

Growing Up in the Eye of the Firestorm:
A Jewish Childhood under the Nazis

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I.

The secret was death not sex and the grownups were sitting at the table whispering. I pretended that I couldn't fall asleep in my bed and begged that they'd let me sleep on the sofa in the living room, which we called *Salon*. Of course I didn't even intend to fall asleep, I wanted to get in on the forbidden news. Stories, horror stories, incomplete one and all. Some were about strangers, others about relatives, always about Jews. They'd talk about a cousin of my mother's, but much younger than she, I'll call him Hans, who had been discharged from a concentration camp. The voices at the table, women's voices, indistinct and barely audible, because I kept my head under the blanket, said K.Z., just the two letters. In German they make an ugly sound, they hiss, spit, and cough like this: *kah-tset*. Hans was scared, they had bullied him into not talking, and he hadn't talked, or perhaps he had, maybe just to his mother? They had tortured him, what is torture, how does one stand it, how is it done? But he was alive and back, knock on wood, let's be thankful, next question, how can we help him leave the country?

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I was to meet Hans again in England, when I was no longer eight years old but the way I am now, impatient and absent-minded, prone to drop things intentionally or through clumsiness, even breakables, like dishes and love affairs, a woman who is perennially on the move, changing jobs and homes at the drop of a hat, and inventing the reasons while she is packing, a person who runs away as soon as she gets nervous, long before she smells danger. Because running away was the best thing I ever did, ever do. A favorite subject, you can be sure I'll return to it.

So there I was with Hans in England, in his home which he loved because he owned it. He was married to an English woman, a Gentile, and his children were visiting, and I had come visiting from America, together with Heinz, another cousin on my mother's side, who had survived the war in Hungary with false papers that proved him an Aryan and a Catholic.

Hans was telling us indignantly how the rabbi hadn't wanted him to marry a Gentile and how he had left the rabbi and clung to his woman. I hadn't even thought of consulting a rabbi when I got married. Hans's father, killed in Auschwitz, had been the only observant Jew in the family. It was incongruous and therefore amusing, that his son, who had been the embodiment of my childhood's darkest secret, should concern himself, let alone get angry, decades after the fact, about some dumb English rabbi's objection to the woman of his choice. That was the best part. The rest was tea and cakes, and I was shifting in my seat, eager to get up, do something, go for a walk, anything to escape the enfolding envelope of boredom made of unremitting and senseless details of their everyday lives. Heinz, the other cousin, told me later, not without a touch of malice, that Hans had asked him if I suffered from hemorrhoids, because I wouldn't sit still for long.

But Hans wasn't your average English home owner: he had been tortured in Buchenwald when he was a teenager, while his little relation had kept her ears open under the blanket, determined to find out more about his experience. Not so much from sympathy as from curiosity, because he was the center of an exciting mystery, which concerned me too, in some nebulous way. Though no one would tell me about it because I was too young. And now?

Now I was better informed and could ask all I liked, whenever I liked, for those who had imposed the restriction were gone, dispersed, had died in gas chambers or in their beds, wherever. And I can't get rid of the prickly feeling that I am uncovering taboos, searching for indecencies, that I am not supposed to know about death and dying. As if there were anything else worth bothering about. The secret of the grownups who pretend that only grownups die because only they know how to cope with death. And yet on the street the Nazi boys were singing the song about the Jewish blood spurting from their knives and they were carrying little knives as if to prove it.

So now I have a chance to ask Hans about the old secrets and I do. And the others in the confined space of the living room want to be left in peace: the children assure us that they were about to leave and had better go now, Heinz takes off his glasses, cleans them and wants to know whether we have to go through with this. Hans's Gentile wife leaves the room. She has heard all of this often enough and more than enough. This is manifestly true, but did she ever pay attention?

And Hans answers my questions and tells me his story. . . .

Why have I hardly ever visited this cousin? One reason is my indifference to family relations which it took me years to acknowledge. In Jewish circles it has become customary the world over to count the murder victims in our extended families, to insist that our children know these figures and to compare them with the remnant of the *mishpoche*. They are horrendous figures, huge collective graves in every family. "One hundred and five," says an uncle and the next one adds another dozen, while an aunt ticks off a few more names on her fingers. And for a long time I participated in this counting and accounting, and tried to persuade myself that I was in mourning for people of whom I had only the vaguest memory. But actually I was never nestled in such a *mishpoche*, mine went to pieces when I became conscious, not later.

