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The Sunflower

*by Simon Wiesenthal
with a Symposium*

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I nodded and looked up the staircase. Orderlies were bringing down a motionless figure on a stretcher. There had never been a lift in the building and the Germans had not installed one. After a few moments the nurse came out of the Dean's room, caught me by the arm and pushed me through the door.

I looked for the familiar objects, the writing desk, the cupboards in which our papers were kept, but those relics of the past had vanished. There was now only a white bed with a night table beside it. Something white was looking at me out of the blankets. At first I could not grasp the situation.

Then the nurse bent over the bed and whispered and I heard a somewhat deeper whisper, apparently in answer. Although the place was in semi-darkness I could now see a figure wrapped in white, motionless on the bed. I tried to trace the outlines of the body under the sheets and looked for its head.

The nurse straightened up and said quietly: "Stay here." Then she went out of the room.

From the bed I heard a weak, broken voice exclaim: "Please come nearer, I can't speak loudly."

Now I could see the figure in the bed far more clearly. White, bloodless hands on the counterpane, head completely bandaged with openings only for mouth, nose and ears. The feeling of unreality persisted. It was an uncanny situation. Those corpse-like hands, the bandages, and the place in which this strange encounter was taking place.

I did not know who this wounded man was, but obviously he was a German.

Hesitatingly, I sat down on the edge of the bed. The sick man, perceiving this, said softly: "Please come a little nearer, to talk loudly is exhausting."

I obeyed. His almost bloodless hand groped for mine as he tried to raise himself slightly in the bed.

My bewilderment was intense. I did not know whether this unreal scene was actuality or dream. Here was I in the ragged clothes of a concentration camp prisoner in the room of the former Dean of Lemberg High School—now a military hospital—in a sick room which must be in reality a death chamber.

As my eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness I could see that the white bandages were mottled with yellow stains. Perhaps ointment, or was it pus? The bandaged head was spectral.

I sat on the bed spellbound. I could not take my eyes off the stricken man and the grey-yellow stains on the bandages seemed to me to be moving, taking new shapes before my eyes.

"I have not much longer to live," whispered the sick man in a barely audible voice. "I know the end is near."

Then he fell silent. Was he thinking what next to say, or had his premonition of death scared him? I looked more closely. He was very thin, and under his shirt his bones were clearly visible, almost bursting through his parched skin.

I was unmoved by his words. The way I had been forced to exist in the prison camps had destroyed in me any feeling or fear about death.

Sickness, suffering and doom were the constant companions of us Jews. Such things no longer frightened us.

Nearly a fortnight before this confrontation with the dying man I had had occasion to visit a store in which cement sacks were kept. I heard groans and going to investigate, I saw one of the prisoners lying among the sacks. I asked him what was the matter.

"I am dying," he muttered in a choked voice, "I shall die;

there is nobody in the world to help me and nobody to mourn my death." Then he added casually, "I am twenty-two."

I ran out of the shed and found the prison doctor. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. "There are a couple of hundred men working here today. Six of them are dying." He did not even ask where the dying man was.

"You ought at least to go and look at him," I protested.

"I couldn't do anything for him," he answered.

"But you as a doctor have more liberty to move about, you could explain your absence to the guards better than I could. It is frightful for a man to die lonely and abandoned. Help him at least in his dying hour."

"Good, good," he said. But I knew that he would not go. He too had lost all feeling for death.

At the evening roll-call there were six corpses. They were included without comment. The doctor's estimate was correct.

"I know," muttered the sick man, "that at this moment thousands of men are dying. Death is everywhere. It is neither infrequent nor extraordinary. I am resigned to dying soon, but before that I want to talk about an experience which is torturing me. Otherwise I cannot die in peace."

He was breathing heavily. I had the feeling that he was staring at me through his head bandage. Perhaps he could see through the yellow stains, although they were nowhere near his eyes. I could not look at him.

"I heard from one of the sisters that there were Jewish prisoners working in the courtyard. Previously she had brought me a letter from my mother . . . She read it out to me and then went away. I have been here for three months. Then I came to a decision. After thinking it over for a long time . . .

"When the sister came back I asked her to help me. I wanted her to fetch a Jewish prisoner to me, but I warned she must be careful that nobody must see her. The nurse, who had no idea why I had made this request didn't reply and went away. I gave up all hope of her taking such a risk for my sake. But when she came in a little while ago she bent over me and whispered that there was a Jew outside. She said it as if complying with the last wish of a dying man. She knows how it is with me. I am in a death chamber, that I know. They let the hopeless cases die alone. Perhaps they don't want the others to be upset."

Who was this man to whom I was listening? What was he trying to say to me? Was he a Jew who had camouflaged himself as a German and now, on his deathbed, wanted to look at a Jew again? According to gossip in the Ghetto and later in the camp there were Jews in Germany who were "Aryan" in appearance and had enlisted in the army with false papers. They had even got into the SS. That was their method of survival. Was this man such a Jew? Or perhaps a half-Jew, son of a mixed marriage? When he made a slight movement I noticed that his other hand rested on a letter but which now slipped to the floor. I bent down and put it back on the counterpane.

I didn't touch his hand and he could not have seen my movement—nevertheless he reacted.

"Thank you—that is my mother's letter," the words came softly from his lips.

And again I had the feeling he was staring at me.

His hand groped for the letter and drew it towards him, as if he hoped to derive a little strength and courage from contact with the paper. I thought of my own mother who would never write me another letter. Five weeks previously she had been dragged out of the Ghetto in a raid. The only article of

value which we still possessed, after all the looting, was a gold watch which I had given to my mother so that she might be able to buy herself off when they came to fetch her. A neighbour who had valid papers told me later what had happened to the watch. My mother gave it to the Ukrainian policeman who came to arrest her. He went away, but soon came back and bundled my mother and others into a truck, that carried them away to a place from which no letters ever emerged . . .

