist. And the synthesis, you ask – the synthesis is in the melody of the forest."

"How was this 'Besht Symphony' captured by Stalin?" Meilach was inconsolable. "Munia... Munia... '*butseina dekardinuta*'."

To this day those two Aramaic words make me shiver. Even though I still cannot agree to the meaning Meilach gave to this phrase from the Zohar. Furthermore, how did he conclude from this that Munia was in a state of depression, like Ben-Aboya, while Munia himself, after this transformation,

far from appearing depressed, wrote his finest works during that period – and precisely in the language of the Zohar, apparently for the very same reason that the interpreters attributed to why the "Akdamot"[3] was written in Aramaic.

Shmuel Nadler was a "religious poet." And the object of his love was a married woman.

"If I weren't afraid," said Meilach then, "I would say that Munia's new work surpasses the pain of Bialik, which hides in "HaBricha" ("The Pool"), cries out in "Megilat-Ha'esh" ("Scroll of Fire"), and reaches despair in "Hachnisini" ("Take Me under Your Wing"). But whereas Bialik's bursting pain is held in by the Yeshiva walls, Munia's arms reach out to infinity."

In this narrow framework I cannot dwell on Munia's love agonies of those days, but I cannot avoid mentioning our discussions while reading the manuscript, and hinting at the wellsprings of his work[4].

Munia entrusted me with his unnamed life's work, to bring to a publisher in the land of Israel. It was on the eve of my departure, which was brutally prevented, and this treasure of the mind fell from my hands into the abyss.

The day after my escape from the death march, as I was trying to make my way from Auschwitz to the land of Israel, my Mussulman skeleton still wrapped in the Auschwitz shroud, my bare feet carried me of their own volition back to the white, dead, snow-covered ghetto. Two sacred objects I had hidden there, in the ghetto: Munia's book and Daniella's diaries from the German "house of dolls." From the ghetto I carried them with me through ravaged Europe, over the obliterated borders of towns and countries, until I reached the border river of Austria, which divided the Russian conquered territories from the Allied forces.

The bloodstains of those near me, shot by the Russian border guards, spattered on the surface of the river. I dived down to the bottom, and Munia's book, the light and glory of the human spirit, was lost in the depths.

Will I always carry this guilt with me?

In Israel, for some thirty years, I have been trying to reconstruct Munia's work, if only from Meilach's analysis (like Raiyvad's comment on Maimonides). But as soon as I pick up the pen my inferiority is revealed. I am dust at the feet of both of them. And the pen drops helplessly from my hand.

3. "Akdamot": Hymn for the festival of Shavuot.

4. Zohar, parashat "Aharei Mot," 78, 72; "Sefer Hayetzira," chapter 3; Hag'ra; The New Zohar, parashat "Vo'etchanan" and parashat "Ki Tetze"; "Idra Raba," parashat "Naso"; Midrash "Hane'elam," "Song of Songs"; "Guide to the Perplexed," part 3, chapter 49; Sigmund Freud, "Psychogenetic and Structural Models"; Henri Bergson: "Roots of Ethics and Faith"; Pierre Ronsard: "Anacreon."

It was exactly twenty years ago. I was writing a chapter about time lost and vanished, when forever was as if it had never been. Suddenly I was choked by longing for the "Mezuman." That night the chapter I was writing was pushed aside. Instead, some lines poured themselves out of me, entitled: "Melech Steier." The next day I gave them to Sutskever, editor of the quarterly "Die Goldene Keit" ("The Golden Chain").

At that time Itzik Manger used to visit me from time to time. Manger knew very well that he had to avoid drinking and smoking, but in my house he let himself go and tried to explain his lack of restraint. In my presence, he said, he saw himself as a survivor of Auschwitz. I myself am careful to avoid giving off the reek of the Holocaust to those around me; a deliberate constant effort. But Manger drew this kind of thing from other spheres. "Tell me, please," he gazed at me, "there, at Auschwitz, didn't you regret not having drunk from the bottle twenty-four hours a day as long as you were free, outside? When you could have done so and didn't?"