But the real reason why I shy away from visiting relatives is my bad conscience. Hans's mother, my great-aunt, was one of the victims who died that most pitiful of all deaths, the infamous death in the gas chambers. And she was a relative I knew well, since we shared an apartment once. In my memory she remains the person who wouldn't let me drink water after eating cherries, a superstition undermining the authority of my absent father, who was the doctor in the family to whom nobody listened; she was the person who confiscated my collection of used streetcar tickets, claiming it was unhygienic; who insisted that I eat a revolting breakfast in the dark hours of the morning, before going to school, and who stood between my mother and me, keeping her at a safe distance so she wouldn't be bothered by her child. So what shall I say to her son who loved her when he asks me who hated her with a sharp, prickly aversion and can't forgive her even beyond her pathetic death?

After the war my mother walked away from my brother's death and hardly ever mentioned him again. There were no laments and there was no period of mourning. "Trauerarbeit," the labor of mourning Freud calls such a necessary period of remembering. She didn't do it, she just walked away. Not that she hadn't waited for him, for my father too. She searched the lists and she informed all the agencies that were bringing families together. So for a long time I fantasized that he was somewhere in the Communist world and didn't even know that we were still around. Even after I had come to this country, I sometimes dreamed that he would

turn up and I wouldn't be able to recognize him because he had become an adult and perhaps he was prematurely bald or portly. I visualized him as someone I might know, not as the kid whom they shot in the dead of winter in a northern town. Freezing, he was naked.

You remember how some years back the TV news showed scenes of seal pups being clubbed to death by boys and men in Eastern Canada, and the boys' faces alive with innocent cruelty. What sticks in my mind is a seal mother who tried to protect her pup with great tenacity. Then she watched helplessly as it was clubbed and I believe she barked a little and then she walked away. Just like that. There was nothing more to be done. My mother took the loss like that seal, only she is no seal, and I don't know what happened to it in her picture-ridden mind.

My old mother tells me that my father used to say he had no elbows, he couldn't push. Of course she has a whole attic full of memories of him, and I who would give much to have more knowledge of him, stand outside the attic and have no key to it and don't know how to make her tell me more. I used to try, not just with her but with many people who had known him, all those friends, or supposed friends, and his relatives here in the United States. But nothing came of it. They either didn't understand the need of the orphan to know where she came from or maybe they resented this need, or they simply didn't know how to talk about him or how to tell something, anything. So I pick up snippets like the saying about the elbows. Out of the blue, this detail.

The reason I am so struck by it is the difficulty I have coming to terms with the gas chambers. For a long time after the war, for decades in fact, I fantasized that he had committed suicide. After all, he was a doctor, wouldn't he have known how to kill himself when the train from Drancy pulled into Auschwitz? I couldn't face having my father die in a gas chamber. I wrote poems in which he and his death figured. They had lines like, "My father drowned in every sea, / Yet lifts his head at break of day / Above the flood of memory . . . here in San Francisco Bay / My father drowns in every sea."

But we know how they died in the gas chambers. The strong climbed on top of the weak in that last agony, as they choked to death. So the men were always on top when they pulled out the corpses and the women and children at the bottom.

That is what came to mind when I heard that he liked to say he had no elbows: that he trampled on those who were weaker. My father did this? On kids like me, when he died. But perhaps he didn't since he had no elbows? But do you have a choice, or haven't you reached the limits of freedom, when you are choking on poison gas? These are the questions I cannot answer and cannot shed.

We never did mourn. We walked away like the seal mother from the pup. Some of our children try to do this "Trauerarbeit" for us.

In 1940 when I was eight or nine the local movie theater showed Walt Disney's *SnowWhite*. I was a movie fan even then and wanted to go see it, but since I was Jewish I unfortunately wasn't permitted to go. I groused and bitched about this unfair situation until my mother proposed that I should go and forget about the sign that said "No Jews."

It was a Sunday, we were known in the neighborhood and to enter a movie house here was a challenge. My mother was convinced that no one would care whether one more child was watching, and she said I shouldn't think I was all that important and I should stop being a coward, because she was never a coward when she was my age. So of course I went, bought the most expensive type of ticket so as to be less noticeable and managed to sit down next to the nineteen-year-old baker's daughter from next door with her little siblings, enthusiastic Nazis one and all.

I sweated through the next ninety minutes and had no idea what happened on the screen. All I could think of was whether the baker's daughter was really looking at me angrily or whether I was only imagining it. The wicked queen of the film merged with my neighbor, her malice a poor imitation of the real thing, and it was I and no innocent princess who was out on a limb, twisting in the wind.

Why didn't I get up and walk out? Perhaps in order not to face my mother or because I thought that any move would attract attention, perhaps merely because one doesn't leave a theater before the film is over, or, most probably, because from sheer fright this solution didn't occur to me. I don't even know why my people didn't leave Vienna in time and perhaps there is a family resemblance between that question and why I stayed glued to my seat.