Time seemed to stand still, as I listened to the croaking of the dying man.

"My name is Karl . . . I joined the SS as a volunteer. Of course—when you hear the word SS . . ."

He stopped. His throat seemed to be dry and he tried hard to swallow a lump in it.

Now I knew he couldn't be a Jew or half-Jew who had hidden inside a German uniform. How could I have imagined such a thing? But in those days anything was possible.

"I must tell you something dreadful . . . Something inhuman. It happened a year ago—has a year already gone by?" These last words he spoke almost to himself.

"Yes, it is a year," he continued, "a year since the crime I committed. I have to talk to someone about it, perhaps that will help."

Then his hand grasped mine. His fingers clutched mine tightly, as though he sensed I was trying unconsciously to withdraw my hand when I heard the word "crime". Whence had he derived the strength? Or was it that I was so weak that I could not take my hand away?

"I must tell you of this horrible deed—tell you because . . . you are a Jew."

Could there be some kind of horror unknown to us?

All the atrocities and tortures that a sick brain can invent are familiar to me. I have felt them on my own body and I have

seen them happen in the camp. Any story that this sick man had to tell couldn't surpass the horror stories which my comrades in the camp exchanged with each other at night.

I wasn't really curious about his story, and inwardly I only hoped the nurse had remembered to tell an askari where I was. Otherwise they would be looking for me. Perhaps they would think I had escaped . . .

I was uneasy. I could hear voices outside the door, but I recognised one as the nurse's voice and that reassured me. The strangled voice went on: "Some time elapsed before I realised what guilt I had incurred."

I stared at the bandaged head. I didn't know what he wanted to confess, but I knew for sure that after his death a sunflower would grow on his grave. Already a sunflower was turning towards the window, the window through which the sun was sending its rays into this death chamber. Why was the sunflower already making its appearance? Because it would accompany him to the cemetery, stand on his grave and sustain his connection with life. And this I envied him. I envied him also because in his last moments he was able to think of a live mother who would be grieving for him.

"I was not born a murderer . . ." he wheezed.

He breathed heavily and was silent.

"I come from Stuttgart and I am now twenty-one. That is too soon to die. I have had very little out of life."

Of course it is too soon to die I thought. But did the Nazis ask whether our children whom they were about to gas had ever had anything out of life? Did they ask whether it was too soon for them to die? Certainly nobody had ever asked me the question.

As if he had guessed my mental reaction he said: "I know what you are thinking and I understand. But may I not still say that I am too young . . . ?"

Then in a burst of calm coherency he went on: "My father who was manager of a factory was a convinced Social Democrat. After 1933 he got into difficulties, but that happened to many. My mother brought me up as a Catholic, I was actually a server in the church and a special favourite of our priest who hoped I would one day study theology. But it turned out differently; I joined the Hitler Youth, and that of course was the end of the Church for me. My mother was very sad, but finally stopped reproaching me. I was her only child. My father never uttered a word on the subject . . .

"He was afraid lest I should talk in the Hitler Youth about what I had heard at home . . . Our leader demanded that we should champion our cause everywhere . . . Even at home . . . He told us that if we heard anyone abuse it we must report to him. There were many who did so, but not I. My parents nevertheless were afraid and they stopped talking when I was near. Their mistrust annoyed me, but, unfortunately, there was no time for reflection in those days.

"In the Hitler Youth, I found friends and comrades. My days were full. After school most of our class hurried to the clubhouse or sports ground. My father rarely spoke to me, and when he had something to say he spoke cautiously and with reserve. I know now what depressed him—often I watched him sitting in his armchair for hours, brooding, without saying a word . . .

"When the war broke out I volunteered, naturally in the SS. I was far from being the only one in my troop to do so; almost half of them joined the forces voluntarily—without a thought, as if they were going to a dance or on an outing. My mother wept when I left. As I closed the door behind me I heard my father say: 'They are taking our son away from us. No good will come of it.'

"His words made me indignant. I wanted to go back and

argue with him. I wanted to tell him that he simply did not understand modern times. But I let it be, so as not to make my departure worse for all of us by an ugly scene.

"Those words were the last I ever heard my father speak . . . Occasionally he would add a few lines to my mother's letter but my mother usually made excuses by saying he was not back from work and she was anxious to catch the post."

He paused, and groped with his hand for the glass on the night table. Although he could not see it he knew where it was. He drank a mouthful of water and put the glass back safely in its place before I could do it for him. Was he really in such a bad way as he had said?

"We were first sent to a training camp at an army base where we listened feverishly to the radio messages about the Polish campaign. We devoured the reports in the newspapers and dreaded that our services might not after all be needed. I was longing for experience, to see the world, to be able to recount my adventures . . . My uncle had had such exciting tales to tell of the war in Russia, how they had driven Ivan into the Masurian Lakes. I wanted to play my part in that sort of thing . . ."

I sat there like a cat on hot bricks and tried to release my hand from his. I wanted to go away, but he seemed to be trying to talk to me with his hand as well as his voice. His grip grew tighter—as if pleading with me not to desert him. Perhaps his hand was a replacement for his eyes.

I looked round the room and glancing at the window, I saw a part of the sun-drenched courtyard, with the shadow of the roof crossing it obliquely—a boundary between light and dark, a defined boundary without any transition.

Then the dying man told of his time in occupied Poland, mentioning a place. Was it Reichshof? I didn't ask.

