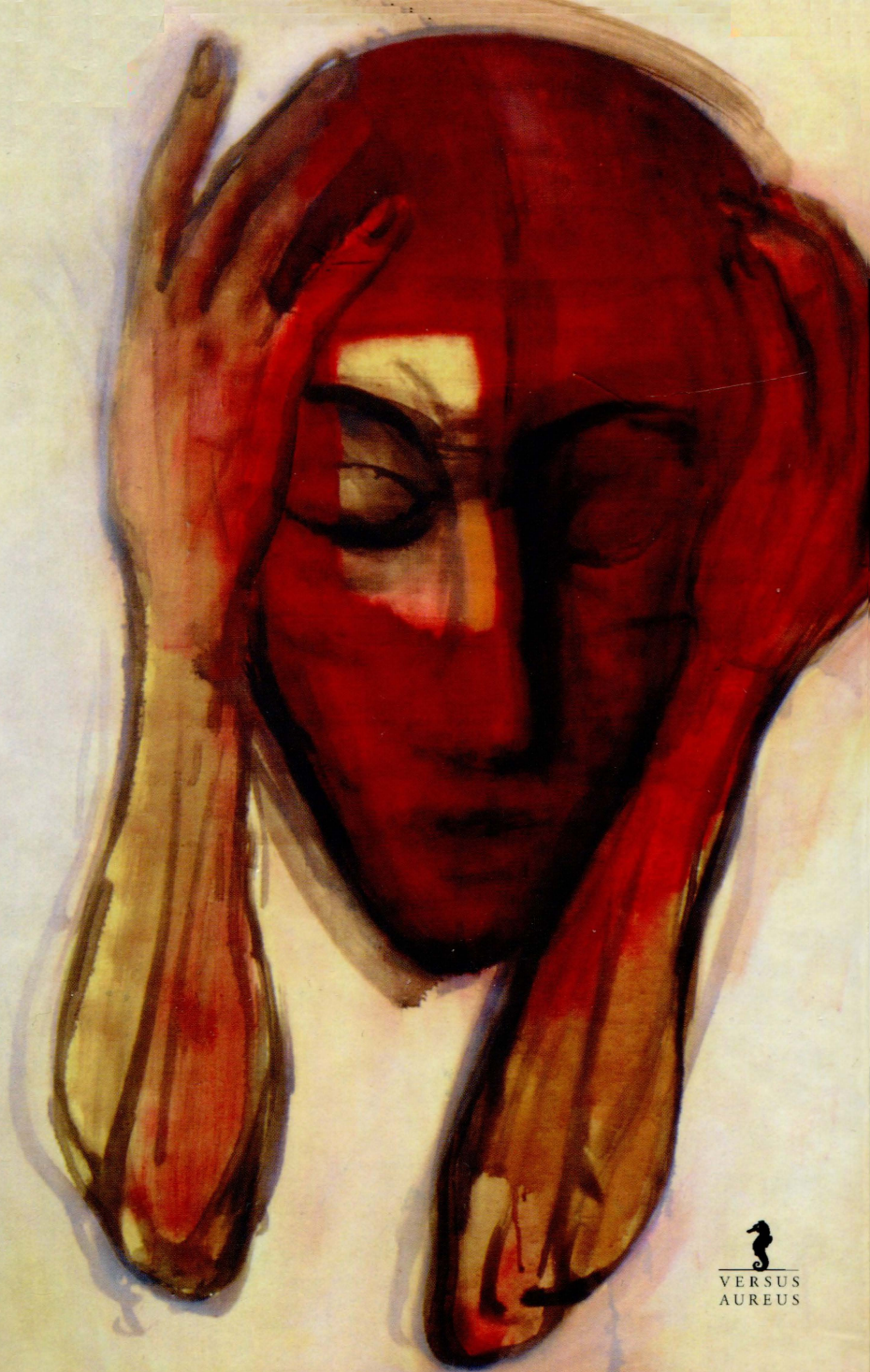


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F O R E S T O F T H E G O D S

FOREST OF THE GODS

Balys Sruoga

FOREST OF THE GODS



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in English

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I

FOREST OF THE GODS

Moors, hummocks, hills. On white dunes, sands sifted through the hands of a superior force – pines tall and spindly as yeshiva students. On the hillsides – birch trees so sickly, so impoverished, it's as if the sun forgot about these orphans. On the slopes and slants – huckleberries, blueberries, lingonberries, braided into a soft green carpet flecked with multicoloured fruits. In the furrows, scoured by crosswinds – clumps of bog grass, sedge and cowslip.