How deeply, then, Manger grasped the tragedy and sanctity of our lives on this earth! So, put the bottle on the table, please! While you still can, for time is short.

Also lying on the table was an issue of "Die Goldene Keit" that had come in the mail. Manger, glass and smoldering cigarette in one hand, leafed through the magazine with the other, and his glance naturally fell upon my few lines, barely filling one page. Meanwhile, I was reflecting on the drastic change that had come over Manger, the seraph, the flame-thrower of before Auschwitz. How he whispers today, as if his words rise slowly from great depths.

He finished reading the lines and murmured as if to himself: "Why 'Melech Steier'[5] in the title? Who needs this florid phrase here? The poet Ravitch feels a need to call himself 'king' but here? Why, here the words tear every nerve in one's body. Why 'melech'? Why 'steier'? Like Bureysha's 'geier'! ('goer' in Yiddish). What's the point of this fancy phrase?!"

I felt my heart twisting in pain. Melech Steier: as if he had never existed, a fancy phrase. And if Itzik Manger doesn't know, there is not a soul in the wide world who knows that a genius of that name had flowered in a small town in Galicia, casting light around him. I could not find the words to correct Manger's mistake. It passed through my mind that he might even interpret my silence as injury at his critical remark. As if that was all I needed now!

* * *

5. 'Melech Steier': In Yiddish – "the standing king." ("Melech" = King; "steier" = stander)

It was in the early 1930's: Itzik Manger and Moshe Brodersohn were appearing at the Philharmonic Hall in Lodz. "I'd like to take the opportunity of having a talk with that guy," said Meilach in Mangerese. Meilach, the lover of folklore, had always been enchanted by the folkloristic element in Manger's poetry. But it was no simple matter for Meilach to be seen in the brightly lit Philharmonic Hall dressed in Galician Hasidic attire, which attracted a great deal of attention in Congress Poland. It was much easier to vanish into the darkness of a cinema to see Paul Muni, Harry Bower or Emile Jannings. But to go to the Philharmonic Hall would be like a Kohen entering a cemetery, something not to be countenanced. The fact is, we talked the night away. Manger sat looking at Meilach in amazement: a Galician bumpkin! A Yeshiva student! And such a fountain of knowledge, so versatile. Where does it all come from? Where? Apparently the poet of "Songs of the Peoples" was already attracted at that time to folklore, at which Meilach Steier was so brilliant.

* * *

"Manger," I said quietly after an interval of silence, "do you remember, once, before the war, we spent an evening together in my attic room, under a starry sky, and you sat opposite a yeshiva student from Galicia?"

With a quick glance Manger turned to me. His soft eyes lit up, his lips opened slightly in anticipation; as if that yeshiva student had been visiting him in his dreams all through the years since that meeting. His angular features sharpened. He did not take his eyes off me even when his hand reached out to put his glass down on the table, as if every part of his body strained to listen.

"His name was Meilach Steier," I said quietly.

There was a silence as sharp as a knife. Manger chewed his cigarette end between his teeth. He did not inhale the smoke. Moist yellowish tobacco spread over his lips. He no longer reached for the glass on the table. His eyes were on "Die Goldene Keit," where those lines were written; perhaps he was looking at the words "Melech Steier"; perhaps he was reading the lines again. I don't know. He didn't say anything. Suddenly he stood up and left the house without a word.

In the ash tray lay a torn, damp cigarette, the strands of tobacco like the spilt entrails of a stomach that had been torn open. On the table an unfinished half-glass of whiskey; and beside it "Die Goldene Keit" – open.

I never saw Manger again.

* * *

One day Sutskever asked me: "I want to publish something by Melech

Steier, and you knew him. Please, write a few words about him, as an introduction." My hands began to tremble. I couldn't believe my ears. "Sutskever, twenty years ago, when you published that poem, did you know that Melech Steier was the name of a man and not a literary fancy?" It crossed my mind that perhaps he had heard about Steier from Manger.

"Not only did I know," Sutskever answered, "but I have a copy of one of Melech Steier's books, probably the only one in the whole world."