Why the long prelude? Why didn't he say what he wanted from me. There was no necessity to break it so gently.

Now his hand began to tremble and I took the opportunity to withdraw mine, but he clutched it again and whispered: "Please." Did he want to fortify himself—or me?—for what was to come?

"And then—then came the terrible thing . . . But first I must tell you a little more about myself."

He seemed to detect my uneasiness. Had he noticed I was watching the door for suddenly he said:

"No one will come in. The nurse promised to keep watch out there . . .

"Heinz, my schoolmate, who was with me in Poland too, always called me a dreamer. I didn't really know why, perhaps because I was always merry and happy—at least until that day came and it happened . . . It's a good thing that Heinz cannot hear me now. My mother must never know what I did. She must not lose her image of a good son. That is what she always called me. She must always see me as she wanted to see me.

"She used to read my letters out to all the neighbours . . . and the neighbours said that they were proud I got my wound fighting for the Führer and the Fatherland . . . you know the usual phrase . . ."

His voice grew bitter as if he wanted to hurt himself, give himself pain.

"In my mother's memory I am still a happy boy without a care in the world . . . Full of high spirits. Oh, the jokes we used to play . . ."

As he recalled his youth and comrades, I too thought back on the years when practical jokes were a hobby of mine. I thought of my old friends—my schoolmates in Prague. We had had many a joke together, we who were young with life stretching before us.

But what had my youth in common with his? Were we not from different worlds? Where were the friends from my world? Still in camp or already in a nameless mass grave . . . And where are his friends? They are alive, or at least they have a sunflower on their graves and a cross with their name on it.

And now I began to ask myself why a Jew must listen to the confession of a dying Nazi soldier. If he had really rediscovered his faith in Christianity, then a priest should have been sent for, a priest who could help him to die in peace. If I were dying to whom should I make my confession if indeed I had anything to confess? And any way I would not have as much time as this man had. My end would be violent, as had happened to millions before me. Perhaps it would be an unexpected surprise, perhaps I would have no time to prepare for the bullet. He was still talking about his youth as if he were reading aloud and the only effect was that it made me think of my youth too. But it was so far away that it seemed unreal. It seemed as if I had always been in prison camps, as though I were born merely to be maltreated by beasts in human shape who wanted to work off their frustrations and racial hatreds on defenceless victims. Remembrance of time past only made me feel weak, and I badly needed to remain strong for only the strong in these dire times had a hope of survival. I still clung to the belief that the world one day would revenge itself on these brutes—in spite of their victories, their jubilation at the battles they had won, and their boundless arrogance. The day would surely come when the Nazis would hang their heads as the Jews did now . . .

All my instincts were against continuing to listen to this deathbed disavowal. I wanted to get away. The dying man must have felt this, for he dropped the letter and groped for my arm. The movement was so pathetically helpless that all of

a sudden I felt sorry for him. I would stay, although I wanted to go. Quietly he continued talking.

"Last spring we saw that something was afoot. We were told time after time we must be prepared for great doings. Each of us must show himself a man . . . He must be tough. There was no place for humanitarian nonsense. The Führer needed real men. That made a great impression on us at the time.

"When the war with Russia began, we listened over the radio to a speech by Himmler before we marched out. He spoke of the final victory of the Führer's mission . . . On smoking out sub-humans . . . We were given piles of literature about the Jews and the Bolsheviks, we devoured the "Sturmer", and many cut caricatures from it and pinned them above our beds. But that was not the sort of thing I cared for . . . In the evenings, in the canteen we grew heated with beer and talk about Germany's future. As in Poland, the war with Russia would be a lightning campaign, thanks to the genius of our leader. Our frontiers would be pushed further and further eastwards. The German people needed room to live."

For a moment he stopped as though exhausted.

"You can see for yourself on what sort of career my life was launched."

He was sorry for himself. His words were bitter and resigned.

I again looked through the window and perceived that the boundary between light and shadow was now above the other windows of the inner façade. The sun had climbed higher. One of the windows caught the sun's rays and reflected them as it was closed again. For a moment the flash of light looked like a heliographic signal. At that time we were ready to see symbols in everything. It was a time rife for mysticism and

superstition. Often my fellow prisoners in the camp told ghost stories. Everything for us was unreal and insubstantial: the earth was peopled with mystical shapes; God was on leave, and in His absence others had taken over, to give us signs and hints. In normal times we would have laughed at anybody who believed in supernatural powers. But nowadays we expected them to intervene in the course of events. We devoured every word spoken by alleged soothsayers and fortune-tellers. We often clung to completely nonsensical interpretations if only they gave us a ray of hope for better times. The eternal optimism of the Jew surpassed all reason, but now even reason was out of place. What in this Nazi world was reasonable and logical? You lost yourself in fancy merely in order to escape from the appalling truth. And in such circumstances reason would have been a barrier. We escaped into dreams and we didn't want to awake from those dreams.

I forgot for a moment where I was and then I heard a buzzing sound. A bluebottle, probably attracted by the smell, flew round the head of the dying man who could not see it nor could he see me wave it away.

"Thanks," he nevertheless whispered. And for the first time I realised that I, a defenceless sub-human, had contrived to lighten the lot of an equally defenceless superman, without thinking, simply as a matter of course.

The narration proceeded: "At the end of June we joined a unit of storm troops and were taken to the front in trucks. We drove past vast fields of wheat which stretched as far as the eye could see. Our platoon leader said that Hitler had intentionally started the campaign against Russia at a time which would enable us to bring in the harvest. We thought that clever. On our endless journey we saw by the wayside dead Russians, burnt-out tanks, broken-down trucks, dead horses. And there

were wounded Russians too lying there helpless, with nobody to care for them; all the way we could hear their screams and groans.