Once, a long, long time ago, this was the bottom of the sea. It looks as if, during a storm, the waves unexpectedly froze and hardened, and the north winds sprinkled their crests with white sands.

This little place nestles on the shores of the Baltic Sea, forty-five kilometers east of the city of Gdansk. Until 1939, few knew

of this isolated corner. Next to it slumbered Stutthof [Sztutowo], a small moribund town, almost a village, similar to thousands of other German towns and villages. Stutthof was connected to Gdansk by an asphalt highway and an obsolete railway. Here dwelt the dullest people in Europe – Prussian Germans, submerged in everyday spiritual torpor, venerating the cop and the kitchen, order and ale. They could go without their daily bread for an entire week, if only during the holidays they might be allowed to pompously promenade through the town's streets and get a chance to bang on the big hollow drum.

On Sunday, Stutthof's citizens who wanted to splash in the sea would have to cross that former sea, now tangled with pines, birches and stumps. Even if the souls of these citizens were besotted, when they waded into the mossy area they felt ever so slightly renewed, even elevated. The name of the place alone reminded them that there might still be something in this world besides their cops and ale.

Forest of the Gods! People had called it that since ancient times. Once, long ago, gods had dwelt here. Not Germanic gods – not Odin, not Thor. Here lived the last of the Lithuanian gods.

The Gdansk area was rich in myths and legends in which personages of Lithuanian origin with Lithuanian names worked in mysterious ways. Perkūnas¹, Jūrātė², Laumė³, Patrimpas⁴. And the current mortal tenants of the area, Prussian citizens, though now they called themselves Germans, repeated these myths.

Until 1939, only berry-picking women and pensioners in search of mushrooms wandered through the Forest of the Gods on weekdays. Occasionally, a bedraggled hunter wandered in and out. Otherwise, it was empty and barren except for the soughing of slender pines. In 1939, the Forest of the Gods suddenly rallied, revived, as if the ancient gods had returned to it...

It was not gods that returned to the forest. No, these were regular denizens of the deep, indistinguishable from devils.

With the end of the Polish-German War⁵, Gdansk's civil government decided to erect a concentration camp within the Forest of the Gods to bring disobedient Poles back to the path of righteousness.

The first assignment for all concentration camps was to be certain that no one in the world should discover what was going on behind the barbed wire. If news spread about the living conditions of those fenced in, it could make trouble for the camp landlords. An angry soul or two might appear and start to scream, calling the accommodating landlords barbarians. This sort of thing isn't necessary. When camp operations are running smoothly, with no strangers listening, no strangers looking – then the propagandists may safely exalt the landlords' cultural and creative talents without fear of contradiction.

The Forest of the Gods was far from neighboring eyes and ears. There were few residents in the area and these were reliable worshippers of the powerful idols of this world. Most important, the geographic location of the Forest of the Gods was such that the tenants under the pine tree arcades could not even daydream about removing themselves from the hospitality of the camp. One side bordered the Baltic Sea, so carefully guarded during the war. On the other side – the famous gulf⁶. On the third side – the huge, two-forked Vistula [Wisla] with its channel and canal system. On the fourth side – a very narrow peninsula which separated the sea and the gulf. A prisoner breaking out from the Forest of the Gods, whichever way he turned, would end up in the water or in the arms of the police.

In the autumn of 1939, the first new settlers transferred themselves here: a band of S.S. men and a few hundred disheveled,

striped paupers, mostly Gdansk area Poles sentenced to die. In the forest, the first tattered tents were erected – and the concentration camp was officially open.