Words stuck in my throat. Not only the one copy in the whole world, but Sutskever was the one person who had known for twenty years that Meilach Steier – the name on my memorial poem – was the name of a person.

"So tell me, answer me!" demanded Sutskever. "Will you write? See, Speigelblatt (the editorial secretary, who was present during the conversation) – he doesn't answer. So, tell me, I need a plain answer: Will you write? Yes or no?"

The words stuck in my throat. I did not answer.

* * *

We were a threesome.

Shmuel Nadler from Galina – we called him Munia; Elimelech Steier from Mialitz – we called him Meilach; me – Munia called me the "Zi'nist."

Of those three not one remained.

35

MELECH STEIER

Since Melech Steier went to the fire
The Divine Presence has turned away from the poem.
The stalls have closed in the marketplace.
A funeral passes. It's a holiday, Heaven preserve us,
The rabbi's wife has died,
There'll be no *cheder* today.
Confetti and radioactive fallout
Rain on the thirsty earth.

God, Blessed be His Name
Has destroyed the image.
Rodin will never again pour out his mold
Of the Creator's hands.
The mold is no more.
The form is shattered.

When Melech Steier walked naked to the fire
It's as if a debt was left unpaid.
Hey, walker! On your way from Mielitz to Warsaw
Mend the rip in the heavens,
If you can be a mender now.
Melech Steier mistakenly
Raised his hand to his glasses,
Which were forever sliding down.

(They already lay in the pile beside the crematorium.)
He looked toward the sky like a child –
Like a child! Like a child! Honest, just like a child!
But I, an adult, know –
His eyes, upraised, toward
He Whose Name I'm not worthy
To mention.
I'm not worthy to mention? I am, though, worthy
To demand my poem,
Which along with Melech Steier,
Is gone into the fire.

36

CURRICULUM VITAE

The following is written for teachers and instructors who ask on behalf of their students, seeking to know the life story of the author whose books they receive in order to write on the subject: "The Holocaust and the Revival of Israel in the Books of K. Tzetnik."

K. Tzetnik was born in Auschwitz in 1943. When the Kapo branded the number 135633 on his left arm he hissed between his teeth, "Here you were born! From now on this number is your name. This is the name they'll call you by to get on the truck for the crematorium!"

In February 1945 K. Tzetnik escaped from the Auschwitz death march. When a Red Army officer asked him: "What's your name?," K. Tzetnik answered:

– "My name was burned with all the rest in the crematorium at Auschwitz."

And the alien from the other planet went on wandering over the obliterated borders of ravaged Europe, heading for the land of Israel, until he came to Italy, where he was taken to a hospital by soldiers of the Jewish Brigade. Knowing that his days were numbered, he asked the soldier, Eliyahu Goldenberg, who had been so good to him:

– "Please bring me a pen and paper quickly, I want to keep my oath while I still have breath in my body."

After several days, the refugee handed the Brigade soldier some written pages.

Eliyahu Goldenberg relates: "I saw the name 'Salamandra' staring at me

from the top of the first page. Turning to him, I said quietly:

– 'You have forgotten to write the author's name.' From his sickbed he shouted at me, his two hands gesturing:

– 'They! They wrote these pages. They who went to the crematorium! The K. Tzetniks! They are the authors of this book! Write K. Tzetnik. Write! Write!'

"And I, in awe and fear, took out my pen and wrote the author's name, K. Tzetnik, on the first page beside the title of the book, 'Salamandra.'

"I flew to Israel and gave the pages to Rubashov (Shazar), the editor of Davar and Am-Oved. He understood and accepted that a refugee named K. Tzetnik had written the pages."

And all the rest of his life story is written and enfolded in the six volumes of the "Salamandra" series.

* * *

Eliyahu Goldenberg, a famous actor and reciter, received the following poem titled Nucleus from K. Tzetnik in Italy in 1945. He used to read the poem during his appearances in Israel. After Eliyahu Goldenberg's death, his wife found the poem among his things and sent it to the author.