When the lights came on, I wanted to wait until the house had emptied out, but my enemy stood her ground and waited. She told her little brother to shush and fixed me sternly. There I was, in a trap, as I had surmised. It was pure terror. The baker's daughter put on her gloves and coat and finally addressed me.

Hadn't I seen the sign outside? Didn't I know what it meant? I could read, couldn't I? I had broken a law. She was using her best high German, no dialect for this patriotic occasion. If it happened once more she would go to the police. I was lucky she didn't go today.

The story of *Snow White* can be reduced to the question of who is entitled to inhabit the king's palace and who is the outsider. The baker's daughter and I followed this formula. She, in her own house, the magic mirror of her racial purity before her eyes, and I, also at home in this place, a native, but without permission and at this moment expelled and exposed. Even though I despised the law that excluded me, I still felt ashamed to have been found out. For shame comes about not through the commission of the shameful action but through discovery and exposure. If I had

got away with my small illegality, I would have been proud of my daring. Yeats speaks of the “defiling and disfigured shape/ The mirror of malicious eyes casts upon his eyes until at last/ He thinks that shape must be his shape.” My case exactly, and I might have felt better had I known the poem.

The usher, an older woman, helped me into my coat and handed me my purse, which I was about to leave on the seat. She was sorry for me and said a few soothing words. I nodded, incapable of answering because I was choking on my tears of humiliation, but grateful for that bit of kindness, alms for the poor.

I came home crying and furious, blaming my mother, for what seemed a near-catastrophe. She shrugged her shoulders. Who would think of bothering a child watching a fairy tale? Don't get upset. There are worse things. But that was the problem. Wasn't this bad enough? I had almost been arrested. What were the worse things? How should I know what was serious, and what wasn't? It was easy for my mother who presumably knew where you drown and where you can just barely tread water. But I didn't know a thing and wanted explanations. What was the worst and could it be something other than death? How could I surmise that my grownups didn't know much themselves, that they were entirely flummoxed by their situation and that, in fact, I was learning faster than they? I got the impression that I shouldn't trust my mother, that she had only bad advice for me. This impression was wrong. Like other people's advice, my mother's varies between good, bad, and indifferent. A couple of years later, when she happened to be right, my lack of confidence in her, dating from that afternoon at the movies, almost cost me my life.

II.

The other day I met a couple of likable students in Göttingen. I heard them talk about Auschwitz, but not, as is customary in Germany, as shorthand for the Holocaust but quite concretely as a place they seemed to know well. I started asking questions without telling them that I had been there before them, and learned that they had done their alternative service, their *Zivildienst* in the old concentration camp. Instead of serving in the military, they had whitewashed the fences in Auschwitz. I wondered aloud whether this made any sense. My doubts astonished them. Preservation was a form of restitution, they figured. Not that they liked the tourists (all those Americans!), and they were less than enthusiastic about the school children with their teachers. Nevertheless: the sites of suffering have to be preserved. And I ask myself: why?

Is it that the ghosts won't let go of us, and we expect that our unsolved questions will be answered, if we hang on to what is left, the place, the stones, the

ashes? But it is not the dead we honor with these unattractive remnants of past crimes, we collect and keep them, because *we* need them in some obscure way. Violated taboos like child murder, mass murder, turn into ghosts for whom we provide a kind of home which they may haunt at will. Perhaps we are afraid they may leave the camps, and so we insist that their deaths were unique and must not be compared to any other losses and atrocities. Never again shall there be such a crime. The same thing doesn't happen twice anyway. Every event, like every human being, and even every dog, is unique. We would be condemned to isolation if we didn't use comparisons, for they are bridges from one unique life to another. Basically we all know that some aspects of what happened in the camps have been repeated elsewhere, today and yesterday and will find new forms tomorrow; and the camps too were only imitations (unique imitations, to be sure) of what occurred the day before yesterday.

There is a museum culture of the camps which is based on a deep superstition, that is, the belief that the ghosts can be met and kept where the living ceased to breathe. Or rather not a deep but a shallow superstition. A visitor who stands here and feels moved, even if it is only the kind of feeling that a haunted house conveys, will still be pleased by his own sensitivity. And so the visitor checks his reactions, examines his emotions, in other words, turns sentimental.