"One of my comrades spat at them and I protested. He simply replied with a phrase that our officer had used: 'No pity for Ivan . . .'

"His words sounded like a sober military command. He spoke in the style of a war correspondent. His words were parrot-like, unthinking. His conversation was full of stupid phrases which he had taken from newspapers.

"Finally we came to a Ukrainian village and here I had my first contact with the enemy. We shot up a deserted farmhouse in which Russians had barricaded themselves. When we stormed it we found only a few wounded men lying about with whom we did not bother. That is, I did not bother. But our platoon leader . . . Gave them the coup-de-grâce . . .

"Since I have been in hospital here these details constantly recur to me. I live it all over again, but much more precisely and vividly . . . Now I have plenty of time.

"The fighting was inhuman. Many of us could hardly stand it. When our major saw this he shouted to us: 'Believe you me, do you think the Russians act differently towards our men? You need only see how they treat their own people. The prisons we come across are full of murdered men. They simply mow down their prisoners when they cannot take them away. He who has been selected to make history cannot be bothered with such trifles.'

"One evening a comrade took me aside in order to express his horror, but after the very first sentence he stopped. He did not trust me.

"We continued to make history. Day after day we heard victory reports and constantly we were told that the war would soon be over. Hitler said so and Himmler . . . For me it is now really over . . ."

He took a deep breath. Then a sip of water. Behind me I heard a noise and looked round. I had not noticed that the door was open. But he had heard it.

"Sister, please . . ."

"All right, I only wanted to look round . . ."

She shut the door again.

"One hot summer day we came to Dnyepropetrovsk. Everywhere there were abandoned cars and guns. Many of them still intact. Obviously the Russians had left in great haste. Houses were burning and the streets were blocked by hastily erected barricades, but there was nobody left to defend them. There were deaths among the civilians. On the pavement I saw the body of a woman and over her crouched two weeping children . . .

"When the order came to fall out we leaned our rifles against the house walls, sat down and smoked. Suddenly we heard an explosion, and looked up, but there was no plane in sight. Then we saw a whole block of houses had blown up.

"Many house blocks had been mined by the Russians before they retreated and as soon as our troops entered, the buildings blew up. One comrade declared that the Russians had learnt such tactics from the Finns. I was glad we had been resting. We had escaped again.

"Suddenly a staff car stopped near us. A major climbed out and sent for our captain. Then came a number of trucks which took us to another part of the town. There the same miserable picture presented itself.

"In a large square we got out and looked around us. On the other side of the square there was a group of people under close guard. I assumed they were civilians who were to be taken out of the town, in which fighting was still going on. And then the word ran through our group like wildfire: 'They're Jews' . . . In my young life I had never seen many

Jews. No doubt there had formerly been some, but for the most part they had emigrated when Hitler came to power. The few who remained simply disappeared later. It was said they had been sent to the Ghetto. Then they were forgotten. My mother sometimes mentioned our family doctor, who was a Jew and for whom she mourned deeply. She carefully preserved all his prescriptions, for she had complete trust in his medical knowledge. But one day the chemist told her that she must get her medicines prescribed by a different doctor, he was not allowed to make up the prescriptions of a Jewish doctor. My mother was furious but my father just looked at me and held his tongue.

"I need not tell you what the newspapers said about the Jews. Later in Poland I saw Jews who were quite different from ours in Stuttgart. At the army base at Debicka some Jews were still working and I often gave them something to eat. But I stopped when the platoon leader caught me doing it. The Jews had to clean out our quarters and I often deliberately left behind on the table some food which I knew they would find.

"Otherwise all I knew about the Jews was what came out of the loudspeaker or what was given us to read. We were told they were the cause of all our misfortunes . . . They were trying to get on top of us, they were the cause of war, poverty, hunger, unemployment . . ."

I noticed that the dying man had a warm undertone in his voice as he spoke about the Jews. I had never heard such a tone in the voice of an SS man. Was he better than the others—or did the voices of SS men change when they were dying?

"An order was given," he continued, "and we marched towards the huddled mass of Jews. There were a hundred and fifty of them or perhaps two hundred, including many chil-

dren who stared at us with anxious eyes. A few were quietly crying. There were infants in their mothers' arms, but hardly any young men; mostly women and greybeards.

"As we approached I could see the expression in their eyes—fear, indescribable fear . . . apparently they knew what was awaiting them . . ."

"A truck arrived with cans of petrol which we unloaded and took into a house. The stronger men among the Jews were ordered to carry the cans to the upper storeys. They obeyed—apathetically, without a will of their own, like automatons.

"Then we began to drive the Jews into the house. A sergeant with a whip in his hand, helped any of the Jews who were not quick enough. There was a hail of curses and kicks. The house was not very large, it had only three storeys. I would not have believed it possible to crowd them all into it. But after a few minutes there was no Jew left on the street."

He was silent and my heart started to beat violently. I could well imagine the scene. It was all too familiar. I might have been among those who were forced into that house with the petrol cans. I could feel how they must have pressed against each other; I could hear their frantic cries as they realised what was to be done to them.

The dying Nazi went on: "Then another truck came up full of more Jews and they too were crammed into the house with the others. Then the door was locked and a machine-gun was posted opposite."

I knew how this story would end. My own country had been occupied by the Germans for over a year and we had heard of similar happenings in Bialystok, Brody and Grodek. The method was always the same. He could spare me the rest of his gruesome account.

So I stood up ready to leave but he pleaded with me: "Please stay. I must tell you the rest."