37

NUCLEUS

If a fire burns constantly
In one place for seven years,
A creature will crawl out from the flames
With the name: Salamandra

From an ancient source.

I have burned in seven crematoria
Without end, without end, for seven years running,
The whole family gathered together in one heap,
Fire, burn! Fire, rape! Fire, ravage!

Fire swallowed the young body of my sister,
Gorged itself on my little brother's naked limbs,
Fire tongues lick the bare legs, hands,
My little brother burns! My dear sister burns!

The silent face of my mother –
With her last glance turned to the sky;
And her last thoughts, most likely of her children;
Mother was set ablaze. A mother burns!

My father fought the fire-tongues,
Kicking the walls of the oil-filled trench
As if they were walls of fire
'Til the flames devoured the last drop of his blood.
My father, like a spurting havdolah candle flickered, burned!

Without pause, without pause, in one spot,
For seven years running
From every corner driven together into one pile
Sisters, brothers, fathers, mothers, the whole tribe –
Burned, cracked, on the world's modern sacrificial pyre.

Now world, I have crawled out of the fire to you
A fire creature, with seven heads, a million eyes, with hurrah!
All of your doors have broken open for me
I'm here! Nucleus, your fire-child: Salamandra!

I stride with fiery retribution over your continents
The waters of your seven seas will neither quench
Nor consume the radioactive fallout
From seven burned-out crematoria. I'm your fire-child,
Made of a million burned-up children's tears.

I will spread my wings over your head like a curse,
You shall not rest or profit, sow or reap!
Within your house – vice! Within your streets – chaos!
Until the dove at my window puts out the flood of your fire!

38

A Letter to the Editor That Was Never Sent

Explanation of the Mistake in Numbers in K. Tzetnik's Books

Day after day for two years, in Auschwitz and in labor camps, I marched unceasingly in German lines, death-lines.

In all my books – my testimonies – I described this march: "Six abreast... six abreast." Once Dr. Bachals, editor of "Alsifir" in Holland, asked me: Did they march in sixes, not fives, where you were? (Dr. Bachals was one of a group of intellectuals imprisoned by the Germans in a camp outside Amsterdam when they invaded Holland).

I was amazed. "Six abreast?" Did I write six abreast? Of course Dr. Bachals was right. But how could I have made such a stupid mistake? It's against all reason! And the trouble is that I go on writing "six abreast" to this very day! This could put doubt into the confused reader's mind and lead him to all kinds of mistaken conclusions. Good God, what happened to me, how did I go wrong with the numbers?

Once, talking on the phone, a bank clerk asked me: What is your house number?

– Excuse me for a moment, I have to turn off the oven, I said, and ran outside to look at the number on the house where I had lived for decades.

Once, in Haifa, I inadvertently crossed the road through a red light, and suddenly a policewoman was standing in front of me with a pen and pad in her hand: – Your identity card! she said.

– I'm sorry, I don't carry my identity card with me.

– What's your ID number?

– I am embarrassed, I don't remember numbers. – I don't know my ID number, said I.

The policewoman stared me in the face, the face of a wiseguy trying to fool a policewoman.

– Do you have a telephone at home? – she asked.

– Yes, I do.

– There's a telephone in the kiosk behind you. Phone home and get your ID number.

I mumbled: – I don't remember my phone number.

To the policewoman the incident now became a personal affront. She wouldn't let this one make a fool of her. – Come with me to the police station, she said.

At the police station I seemed to them to be some kind of weird character. And that's what I was all of a sudden, as every cell in my body cried out: What's happening to me? Why does my mind block out numbers?

Finally they released me with tired gestures, as if to say "good riddance." On the way out the policewoman passed me, and, turning round, saw tears streaming down my face. She asked, startled, Why! Why?

And I, who would never have dreamed that I was capable of doing such a thing, apparently driven by her "why?" and her look of astonishment, took my right hand and pushed up my left sleeve, exposing the Auschwitz number branded on my puny arm.

The young policewoman's "Why?", which I can still hear, is what gave me the answer. Not my brain, but my whole being instinctively answered the policewoman's "Why?"