I once visited Dachau, because some American friends asked me to come along. Everything was clean and proper there, and it took more imagination than most people have to visualize the camp as it was forty years earlier. Stones, wood, barracks, central square. The wood smells good, and a fresh wind blows across the square. You can associate it with a youth hostel more easily than with tortured lives. And surely there are visitors who secretly figure they have had worse experiences than the prisoners in this orderly German camp. The missing ingredients are the odor of fear emanating from human bodies, the concentrated aggression, the reduced minds. I didn't see the ghosts of the men who dragged themselves through the long, evil hours, the so-called *Muselmänner*, who had lost the energy and the will to live. Sure, the signs and the documentation and the films help us understand. But the concentration camp as a memorial site? Landscape, seascape—there should be a word like “timescape” to indicate the nature of a place in time, at a certain time, not before and never again.

III.

Even today I don't like the looks of freight cars. Yet the problem with the transport from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz was not the type of car or wagon but that it was so overcrowded. It has become customary to say cattle cars, as if the

proper way to transport animals is by torturing them. The doors were sealed, and air came through a small rectangle that served as window. Maybe there was a second rectangle in back of the car, but that was the place for the luggage. We had been told to take along everything we owned. (So that it could be more easily confiscated on our arrival, a kind of special delivery in which we unwittingly collaborated.) People who came from Theresienstadt didn't own much, but still too much for a freight car full of people, sixty or eighty. In fictional accounts, films or books of such transports, the hero often stands pensively at the little window or he holds up a child to see the landscape move by. But in reality only one person could stand in this privileged spot and he was not likely to give it up and was likely to be someone who knew how to use his elbows.

If I look at a map today, I see that the distance from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz is not very great. Yet it was the longest trip I have ever taken. The train stood around, it was summer, the temperature rose. The still air smelled of sweat, urine, excrement. An old woman who sat next to my mother slowly went crazy. She cried and whimpered, and I was impatient and angry with her, because here she was adding her private disintegration to the great collective evil which we shared. A defense reaction: I could not face or assimilate the sight of a grownup losing her mind in front of me. Finally the old woman pushed herself onto my mother's lap and urinated. And I still see the tense look of revulsion on my mother's face in the slanting twilight of the car and how she gently pushed the woman from her lap. Without malice, more like a nurse might free herself from a clinging patient. I thought my mother should have been indignant, but for her the situation was beyond anger and outrage.

I have just described a central event in my life, and yet I hardly ever get a chance to speak of it. It doesn't fit the framework of social discourse. For example, after I had written this in Germany, I visited friends and we talked about claustrophobia, and people mentioned incidents where they had got stuck and described feelings of panic or near panic. There was talk about the Chunnel and would the average person stand the confinement or flip? And there was a man who once couldn't get out of an elevator, and half the company remembered the air raid shelters of their childhood. And I didn't contribute my transport to Auschwitz, though it was on my mind, because if I had, it would have effectively shut up the rest of the company, they would have been bothered, troubled, sympathetic, and thoroughly uncomfortable. There would have been no further discussion of the way space affects us, which had been our subject. They would have resented me for spoiling the evening. My childhood falls into a black hole.

Sketches from Birkenau. A school teacher, whom I remember with some emotion but no respect. He would collect stalks of grass, of which there wasn't

much, but he found what there was and patiently called the grasses by their respective names, and commented, "You see, even here in Auschwitz something can grow, there is life." But I knew better, and for me there was no comfort in the thought that the grass would outlast me.

Second sketch. The gas chambers as a subject of everyday banter. Two men are fighting in front of a barracks. "What are you yelling about," says one. "No point getting excited. The chimney burns for you as much as for me." He is not resigned, he is angry, he yells. There were discussions on whether it was technically possible to cremate as many people as rumor had it. The optimists thought that the crematoria, the "chimney" took care only of those who had died of more or less "natural" causes.

Third sketch. A German guard, on the other side of the barbed wire, preens with a walking stick that has a loaf of bread at the other end. What an idea to show the starving prisoners that one has the power to let bread spoil in the dirt. But I was used to hunger and don't particularly associate it with Auschwitz. My physical recollections of the camp are mostly of heat (the glaring sun during roll call, which often lasted for hours) and of the stench from the death machine that pervaded the camp, and of thirst.

Another sketch about a walking stick. This time it belonged to a naked two-year-old boy who paraded it in the washroom, and was happy because he had finally scared up a plaything. A man says to my mother, what a shame that a kid like that won't get a chance to grow up. "What did the man tell you?" I ask her. My mother repeats his words.

Two old women arguing. They stand in the glaring sun, gesticulating with emaciated fingers. A third woman joins them, a prisoner with some authority, and knocks their heads against each other, hard. The brutality of the scene hits me with full force, a sensation of deep terror: I am witnessing the dissolution of the social structure I had known at least sketchily. Later I used to think, I shouldn't have been so horrified, surely there are greater horrors. But today I think that I was not naive or simple-minded and that my reaction was not out of line. Old women in Auschwitz, their nakedness and helplessness, the needs of old people, their exposure. Old women on the mass latrines, where at least a dozen people at a time were dealing with their constipation or diarrhea, in full view of each other. The old don't take physical functions for granted as children and young women do. This holds true particularly for the generation I have in mind, the generation of my grandmother, who had been born in the nineteenth century with its notions of modesty.