I really do not know what kept me. But there was something in his voice that prevented me from obeying my instinct to end the interview. Perhaps I wanted to hear from his own mouth, in his own words, the full horror of the Nazis' inhumanity.

"When we were told that everything was ready, we went back a few yards, and then received the command to remove safety pins from hand grenades and throw them through the windows of the house. Detonations followed one after another . . . My God!"

Now he was silent, and he raised himself slightly from the bed: his whole body was shivering.

But he continued: "We heard screams and saw the flames eat their way from floor to floor . . . We had our rifles ready to shoot down anyone who tried to escape from that blazing hell . . ."

"The screams from the house were horrible. Dense smoke poured out and choked us . . ."

His hand felt damp. He was so shattered by his recollection that he broke into a sweat and I loosened my hand from his grip. But at once he groped for it again and held it tight.

"Please, please," he stammered, "don't go away, I have more to say."

I no longer had any doubts as to the ending. I saw that he was summoning his strength for one last effort to tell me the rest of the story to its bitter end.

" . . . Behind the windows of the second floor, I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were alight. By his side stood a woman, doubtless the mother of the child. With his free hand the man covered the child's eyes—then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the mother followed.

Then from the other windows fell burning bodies . . . We shot . . . Oh God!"

The dying man held his hand in front of his bandaged eyes as if he wanted to banish the picture from his mind.

"I don't know how many tried to jump out of the windows but that one family I shall never forget—least of all the child. It had black hair and dark eyes . . ."

He fell silent, completely exhausted.

The child with the dark eyes he had described reminded me of Eli, a boy from the Lemberg Ghetto, six years old with large, questioning eyes—eyes that could not understand—accusing eyes—eyes that one never forgets.

The children in the Ghetto grew up quickly, they seemed to realise how short their existence would be. For them days were months, and months were years. When I saw them with toys in their hands, they looked unfamiliar, uncanny, like old men playing with childish things.

When had I first seen Eli? When did I talk to him for the first time? I could not remember. He lived in a house near the Ghetto gate. Sometimes he wandered right up to the gate. On one occasion I heard a Jewish policeman talking to him and that is how I knew his name—Eli. It was rarely that a child dared to approach the Ghetto gate. Eli knew that. He knew it from instinct without understanding why.

"Eli" is a pet name for Elijah—Eljahu Hanavi, the prophet.

Recalling the very name awoke memories in me of the time when I too was a child. At the Passover Seder, there stood on the table among the dishes a large, ornate bowl of wine which nobody was allowed to touch. The wine was meant for Eljahu Hanavi. After a special prayer one of us children was sent to open the door: the Prophet was supposed to come into the

room and drink the wine reserved for him. We children watched the door with eyes large with wonder. But, of course, nobody came. But my grandmother always assured me that the Prophet actually drank from the cup and when I looked into the cup and found that it was still full, she said: "He doesn't drink more than a tear!"

Why did she say that? Was a tear all that we could offer the Prophet Elijah? For countless generations since the exodus from Egypt we had been celebrating the Passover in its memory. And from that great event arose the custom of reserving a cup of wine for Eljahu Hanavi.

We children looked on Eljahu as our protector, and in our fancy he took every possible form. My grandmother told us that he was rarely recognisable; he might appear in the form of a village peasant, a shopkeeper, a beggar or even as a child. And in gratitude for the protection that he afforded us he was given the finest cup in the house at the Seder service filled with the best wine—but he drank no more than a single tear from it.

Little Eli in the Ghetto survived miraculously the many raids on the children, who were looked upon as "non-working, useless mouths". The adults worked all day outside the Ghetto, and it was during their absence that the SS usually rounded up the children and took them away. A few always escaped the body-snatchers for the children learnt how to hide themselves. Their parents built hiding holes under the floors, in the stoves or in cupboards with false walls, and in time they developed a sort of sixth sense for danger, no matter how small they were.

But gradually the SS discovered the cleverest hiding places and they came out the winners in this game of hide-and-seek with death.

Eli was one of the last children that I saw in the Ghetto.

Each time I left the camp for the Ghetto—for a period I had an entry permit for it—I looked for Eli. If I saw him I could be sure that for the moment there was no danger. There was already famine at that time in the Ghetto, and the streets were littered with people dying of hunger. The Jewish policemen constantly warned Eli's parents to keep him away from the gate, but in vain. The German policeman at the Ghetto gate often gave him something to eat.

One day when I entered the Ghetto Eli was not by the gate but I saw him later. He was standing by a window and his tiny hand was sweeping up something from the sill. Then his fingers went to his mouth. As I came closer I realised what he was doing, and my eyes filled with tears: he was collecting the crumbs which somebody had put out for the birds. No doubt he figured that the birds would find some nourishment outside the Ghetto, from friendly people in the city who dare not give a hungry Jewish child a piece of bread.

Outside the Ghetto gate there were often women with sacks of bread or flour trying to barter with the inmates of the Ghetto, food for clothes, silver plate or carpets. But there were few Jews left who possessed anything they could barter with.

Eli's parents certainly had nothing to offer in exchange for even a loaf of bread.

SS Group Leader Katzmann—the notorious Katzmann—knew that there must still be children in the Ghetto in spite of repeated searches so his brutish brain conceived a devilish plan: he would start a kindergarten! He told the Jewish Council that he would set up a kindergarten if they could find accommodation for it and a woman to run it. Then the children would be looked after while the grown-ups were out at work. The Jews, eternal and incorrigible optimists, took this as a sign of a more humane attitude. They even told each other that there was now a regulation against shooting. Somebody

said that he had heard on the American radio that Roosevelt had threatened the Germans with reprisals if any more Jews were killed. That was why the Germans were going to be more humane in future.