When the Kapo hissed at me through his teeth while branding the number on my left arm: "From now on this is your name, remember it, this is the name they'll call you to get on the truck for the crematorium!..." It was then that I erased from my mind every kind of number, and branded in my soul the oath to survive and bear witness to what I had seen. It was then that I erased the memory of every number. That is why, if I myself want to know what is the number on my left arm I have to push up my sleeve and look.

"Six abreast!..." Six abreast! Many decades have passed since Dr. Bachals first asked me about that, and to this day I still say "six abreast." How can I ever rectify this? Of course they walked "five abreast" to the crematorium and I was always left behind. Perhaps because I had erased from my brain every number the Kapo had branded in my flesh, and perhaps because of the oath I had branded in my soul, I had become the sixth in the row, the one outside the number.

39

In the Final Moment

Eloi, Eloi, be Thou my Angel of Death
Let me die by Your hand
Quietly –
Not by a human hand.

Not by fire. Not by strangulation.
Not by the hand of a man.

Like a beaten horse
Under a heavy load
Will I bow down, brow to the earth
And see Your face, not Your back.

And the morning and the evening.
The Zero-Day, the eighth.
Eloi, Eloi, in the twenty-fifth hour,
Will it come, chaos,
From Your hand.
As it was in the beginning,
So shall it be in the end,
In the fourth sphere.
Forgive them not, dear Father,
They know what they have done to me.

And You remembered Your creation.

In the final moment, lo Eloi!
Not by man created in Thine image. Thy form.
Come down, that I may see You alone,
In the final moment.

40

Daily Bread

Like a dog beaten bloody
Who breaks his teeth biting his chain
Instead of the flesh
Of the brute thrashing him.

Scourged be thy name from the earth!

He was just an ordinary guy,
Yidl Potok,
But man, did you see
How Yidl Potok walked to the gallows?

Creator of the world!
I'm a poet. I know languages –
How did Yidl Potok walk to the gallows?

They brought him back into camp,
So everyone would see how
they hang you in Auschwitz –
But can you show me
Just how Yidl Potok walked to the gallows?

– Like he was going to take care of a natural need.

– Ah, you know nothing!

Creator of the world!
How did Yidl Potok walk to the gallows?
'Till the end of my lives
I'll go mad each day
Feeling Yidl Potok's steps
Over my own flesh –
On the way to the gallows.

Like a crazed, tied-up dog
I bite the chain of every language I know — :
A back. Steps. Legs. A glance to the left.
To the right.

But that walk! Ho! Ho! That walk!

Scourged be thy name from the earth!

The human being is really not worth my curse
But You, dear God,
Blot me, I pray Thee,
Out of Thy book –

41

NINWOE

Barely the first light of day –
And utter darkness over my world.
Priests in the temples, Levites, preachers at the gates
And the youth have learned from graybeards.

Greasy, you belch, pant, gorge yourself, *hure*
And kick the belly
Nine months pregnant
With true liberation.

Morning star after a long black night –
Yet over me the world is already dark.

Ninwoe! Where shall I escape to,
What fish will want to swallow this disgusting body?
My defiled life and soul –
Where is the desert cave
That will want to shelter me?

Woe, Ninwoe – In the day of God's wrath!
In one heap beneath the burning sun
All will fry together:
The pious with the blasphemers,

Political pimps with peace brokers,
Small-change traders of bogus free thought.

For you have stuffed your open craw –
Theft and extortion; used charity from the well-meaning
On debauchery and dissolution...
Traded in greengrocer stands
For gluttonous pits, where you feed on impure carrion,
Sacred bookstores for blood-sucking banks,
The God of Mercy – for Mammon.

Lo, Compassionate One! As wandering foxes are we
In the ruins of Thy Holiness,
If not for us, then for the little ones, the school children
Have mercy

42

On This Day

On this day, there is nothing to say.

The word does not exist in human language that will express what this day symbolizes. Holocaust Day.

In the Jewish prayer book, in the section covering the Days of Awe and Atonement, there is one prayer called the "Recalling of Souls." Jews, who throughout the rest of the year took no part in their community's doings, would nevertheless appear at the synagogue for this prayer, the Recalling of Souls.