And the naked corpses, heaped on trucks, piled up any which way, molested by flies, disfigured features that had faced the ultimate violence, the hair on their head disheveled, sparse pubic hair, all in the glaring sun. I stand and stare in fascination.

Selection, there was to be a selection, women between the ages of fifteen and forty-five were to be chosen for a transport to a labor camp, at a certain barracks at a certain time. There were those who argued that one should avoid the selection, stay away. My mother believed that no place could be worse than what we had here, but the word *Selektion* was not a good word in Auschwitz because it usually meant the gas chambers. One couldn't be sure that there was really a labor camp in sight, though it seemed reasonable, given the parameters of age. But then, reason was not a basic premise of this place.

Two SS men conducted the selection, both with their backs to the rear wall. They stood on parallel sides of the so-called chimney which divided the room. In front of each of them was a line of naked women, waiting to be judged. The one in whose line I stood had a round wicked mask of a face and was so tall that I had to crane my neck to look up to him. I told him my age, he turned me down, with a shake of his head, simply, just like that. Next to him the woman clerk, a prisoner too, was not to write down my number. As if I had stolen my life and had no right to keep it, as if my life were a book that an adult was taking from me because I had no right to read on.

My mother had been chosen, no wonder, she was the right age, a grownup woman. Her number had been written down, she would leave the camp in a short time. We stood on the street and argued. She tried to persuade me that I should try a second time, with the other SS man, in the other line.

This was in June 1944, and since it was very warm both the front and the rear doors of the barracks stood open. This back entrance was guarded, but the guard consisted of inmates, and my mother felt I could sneak by and take another turn. And this time please don't be a fool and don't tell them your real age of twelve years. I got angry and irritated and was half desperate. "I don't look older," I remonstrated. I felt she wanted to cause a great deal of trouble for me, like the time a few years ago when she had urged me to go to the movies, in spite of the legal prohibition. The difference between twelve and fifteen is enormous for a twelve-year-old. I was to add a quarter of my entire life. The lie which my mother proposed was so transparent: three years, where was I to find them?

I was troubled and frightened, but it was not the profound fear of death which overwhelmed me when I looked at the chimneys, the crematoria, spitting flames at night and smoke by day. That fear was like a disease, and the fear I felt now was more like the bearable fear of malicious grownups, a fear that one could cope with. And how would I stay in Birkenau without my mother? She prodded me by calling me a coward until I agreed but with the proviso that I would try thirteen, never fifteen.

The space I was trying to invade was guarded by a cordon, and I sneaked through as the two men who were responsible were in the process of calling to each

other. I bent over a little to appear smaller and ran fast in the shadow of the wall and entered through the back gate, unobserved.

The room was still full of women. A kind of orderly chaos reigned which I associate with Auschwitz. The presumed Prussian perfection of the administration of the camps is a German invention. They were not well organized, or only superficially so, because there was nothing valuable to organize or retain. We were worthless, by definition. The selecting SS officers and their helpers stood with their back to me. I went unobtrusively to the front door, got rid of my clothes once more and took my place at the end of the line. I breathed a sigh of relief to have managed so far and so well. But I was the smallest and obviously the youngest in my line, undeveloped, undernourished, and nowhere near puberty.

I have read a lot about the selections since that time and all reports insist that the first decision was always the final one, that no prisoner who had been sent to one side and thus condemned to death ever made it to the other side. All right, I am the exception.

What happened next is loosely suspended from memory, as the world, before Copernicus, dangled on a thin chain from Heaven. It was an act that is always unique, no matter how often it may occur, an incomprehensible act of grace, or, put more modestly, a good deed. And yet the first term, an act of grace, is perhaps closer to the truth, even though it was caused by a human being, for it came out of the blue sky and was as undeserved as if its originator had been up in the clouds. I was saved by a young woman who was in just as helpless a situation as the rest of us and who cannot have wanted anything other than to help me. The more I think about the following scene the more astonished I am about its essence, that someone makes a free decision to save another person, in a place which promoted the instinct of self-preservation among prisoners to the point of crime and beyond. It was both unrivalled and exemplary. Simone Weil was suspicious of practically all literature, because literature tends to make good actions boring and evil interesting, thus reversing the truth, she argued. Perhaps women know more about what is good than men do, since men tend to trivialize it. Simone Weil was right, as I learned that day in Birkenau, the good is incomparable and inexplicable as well, because it doesn't have a proper cause outside of itself and because it doesn't reach for anything beyond itself.