So began the chopping of the forest, uprooting of stumps, levelling of earth, flattening of hills, filling in of marshes, transportation of gravel and rocks, assembly of barracks, and the erection of a giant edifice – headquarters for the commandant's staff and administration. Blueprints for the camp were colossal, with space planned for more than 100,000 prisoners, but even in 1945, the construction was far from finished.

II

BARRACK CULTURE

Hitler's Germany could be concisely labelled a country of camps. This land, once reknowned for an embellished yet lucid baroque style, now boasted of its barracks.

The decline from baroque to barrack vividly portrays German cultural development under Hitler's aegis. With its occupation of more and more territory, Germany – once a harbinger of culture – by the middle of the twentieth century became a harbinger of camps. Creatively depleted, Hitler's Germany now presented its ripest cultural fruit to other countries – the camp, the barrack.

In Germany itself, the number as well as the variety of camps was difficult to comprehend. War camps, sport camps, rest camps, political convention camps, youth camps, the Reich's civil service camps, repatriate camps, war refugee and exile camps,

bombed village camps, transitional and placement camps, work camps, intern camps, prisoner of war camps, and so on, and so on. Foremost among camps, representing Hitler's cultural gem and vainglory, concentration camps sprouted with Hitler's rise to power.

But concentration camps were not all alike, even if their missions were one and the same – to destroy the enemies of Hitler's Germany, especially enemies of the Nazi Party. These included sworn enemies and mere suspects, superfluous citizens and those characters deemed undesirable by Party members. In the beginning, the camps were closed almost without exception. Closed camps were those which no one ever left alive, and Dachau was first among these. Such camps were also frequently called Vernichtungslager – extermination camp – for obvious reasons.

When Hitler ruled only Germany, he crammed the camps and exterminated only his own citizens. Hundreds of thousands perished; no one knows the exact number. When he began seizing foreign lands, German citizens could breathe a little easier: new, immense sources of material for extermination had been found. The number of camps skyrocketed. Dachau, Oranienburg, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Gusen, Gross-Rosen, Ravensbrück, Flossenburg, Auschwitz.

The most populous camps in Germany were entire cities with their subsidiaries and their factories, their own separate laws, their own strange systems of rights and morals, found nowhere else, their own political parties and party quarrels, peculiar customs and everyday wisdom.

Towards the end of 1943, all German concentration camps were divided into five categories, graded by toughness of regime. At that time Dachau was in the first category – it was the most presentable, the “easiest” camp. It had become the so called rep-

representative camp. More than once the International Commission of the Red Cross paid a visit there. Dachau was used for a peculiar type of propaganda. The camp contained many English, American and French citizens who were extended certain courtesies unavailable to Central and Eastern Europeans.

The most abominable camp of the fourth category was Mauthausen with its subsidiary, Gusen. Fifth category camps were beyond Germany's borders, mainly in Poland; Maidanek, for example. Until the end of the war, the fifth category camps remained **closed** – extermination camps.

The Forest of the Gods, officially called the Stutthof Concentration Camp, did not have clear-cut features. Within, it was possible to find characteristics ranging from the first to the fifth category. Its most difficult period was from 1939 until the end of 1942, when the German Army was marching triumphantly across Europe. At that time the S.S. considered it a hilarious insanity to suggest that Germany could possibly lose a war. During that period The Forest of the Gods was a closed camp. By the end of 1942, of 20,000 brought to the camp, 18,000 had been tortured to death, in one way or another. The remaining 2000 were either transferred to other camps or remained alive at Stutthof. Only a handful were released from the camp – not into freedom, naturally, but into forced labor or labor camps.

From 1942 to 1943 there were 3500 to 4000 prisoners in the Stutthof Camp. In that time the prisoner census changed three to four times per year. As prisoners died, others were herded in to replace them. In this way the head count remained the same: 3500 to 4000. There were a few score prisoners who had managed to stay alive since the opening of the camp. There were a few score prisoners transferred from elsewhere who had survived for five to eight years in other camps or squatted in

various jails before coming to Stutthof. These were not ordinary people. They had without exception literally gone through hell and high water, freezing cold and horrible heat. These were people with tremendous physical strength and unyielding faith, with unbridled determination to cheat death and live. They were also the wards of fate. Neither their strength nor their faith could have helped them if blind lady luck had not also happened to smile on them.