For as long as this prayer went on, souls of their departed would arrive at the synagogue. I remember seeing as a child how, when getting to this prayer, parents would lead us children out to the synagogue yard, for only orphans were allowed to participate.

Never did I know, nor will I ever know, what my parents' faces looked like during this eerie prayer, with the beloved souls of the departed within touch. Total quiet. It was a prayer of silence within the heart. Not a sound was heard on the outside of the synagogue.

In 1945, when I dropped out of that other planet called Auschwitz and came down to earth, I found nothing had changed except for two novelties: penicillin and the atom bomb.

Bit by bit I started to decipher the writing on the wall, inscribed by the Hidden Hand for humanity to read.

For two years in the Auschwitz planet-of-fire, watching the smoke rising

out of the crematoria's smokestacks, by day and by night, I kept asking myself: Could it be that this smoke of a million-and-a-half babies – cast away into the flames – their screams, their weeping, together with the screams and weeping of their mothers, now all smoke – can this smoke, rising to heaven, be simply dispersing somewhere, leaving no traces? Were we not taught that no substance in nature goes to waste?

I found the answer only after dropping down from the planet of ashes to this earth: blessing and curse, penicillin and the atom bomb.

It was there, in Auschwitz, from the crematoria fire that the mushroom-curse crawled out.

Born from the ashes of the one-and-a-half million burned babies. And, once created, it has since been suspended over our heads.

On this day, there is nothing to say.

Not on this day of the Recalling of Souls, when the souls of my beloved stand within touch, before my very eyes: my mother, my father, my sister, my little brother – one and all burned in the crematoria of Auschwitz.

Nothing to say.

Except for silence in the heart.

On this day, however, humanity is no longer like those children taken out to the synagogue yard during the wordless prayer of the Recalling of Souls. This day, the day after Auschwitz, humanity – one and all – stands inside the "synagogue." This day, we are our own orphans, and it is our souls standing within touch, begging us in silent prayer –

Choose –

A blessing or a curse –

penicillin or the atom bomb!

43

SRUL YITZCHAK PIEKARSKY

Yom Kippur eve, 1992. Glancing at the Algemeiner Journal, which had just arrived in the mail, my eyes were drawn to a title in large print on the front page: "Thousands Attend the Funeral of the Great Rabbi Yisrael Yitzchak Piekarsky."

Srul-Yitzchak?! Was it possible? My boyhood friend Srul-Yitzchak had been living in New York, and I didn't know?! Srul-Yitzchak had survived?! My eyes raced down the lines ...

Susnovitz!...

* * *

It was during the intermediate days of Passover; Srul-Yitzchak had come home from Warsaw to celebrate Passover with his family. He came straight to see me, and before I had time to call out a happy greeting, in his customary quick way he declared: After the holidays you're coming with me to Warsaw! ...

To this day I don't know how old he was at that time, I only know that I was still before my bar-mitzvah while Srul-Yitzchak was already fit for the wedding canopy in our circles, although there was still not the slightest sign of a beard on his chin. I was the "baby" at the lectures of the Rabbi of Kozhigliv, where we first met and Srul-Yitzchak at once took me under his wing.

* * *

We sat in the reception room of Rabbi Foigelman, Rabbi of the city of

Katowitz. His brother-in-law, Rabbi Lau, who had just been appointed rabbi of the town of Shatz in Bukovina, had come to Poland to choose some students for the yeshiva he wanted to establish in Shatz. Incidentally, Rabbi Lau was the father of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, Israel's Chief Rabbi, to whom I could not help saying when I first met him in Tel Aviv: Your honor, you are reputed to be a handsome man, but your respected father, I remember, was even more handsome.

And because Rabbi Foigelman knew about my existence, he had invited me to his house to meet Rabbi Lau.

After Rabbi Lau finished speaking, he stretched out his hand to me and said: I promise you that with me in Shatz you will not lack for anything! And Srul-Yitzchak, who had come to the meeting with me, stood up and announced briefly: I am a student of Rabbi Avremel Weinberg of Warsaw, and he – pointing at me – God willing, is coming with me to Warsaw.