I can't keep SS men apart, to me they are all the same uniformed wire puppet with polished boots, and when Eichmann was tried and executed I was embarrassingly indifferent to the whole process. These people were one single phenomenon, as far as I was concerned, and their differences in personality were irrelevant. Hannah Arendt offered the counterpart to Simone Weil's reflections on goodness, when she pointed to the simple fact that evil is committed in the spirit of mental dullness and narrow-minded conformity. Her reflections on evil caused

much indignation among men, who understand, though perhaps not consciously, that this deromanticization of arbitrary violence was a challenge to the patriarchy. Perhaps women know more about evil than men, who like to demonize it.

The line moved toward an SS man who, unlike the first one, was in a good mood. His clerk was perhaps nineteen or twenty. When she saw me she left her post and almost within the hearing of her boss she asked me quickly and quietly and with an unforgettable smile of her irregularly shaped teeth: "How old are you?" "Thirteen," I said, as planned. And she, fixing me intently, whispered, "Tell him you are fifteen."

Two minutes later it was my turn, and I cast a sidelong look at the other line, afraid the other SS man might look up and recognize me as someone with whom he had already dealt. He didn't. When asked for my age I gave the decisive answer which I had rejected when my mother suggested it but accepted from the stranger. "I am fifteen."

"She seems small," the master over life and death remarked. Not unfriendly, rather the way one might evaluate cows and calves.

"But she is strong," the woman said, "look at the muscles in her legs, she can work."

She didn't know me, why did she do it. He agreed, why not? She made a note of my number, I had won an extension on life.

I didn't work in the munitions factory but usually in the open air. It was men's work. We cleared the forest and dug up and carried the trunks of trees and laid railroad tracks. Obviously something was supposed to go up in Groß-Rosen, but I was not interested in what it might be. It's in the nature of slave labor that the worker either ignores or hates the purpose and end product of his work. Marx would have enjoyed and, I hope, turned in his grave if he could have seen us apply his thesis. Sometimes our keepers lent some of us out to the civilian population, and then we would sit in some attic and string onions. That was better than the cold air. The villagers stared at us as if we were wild animals. (But I speak your language, I wanted to say.) Sometimes my friend Ditha and I had to work in the quarry, that was the worst of all, because no other place was so desolate and cold. We clung to each other, but that didn't help much. There was no protection against the cold, our clothes were too thin, and though we had wrapped our feet in newspapers, which was some help, I was still close to despair. We longed for the next rest period, for time to pass. Perhaps I can stay in the camp tomorrow as part of the cleaning crew. How can we go on this way and for how much longer? (About twelve years later I watch Ditha, who is like a sister to me as she plays with her small daughters in the sand. I hear her soothing, superior sounding voice, *Copyrighted Material* do this or don't do that, she says. Suddenly I see us as we were, Ditha's arm around me, the two of us crouching in the quarry in the

cold wind. I turn away from her and the children, for the sand has solidified into Silesian granite and the children's game has become threatening. Why doesn't she go home with her children, all this sweetness is a lie.) I still dream of Silesian granite. It's a kind of wasteland, I look for warmth in that desolation, but there is none.

We women were the cheapest, poorest work force, most easy to replace and therefore least worthy of food. I marched to work with my eyes glued to the ground, hoping to find something edible on the road, because someone had once found a plum. I fantasized about an apple, it didn't have to be ripe and could be partly rotten. But there was never anything. Naturally not. We marched in columns and I was somewhere in the middle. Why should I be the one to find what others had overlooked?

In the forest we often had some contact with German civilians, for example foremen who directed our work. Once during a rest period I sat on tree trunk next to a fat, square man, who must have invited me to join him, for I would never have done it of my own accord. He was clearly curious; I probably didn't fit into his idea of forced laborers. A dark-haired emaciated child prisoner, a girl at that, who spoke flawless and presumably native German, unsuited for the work, a kid who belonged in school. He wanted to know my age. I wondered whether to tell him the truth, that I was thirteen or whether to continue the old lie, which had saved my life so far, and make out that I was three years older. What I really wanted was his lunch. He was eating a sandwich of lard on rye, a delicacy not to be found in the camp, and I wondered how I could get him to give it to me. To have obtained this bread with lard would have been an achievement, and I wanted it for this reason as much as from hunger. I wanted to share it with my mother and my friend Ditha who had become my foster sister. Ditha had contacts to some kitchen personnel and would occasionally produce some extra food, and I wanted to compete. I figured if I told the guy how young I really was, it might soften him up, but from the point of view of safety the lie that had saved my life was better, that is, that I was sixteen. I don't remember how I decided in the end, only that I didn't get his bread-and-lard. To give him his due, he cut off a large bite for me, but all one could do with that was eat it on the spot. He asked me a series of questions about myself which I answered with much reserve. Even if I had wanted to, I wouldn't have known what words to choose to describe what was happening to our people. But of course, I didn't want to anyway. Nothing could have been further from my mind than to take risks with a German.