Others talked of an International Commission which was going to visit the Ghetto. The Germans wanted to show them a kindergarten—as proof of their considerate treatment of the Jews.

An official from the Gestapo named Engels, a greyhaired man, came with a member of the Jewish Council to see for himself that the kindergarten was actually set up in suitable rooms. He said he was sure there were still enough children in the Ghetto who would like to use the kindergarten, and he promised an extra ration of food. And the Gestapo did actually send tins of cocoa and milk.

Thus the parents of the hungry children still left were gradually persuaded to send them to the kindergarten. A committee from the Red Cross was anxiously awaited. But it never came. Instead, one morning three SS trucks arrived and took all the children away to the gas chambers. And that night, when the parents came back from work, there were heart-rending scenes in the deserted kindergarten.

Nevertheless, a few weeks later I saw Eli again. His instinct had made him stay at home on that particular morning.

For me the dark-eyed child of whom the man in the bed had spoken was Eli. His little face would be stamped on my memory for ever. He was the last Jewish child that I had seen.

Up to this moment my feelings towards the dying man had tended towards sympathy: now all that was past. The touch of his hand caused me almost physical pain and I drew away.

But I still didn't think of leaving. There was something

more to come: of that I was sure. His story must go on . . .

He murmured something which I did not understand. My thoughts were far away, although I was here only to listen to what he was so anxious to tell me. It seemed to me that he was forgetting my presence, just as for a time I had forgotten his. He was talking to himself in a monotone. Sick people when they are alone often talk to themselves. Was he continuing the story that he wanted to tell me? Or was it something that he would like to tell me but which he dare not express in comprehensible words. Who knows what he still had to say? Unimaginable. One thing I had learnt: no deed was so awful that its wickedness could not be surpassed.

"Yes, I see them plain before my eyes . . ." he muttered.

What was he saying? How could he see them? His head and eyes were swathed in bandages.

"I can see the child and his father and his mother," he went on.

He groaned and his breath came gasping from his lungs.

"Perhaps they were already dead when they struck the pavement. It was frightful. Screams mixed with volleys of shots. The volleys were probably intended to drown the shrieks. I can never forget—it haunts me. I have had plenty of time to think, but yet perhaps not enough . . ."

Did I now hear shots? We were so used to shooting that nobody took any notice. But I could hear them quite plainly. There was constant shooting in the camp. I shut my eyes and in my memory I heard and saw all the shocking details.

During his narration, which often consisted of short, broken phrases, I could see and hear everything as clearly as if I had been there. I saw the wretches being driven into the house, I heard their screams, I heard them praying for their children and then I saw them leaping in flames to earth.

"Shortly afterwards we moved on. On the way we were

told that the massacre of the Jews was in revenge for the Russian time-bombs which had cost us about thirty men. We had killed three hundred Jews in exchange. Nobody asked what the murdered Jews had to do with the Russian time-bombs.

"In the evening there was a ration of brandy. Brandy helps one forget . . . Over the radio came reports from the front, the numbers of torpedoed ships, of prisoners taken, or planes shot down and the area of the newly-conquered territories . . . It was getting dark . . .

"Fired by the brandy we sat down and began to sing. I too sang. Today I ask myself how I could have done that. Perhaps I wanted to anaesthetise myself. For a time I was successful. The events seemed to recede further and further away. But during the night they came back . . .

"A comrade who slept next to me was Peter and he too came from Stuttgart. He was restless in his sleep, tossing to and fro and muttering. I sat up and stared at him. But it was too dark to see his face and I could only hear him saying, 'No, no', and 'I won't'. In the morning I could see by the faces of some of my comrades that they too had had a restless night. But nobody would talk about it. They avoided each other. Even our platoon leader noticed it.

"'You and your sensitive feelings! Men, you cannot go on like this. This is war! One must be hard! They are not our people. The Jew is not a human being! The Jews are the cause of all our misfortunes! And when you shoot one of them it is not the same thing as shooting one of us—it doesn't matter whether it is man, woman or child, they are different from us. Without question one must get rid of them. If we had been soft we should still be other people's slaves, but the Führer . . .'

"Yes, you see," he began but did not continue.

What had he been going to say? Something perhaps that might be of comfort to himself. Something that might explain

why he was telling me his life story? But he did not return to the subject.

"Our rest period did not last long. Towards midday we resumed the advance, we were now part of the storm troops. We mounted the trucks and were transported to the firing line, but here too there was not much to be seen of the enemy. He had evacuated villages and small towns, giving them up without a fight. There were only occasional skirmishes as the enemy retreated. Peter was wounded, Karlheinz killed. Then we had another rest, with time to wash up and to write letters. Talk centred on different subjects, but there was hardly a word said about the happenings in Dnyepropetrovsk.

"I went to see Peter. He had been shot in the abdomen but was still conscious. He recognised me and looked at me with tears in his eyes. I sat down by him and he told me he was soon to be taken away to hospital. He said, 'The people in that house, you know what I mean . . .'. Then he lost consciousness. Poor Peter. He died with the memory of the most dreadful experience of his life."

I now heard footsteps in the corridor. I looked towards the door which might open at any moment, and stood up. He stopped me.

"Do stay, the nurse is waiting outside. Nobody will come in. I won't keep you much longer, but I still have something important to say . . ."

I sat down again unwillingly but made up my mind to depart as soon as the nurse returned.

What could this man still have to tell me? That he was not the only person who had murdered Jews, that he was simply a murderer among murderers?

He resumed his soulsearching: "In the following weeks we advanced towards the Crimea. Rumour had it that there was hard fighting in front of us, the Russians were well

entrenched; it wasn't going to be a walk-over any more, but close fighting, man to man . . ."