* * *

The years with Srul-Yitzchak in Warsaw; our years together as students of Rabbi Avremel Weinberg, have remained in my heart as the happiest years of my life. In Auschwitz, standing in line during Selektions for the crematorium, those years served me as an armor over my Mussulman skin and bones; the days and nights on the bare planks in the barracks at Auschwitz. When the thin thread that still holds breath to spirit was ready to be torn by despair – then, Srul-Yitzchak, I heard you singing in my ears, as you had done in Warsaw, a new theory about the Ritba; an interpretation of the Radbaz, and always with that special lilt in your voice that I loved so much. And the Halacha came to join the judgments of the Tosefot and drove away despair. The thin thread did not tear, my heart's companion, Srul-Yitzchak, my brother.

I used to call Srul-Yitzchak "hothead," he was impetuous, always in a hurry. I am not short, but in my memory he towers over me, perhaps because of my deep admiration for him, perhaps because of the little difference in our ages. I see him now, the two of us pacing the streets of Warsaw, he almost running, and he had to keep turning round to hold out his hand to me as if to a small child lagging behind, and all this while we were deeply immersed in a discussion; in reading a letter from home; in a new idea for the daily lecture on the Nedarim tractate. And as quickly as he walked, his thoughts and ideas flew even more quickly. He called me "Statetchno," a Polish word meaning "prudent," someone who takes life slowly, even "square." And here is the enigma: "Hothead," the brilliant, tempestuous brain, was a fervent devotee of Rabbi Avremel Weinberg, whose teaching method sought literal meaning, simplicity, pure logic, while I, the "square," was totally captivated by the

study method of Rabbi Menachem Zemba, the wild, high-flying Ostrovitzer way, the way of lightning and invention.

To Srul-Yitzchak this was a kind of "betrayal" on my part, because I exchanged my place at Weinberg's table for a place at Zemba's, but it did not stop him from being a devoted elder brother to me. This is not the place to expand on Srul-Yitzchak's devotion and his care for my every need. The Piekarsky family in Susnovitz knew that I was living in Warsaw at their expense. Don't worry! Srul-Yitzchak would say to me, father will sell some more sacks. To this day I do not know what kind of trade Piekarsky, the father, dealt in; I knew that he traded in empty sacks, a strange business.

* * *

Yom Kippur eve, 1992, looking at Srul-Yitzchak's photograph in the newspaper, I see his father's face. Isn't it the living image of his father? Srul-Yitzchak in my memory has no trace of a beard, and looking at the picture I see the Piekarsky family in Susnovitz, in their house next door to the synagogue.

When SS-Eisensatzgrupen set the synagogue on fire in 1939, and the adjacent Jewish houses were in flames, where was the Piekarsky family? I see the mother's noble, beautiful face, the father's serene, dignified features. They had one daughter, Srul-Yitzchak's one and only sister, and if he was a handsome hothead, his little sister was a stunning beauty and wild as a panther. They were always chasing each other through the rooms, around the tables and chairs. I hear the youthful cries of joy when Srul-Yitzchak came home from Warsaw; how old was his sister then? About my age. I tremble now to think: When there was an "Aktion" of young Jewish girls in the ghetto what happened to Srul-Yitzchak's beautiful sister? What wouldn't I give now if somebody could tell me that Srul-Yitzchak's sister had been saved, too!

* * *

If the Rabbi of Shatz in Katowitz could not separate me from Srul-Yitzchak, another member of his family did it.

Rabbi Meir Shapira, founder of "Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin," was looking for bright students from all over the world to join his yeshiva. While he was in Warsaw he decided to attend a lecture given by Rabbi Menachem Zemba, and since Srul-Yitzchak was not in Praga at Menachem Zemba's, but in Krucha Street at Rabbi Avremel Weinberg's, there was nobody to say "No!" when Rabbi Meir Shapira, in the presence of Rabbi Menachem Zemba, turned to me after the lecture, saying: Young man, I want you in Lublin! I hear that you were an outstanding student of Rabbi Fromer of Kozhigliv, so the Torah returns to its place, because the Kozhiglivian is now lecturing in Lublin. And

so, young man, say "Amen!" so that Rabbi Zemba can hear.