The fat man on his part told me that German kids, too, didn't go to school anymore. They had gone to soldier, everyone. Did he want to persuade himself that all was fair and just in Christianstadt? He stuffed himself while telling me about the starving German people.

In today's Germany there are many well-meaning people about my age whose families employed forced laborers. ("Employed" is too good a word, let's say who "used" forced laborers.) They think back to these unpaid servants with pleasure, even affection. These Poles were well off in our household, they'll say, they used to play and laugh with us kids and they had enough to eat. They liked us. And I listen and ask myself, what about the alert reserve, the suspicion, the over- and underestimation of the enemy which must have occupied the minds of these deportees. Didn't you notice then, don't you remember now, shouldn't you revise your judgment? If the Germans who were children then haven't considered these questions, it is because no one sees himself as an enemy. The enemy is always the other, how can I be an enemy, when my parents love me and I am a friendly civil child. And so they never talk about forced laborers and they shrink visibly when I don't shy away from saying "slave labor."

I didn't want to be friends with the fat man, I wanted his food. And I wanted it not only for myself but to bring back to my mother and Ditha, and not only because I loved them but also to be able to say, Here. Look. I am good for something. Be that as it may, I didn't get his sandwich.

I imagine that in the mind of the fat man, if he is still around, I am a little Jewish girl who wasn't all that badly off, for she didn't tell any horror stories, though he encouraged her to be honest and to chat about her life. And she wasn't afraid, that was clear from the way she talked, therefore she had no reason to be afraid. Perhaps he uses this encounter as evidence the Jews were no worse off during the war than the "rest of us."

The first weeks of 1945, and by now there was so little to eat that you couldn't think of anything other than food. When I got my daily bread ration I stuffed it into my mouth as if I needed to eat it all in one swoop. Once in a great while I saw myself as I must have looked to someone else and was ashamed.

As the food grew worse, the social differences (and that is the only word for it) between the prisoners increased. Economic class distinctions, like everywhere else. The cooks and their children grew fat, actually fat. The less there was to eat, the more eagerly the keepers of the food ate it. Since they cooked not only for us but also for the guards they had access to whatever there was, and they helped themselves. When the winter clothes came (second-hand stuff that had been belonged to other victims), the cooks chose first and took what was best. I am standing in front of the central building, there is light in the kitchen, so I can look in the window, a cook shows off her plump daughter to another woman who is wearing worthless rags; she shows the ragwoman what a good skirt her daughter has on, and the daughter preens and poses as if this were a fashion show. Ragwoman admires the kitchen daughter in her new Copyrighted material because she is hoping for food, for a second helping.

One evening Ditha told me that the kitchen staff had some leftovers which they were saving for the children. I ran to the back entrance of the building, stood around for a while, a few more women who must have heard the same rumor joined me. I got impatient, perhaps these latecomers will push ahead, I was here first, and so I went up a few short stairs and then walked along the narrow well-lit hall to the back door of the kitchen. Suddenly a door to the right opened, a tall woman guard appeared, behind her an SS man I had never seen before. He calls to me with a strong Northern accent, using the polite form of address, I stand before him, my metal dish in hand, he asks what I want, I tell him I've heard there are leftovers, he says, "Now watch out." Idiot that I am I still think he'll let me pass, for why would he want to waste the leftovers, if indeed there are any, you don't throw away food when everyone is starving, do you now? And before I know it he has hit me in the face, full force so that I stumble backward all along the hallway and see stars. My wooden clogs fall off my feet, the dish falls from my hands, as I crash to the ground. When I recover my eyesight the other women have retreated, the SS man and his companion are gone, after some further verbal nastiness meant to send us packing. Ditha helps me get up, one or two of the others pick up my things with a bit of comforting tongue clucking. I feel that basically they feel that I provoked this scene, that it was my fault. Walking back to our barracks with Ditha I curse, "The pig actually used the polite form (er hat mich gesiezt)," as if that were adding insult to injury. My face still hurts and the chance for additional food has evaporated.