He paused for breath. The pauses were becoming more frequent. Obviously he was overtaxing his strength. His breathing was irregular; his throat seemed to dry up: his hand groped for the glass of water.

I did not move. He appeared content as long as he was aware of my presence.

He found the glass and gulped down some water.

Then he sighed and whispered: "My God, my God."

Was he talking about God? But God was absent—on leave, as the woman in the Ghetto had said. Yet we all needed Him; we all longed to see signs of His omnipresence.

For this dying man, however, and for his like there could be no God. The Führer had taken His place. And the fact that their atrocities remained unpunished merely strengthened their belief that God was a fiction, a hateful Jewish invention. They never tired of trying to "prove" it. But now this man, who was dying here in his bed was asking for God!

He went on: "The fighting in the Crimea lasted for weeks. We had severe losses. Everywhere military cemeteries sprang up. I heard they were well tended and on every grave were growing flowers. I like flowers. There were many in my uncle's garden. I used to lie on the grass for hours and admire the flowers . . ."

Did he know already that he would get a sunflower when he was buried? The murderer would own something even when he was dead . . . And I?

"We were approaching Taganrog, which was strongly held by Russians. We lay among the hills, barely a hundred yards from them. Their artillery fire was incessant. We cowered in our trenches and tried to conquer our fear by drinking from brandy flasks passed from hand to hand. We waited for the

order to attack. It came at last and we climbed out of the trenches and charged, but suddenly I stopped as though rooted to the ground. Something seized me. My hands, which held my rifle with fixed bayonet, began to tremble.

"In that moment I saw the burning family, the father with the child and behind them the mother—and they came to meet me. 'No, I cannot shoot at them a second time.' The thought flashed through my mind . . . And then a shell exploded by my side. I lost consciousness.

"When I woke in hospital I knew that I had lost my eyesight. My face and the upper part of my body were torn to ribbons. The nurse told me that the surgeon had taken a whole basinful of shell splinters out of my body. It was a miracle that I was still alive—even now I am as good as dead . . ."

He sighed. His thoughts were once again centred on himself and he was filled with self-pity.

"The pain became more and more unbearable. My whole body is covered with marks from pain-killing injections . . . I was taken from one field hospital to another, but they never sent me home . . . That was the real punishment for me. I wanted to go home to my mother. I knew what my father would say in his inflexible severity. But my mother . . . She would look at me with other eyes."

I saw that he was torturing himself. He was determined to gloss over nothing.

Once again he groped for my hand, but I had withdrawn it sometime before and was sitting on it, out of his reach. I did not want to be touched by the hand of death. He sought my pity, but had he any right to pity? Did a man of his kind deserve anybody's pity? Did he think he would find pity if he pitied himself . . .

"Look," he said, "those Jews died quickly, they did not suffer as I do—though they were not as guilty as I am."

At this I stood up to go—I, the last Jew in his life. But he held me fast with his white, bloodless hand. Whence could a man drained of blood derive such strength?

"I was taken from one hospital to another, they never sent me home. But I told you that before . . . I am well aware of my condition and all the time I have been lying here I have never stopped thinking of the horrible deed at Dnyepropetrovsk. If only I had not survived that shell—but I can't die yet, although I have often longed to die . . . Sometimes I hoped that the doctor would give me an injection to put me out of my misery. I have indeed asked him to put me to sleep. But he has no pity for me although I know he has released other dying men from their sufferings by means of injections. Perhaps he is deterred by my youth. On the board at the foot of my bed is not only my name but also my date of birth, perhaps that keeps him back. So I lie here waiting for death. The pains in my body are terrible, but worse still is my conscience. It never ceases to remind me of the burning house and the family that jumped from the window."

He lapsed into silence, seeking for words. He wants something from me, I thought, for I could not imagine that he had brought me here merely as an audience.

"When I was still a boy I believed with my mind and soul in God and in the commandments of the Church. Then everything was easier. If I still had that faith I am sure death would not be so hard.

"I cannot die. . . without coming clean. This must be my confession. But what sort of confession is this? A letter without an answer . . ."

No doubt he was referring to my silence. But what could I say? Here was a dying man—a murderer who did not want to

be a murderer but who had been made into a murderer by a murderous ideology. He was confessing his crime to a man who perhaps tomorrow must die at the hands of these same murderers. In his confession there was true repentance, even though he did not admit it in so many words. Nor was it necessary, for the way in which he spoke and the fact that he spoke to *me* was a proof of his repentance.

"Believe me, I would be ready to suffer worse and longer pains if by that means I could bring back the dead, at Dnyepropetrovsk. Many young Germans of my age die daily on the battlefields. They have fought against an armed enemy and have fallen in the fight, but I . . . I am left here with my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are, I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough."

I said nothing. The truth was that on his battlefield he had also "fought" against defenceless men, women, children and the aged. I could imagine them enveloped in flames jumping from the windows to certain death.

He sat up and put his hands together as if to pray.

"I want to die in peace, and so I need . . ."

I saw that he could not get the words past his lips. But I was in no mood to help him. I kept silent.

"I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know whether there were any Jews left . . ."

"I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

Now, there was an uncanny silence in the room. I looked through the window. The front of the buildings opposite was

flooded with sunshine. The sun was high in the heavens. There was only a small triangular shadow in the courtyard.

What a contrast between the glorious sunshine outside and the shadow of this bestial age here in the death chamber! Here lay a man in bed who wished to die in peace—but he could not, because of the memory of his terrible crime gave him no rest. And by him sat a man also doomed to die—but who did not want to die because he yearned to see the end of all the horror that blighted the world.