And I said, "Amen!"

* * *

Years passed. In my heart I still longed for my boyhood friend, Srul-Yitzchak; longed for our talks and arguments that sometimes continued throughout the night; longed for the way he turned all my ideas and thoughts into dust and at the same time stimulated those very thoughts and ideas in me.

It is Yom Kippur eve, 1992, as I write these lines. There is a hidden corner in the heart of a man, a secret room, an innermost chamber: a holy of holies. In rare moments he goes inside, perhaps once a year, to be alone there with what is most precious to him, perhaps with himself alone. There, in my innermost chamber, posed as if between two cherubs, lies the heartache and longing for those years studying with Rabbi Avremel Weinberg with Srul-Yitzchak Piekarsky at my side.

* * *

And the years passed. I had already left "Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin;" university; music academy. Suddenly a letter from Srul-Yitzchak. A letter of pain and sorrow, like the tearing of one's garment after the death of a loved one.

Srul-Yitzchak's dream of taking me into the Piekarsky family at Susnovitz was destroyed. Srul-Yitzchak had always been very strict in his observance of the mitzvot, even the smallest ones. During the years when we studied together, he really suffered to see that I could not help peeping at the "Yid" or the "Tagblat," after all newspapers of Agudat Yisrael, after all the philosophical essays of Yehuda Leib Orlean, Ben-Zion Fessler and Dr. Birenboim. That's all well and good, but "*gevalt*!" what a waste of time! It really hurt him. And now he suddenly discovered that a book of poems by me had appeared: But where? Published by whom? In the Kultur-Leige publishing house, the murderous enemy of any spark of Jewish tradition.

I meant to answer with a long letter explaining that it was not my fault. The poet, Shmuel Nadler, my friend from "Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin," knew that I did not want those poems to appear as my first-born; he tricked me into giving them to him with the excuse that he wanted to read them more deeply and then went and gave them to the poet Yisrael Stern. Yisrael Stern, after reading the poems, gave them to Yankel Patt, editor of the famous "Warsaw Kultur-Leige" publishing house. By the way, Shmuel Nadler, who at one time had been the pearl in the crown of Agudat Yisrael and the favorite of the founder of Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin, suddenly appeared at the left-wing Writers' Association at 13 Tlomatsky Street, and there, from the platform, delivered the sensational announcement that he, the Haredi Shmuel Nadler,

was severing himself from the world of yesterday and moving to the Communist world of tomorrow.

My letter to Srul-Yitzchak returned "address unknown."

* * *

Fate threw me into one of the ghettos around Susnovitz, and in the mass procession of those being driven in the direction opposite to the one I was going in, I suddenly saw Piekarsky's father holding his wife so that they would not be separated in the crush. With all my strength I shouted to them: Srul-Yitzchak?! Srul-Yitzchak?! Meaning – where is Srul-Yitzchak? The noble-featured mother barely had time to stretch out both arms to me, two empty arms, before we disappeared to our separate gathering points.

To this day I don't know the meaning of the mother's two outstretched arms in answer to my shouted question: Where is Srul-Yitzchak?

Today, Yom Kippur eve, 1992, I am writing my answer to you in place of my letter that returned "address unknown."

Today, Yom Kippur eve, 1992, I stand with head bowed and tear my white shirt in memory of my dear, faithful, devoted boyhood companion, Srul-Yitzchak Piekarsky.

Blessed be the True Judge.



Rabbi Yisrael Yitzchak Piekarsky of blessed memory

HOLOCAUST

KADDISH

by K. TZETNIK

I am not a writer of literature...
This is a chronicle from the Planet Auschwitz.
Time there was not what time is on earth...
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Dressed not the way people dress here. Were not born nor gave birth.
Breathed according to laws of a different nature and neither lived
nor died by the regulations of the world that is here.
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