We return and tell our story. My mother claims that if she had been there, she would have hit back. "Why, then we were lucky that you weren't there," Ditha and I say in unison. She irritates me, because she stylizes herself at my expense, she is the potential heroine, unlikely as it may seem, and reduces me to poor-little-victim status. As if the humiliation of having been hit weren't enough, she has to add her superior pity.

But on that evening I recited one of my Auschwitz poems to my assembled roommates. In this poem the personified death machine proclaims that while it has consumed all who have come its way, it will in the end consume those who built it. I recited these verses with much verve and the secret thought, "You'll get your comeuppance, you creep who hit me, just wait." That was a comfort of sorts but of course it was nonsense, for we can be pretty sure that he didn't get his comeuppance. If he doesn't live in a luxury villa in South America, then perhaps he lives on retirement pay in Göttingen and he may even be the old pensioner whom I overheard talking to a young saleswoman in Schmidt's drugstore the other day. He was carrying on about foreigners, especially the ones from Poland. "They should all go into the gas chambers and the politicians can join them there," he said. I was about to choose between two tubes of toothpaste and almost

dropped them at these words. I look at him, I guess his age, yes, homeboy is old enough, he knows the score. He notices my glance, and now it's his turn to look me up and down. "Did I hear what you said?" I ask. We look each other in the eye, a look of recognition. And with a sarcastic undertone, "You heard me correctly," he says.

Escape

We arrived in a small Bavarian town, as part of a trek of refugees from the East. I was still carried by a dizzy sense of happiness, the very opposite of what the genuine German refugees experienced. For they had lost everything, that is, all their property, while we hoped to have gained everything, that is, the rest of our lives. So this arrival in Straubing was for me sheer euphoria, and for the others a low point, a leave-taking from home. And here we were among free men and women who complained about this and that and were entitled to their complaints which would have been unimaginable during those other mass transports we had so recently experienced. We were fellow citizens and were treated as such. We got quarters in town, and the three of us ended up on a small farm at the edge of town, where we had a room for ourselves, sheer luxury.

But there is another side to this coin of triumph, and it is a sense of betrayal, not to say treason. Here are two examples, the first is comical. My mother made friends with the farm woman, who one evening looked deep into my mother's green eyes and asked how come one of my mother's daughters looked so Jewish. My mother, thinking how her two "daughters" didn't look one bit alike, figured this difference in appearance could best be explained through paternity. And so she confessed in sisterly confidence, as between two women who have seen a bit of the world, that she had once had an affair with a Jew, and begged the other woman not to talk about this weakness and sighed that it had caused her much grief and regret. It worked and in a sense it's a funny anecdote, but it's not quite the stuff of comedy and there is a bitter aftertaste in the retelling.

And here is the other example. I went shopping and suddenly the prisoners of an evacuated concentration camp occupied the street, guarded by SS men and their dogs. And I stood on the sidewalk. I had never seen "us" from the outside. What separated me from them was a matter of a few weeks, no more, after we had been together for years. They looked so tired, as if there were no place on earth left for them. The dogs looked alert, well fed, and purposeful. My previous comrades walked slowly and with all their strength gone, whereas I had acquired a firmer step in that short time. I had become a German girl, who occasionally went to church on Sunday, knew how to cross myself and helped out in the potato field. For the rest, I came and

went as I pleased. And now here they were, my people. I stared at them with intense concentration and knew that they perceived me only as part of a hostile population.

That was an hour where the sense of having committed treason was not part of any comedy. Not that I wanted to be back with them, but that is the point. I wanted to remember seeing them, wanted to remember this one-sided meeting, yet I did not feel that I had to share their fate. Survivor guilt does not mean that you think you have no right to live. Speaking for myself, I never believed I should have died because others were killed. I hadn't done anything, why should I pay with my life? It's a question of debt rather than guilt, but the words are related as in the Lord's Prayer (forgive us our debts), and in German the one is *Schuld*, the other *Schulden*. One remains a debtor and doesn't quite know whom one owes. One would like to take from the victimizers to give to the dead, but one doesn't know how. For you owe me, I am a victim, but I owe them, for they are dead, more victim than I. One is debtor and creditor at the same time and is doomed to perform surrogate actions, alternating between giving and demanding, senseless actions in the light of reason.

That was my last contact with concentration camp inmates. They walked right through the middle of town, in broad daylight, and there were townspeople to my right and my left who looked away. Or closed their faces so that nothing could penetrate. We have our own troubles, kindly spare us yours. We waited on the sidewalk until the train of "subhumans" had passed. When a few weeks later the Americans occupied the city of Straubing, there was no one who had seen anything. And in a sense no one had. For you haven't seen what you haven't perceived and absorbed. In that sense only I had seen them. I still do.