Two men who had never known each other had been brought together for a few hours by Fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him.

I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands. Between them there seemed to rest a sunflower.

At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.

The nurse was not outside the door. I forgot where I was and did not go back down the staircase up which the nurse had brought me. As I used to do in student days, I went downstairs to the main entrance and it was not until I saw surprised looks from the nurses and doctors that I realised I was taking the wrong way down. But I did not retreat. Nobody stopped me and I wall'ed through the main door into the open air and returned to my comrades . . . The sun at its zenith was blazing down.

My comrades were sitting on the grass spooning soup out of their mess tins. I too was hungry, and just in time to get the last of the soup. The hospital had made us all a present of a meal.

But my thoughts were still with the dying SS man. The

encounter with him was a heavy burden on me, his confession had profoundly disturbed me.

"Where have you been all this time?" asked somebody. I did not know his name. He had been marching beside me the whole way from the camp to the hospital.

"I was beginning to think you had made a bolt for it which would have meant a nice reception for us back in the camp."

I did not reply.

"Did you get anything?" he asked as he peered into the empty bread sack, which, like every other prisoner I carried over my shoulder. He looked at me suspiciously, as to imply: you've got something, but won't admit it for fear of having to share it with us.

I let him think what he liked and said nothing.

"Are you annoyed with me?" he questioned.

"No," said I. I didn't want to talk to him—not at that moment.

After a short pause we resumed work. There seemed to be no end to the containers which we had to empty. The trucks which carried the rubbish to be burnt somewhere in the open kept coming back incessantly. Where did they take all this refuse? But really I did not care. The only thing I desired was to get away from this place.

At long last we were told to stop work, and to come back the next day to cart away more rubbish. I went cold when I heard this.

On the way back to the camp our guards, the askaris, didn't seem to be in a singing mood. They marched along beside us in silence and did not even urge us on. We were all tired, even I, who had spent most of the day in a sick room. Had it really lasted several hours? Again and again my thoughts returned to that macabre encounter.

On the footpaths, past which we were marching, people

Perhaps her tears might help to wash away some of the misery of the world.

That was not the only thought that occurred to me. I knew there was little I could say to this mother, and whatever I might have told her about her son's crime she would not have believed.

She would prefer to think me a slanderer than acknowledge Karl's crime.

She kept repeating the words: "He was such a good boy", as if she wished me to confirm it. But that I could not do. Would she still have the same opinion of him if she knew all?

In his boyhood Karl had certainly been a "good boy". But a graceless period of his life had turned him into a murderer.

My picture of Karl was almost complete. His physical likeness too was now established, for in his mother's home I had at last seen his face.

I knew all about his childhood and I knew all about the crime he had committed. And was pleased with myself for not having told his mother of his wicked deed. I convinced myself that I had acted rightly. In her present circumstances, to take from her her last possession would probably have also been a crime.

Today, I sometimes think of the young SS man. Every time I enter a hospital, every time I see a nurse, or a man with his head bandaged, I recall him.

Or when I see a sunflower . . .

And I reflect that people like him are still being born; people who can be indoctrinated with evil. Mankind is ostensibly striving to avert catastrophes; medical progress gives us hope that one

day disease can be conquered, but will we ever be able to prevent the creation of mass murderers?

The work in which I am engaged brings me into contact with many known murderers. I hunt them out, I hear witnesses, I give evidence in courts—and I see how murderers behave when accused.

At the trial of Nazis in Stuttgart only one of the accused showed remorse. He actually confessed to deeds of which there were no witnesses. All the others bitterly disputed the truth. Many of them regretted only one thing that witnesses had survived to tell the truth.

I have often tried to imagine how that young SS man would have behaved if he had been put on trial twenty-five years later.

Would he have spoken in court as he did to me before he died in the Dean's room? Would he openly admit what he had confessed to me on his deathbed?

Perhaps the picture that I had formed of him in my mind was kinder than the reality. I never saw him in the camp with a whip in his hand, I saw him only on his deathbed—a man who wanted absolution for his crime.

Was he thus an exception?

I could find no answer to that question. How could I know if he would have committed further crimes had he survived?

I have a fairly detailed knowledge of the life story of many Nazi murderers. Few of them were born murderers. They had mostly been peasants, manual labourers, clerks or officials, such as one meets in normal everyday life. In their youth they had received religious instruction; and none had a previous

criminal record. Yet they became murderers; expert murderers by conviction. It was as if they had taken down their SS uniforms from the wardrobe and replaced them with their consciences as well as with their civilian clothes.

I couldn't possibly know their reactions to their first crimes, but I do know that every one of them had subsequently murdered on a wholesale scale.

When I recall the insolent replies and the mocking grins of many of these accused, it is difficult for me to believe that my repentant young SS man would also have behaved in that way . . . Yet ought I to have forgiven him? Today the world demands that we forgive and forget the heinous crimes committed against us. It urges that we draw a line, and close the account as if nothing had ever happened.

We who suffered in those dreadful days, we who cannot obliterate the hell we endured, are for ever being advised to keep silent.

Well, I kept silent when a young Nazi, on his deathbed, begged me to be his confessor. And later when I met his mother I again kept silent rather than shatter her illusions about her dead son's inherent goodness. And how many bystanders kept silent as they watched Jewish men, women, and children being led to the slaughterhouses of Europe?

There are many kinds of silence. Indeed it can be more eloquent than words, and it can be interpreted in many ways.

Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode, just as much as it once challenged my heart and my mind. There are those who can appreciate my dilemma, and so endorse my attitude, and there

are others who will be ready to condemn me for refusing to ease the last moments of a repentant murderer.

The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision.

You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, "What would I have done?"