The Stutthof Camp changed hands in 1942 from Gdansk's local government to the jurisdiction of the state. It was then given over to the S.S. Organization, becoming a type of private property with all of its dead and living inventory. Strangely, in spite of this change, from that year on the conditions in camp slowly improved. The old camp veterans who had lingered on since 1939 told of earlier experiences which seemed totally unbelievable – unbelievable, of course, only to those who had never been in a German concentration camp.

By 1943, these veterans, like experienced wolves, had been able to push their way into better positions, even to take over commanding posts, frequently determining the quality of life in the camp.

Camp government in prisoners' hands! Naturally this is an overstatement – but one containing much truth. This situation had similarities with the old czarist Russian system of serfdom: the owner of a serf could punish his slave, beat him, sell him, trade him in for a dog; yet without him the owner was unable to survive. This type of relationship is masterfully depicted, for example, by the famous Russian author, Goncharov¹, in his marvelous novel, *Oblomov*². A landed gentryman, Ilija Oblomov, was not only unable to survive without the aid of his serf, Zacharias – he himself became the virtual slave of Zacharias. Unable to es-

cape to freedom, Zacharias nonetheless did what he wanted with his lord. Though without rights and totally dependant on his master's moods, he was yet able to influence him. Something analogous went on in Stutthof between the S.S. and the prisoners. At any given moment the S.S. could shoot the prisoners, hang them, stone them or club them to death, throw them to the dogs, rob them, beat them, smear them with tar – and so on, and so on. A prisoner was unprotected by laws. He had no rights, no rights existed for him. He was no more than an item in the inventory books. But on the other hand, the S.S. could not run the camp without the help of the prisoners, or even live in reasonable comfort without them. The Zacharias of Stutthof were Polish prisoners residing in Stutthof from the start of the camp, as well as Germans transferred from other camps – mostly criminals, homosexuals and Bible students.

This type of “order” was tenuously established at the cost of great hardships and horrible suffering. It is not even possible to talk about the camp as a stable entity, for the camp was in constant upheaval. As fortunes changed on the fields of battle, and German society went through its mood swings, the atmosphere in camp changed in turn. Standing orders changed. Rules were revised. Such changes and their significance became apparent only after one had lived in camp quite some time.

Once a prisoner set foot in the Forest of the Gods it was immediately evident to him that the old gods had disappeared from here without a trace. By moving in, the S.S. had incarcerated even the old devils and taken their places – suiting self to circumstance.

III

ON THE MOVE...

February-March of 1943. Germany's Occupational Government¹ announces the mobilization of Lithuania's youth into S.S. lines. It commands enlistment with threats of German punishment for those who disobey.

The youngsters don't fear punishment. The youngsters don't join the S.S. The youngsters proceed to sing:

"You're the forest, you're the green..."

The youngsters proceed into the green forest.

The draft board offices feel haunted. The draft board's great expectations of at least a few hundred youngsters are shattered when barely four or five show up, and these – rickety, sickly, skinny as rails, infirm, crippled, not worth the flat feet they're standing on.

The Germans, vocational counselors of our youth, are turning green. Shame seeps into the offices. Seedy spies and similar bootlickers heel at the command of their masters; but despite their efforts they come up empty.

Somewhere from the depths, from the dark Occupational Government's cabinet, murmured and repeated by the peon pushovers, comes an incensed lowing: the Lithuanian intelligentsia will get what it's got coming! This type of insult the government will not forgive: Lithuanian youth have clearly wrecked the career of the German Commissar General Renteln. Renteln had convinced the Berlin uncles that in Lithuania, as in other Baltic nations, "Everything is in order". But here, thunder only knows what happened!

"Well, when we get them – we'll get them but good!" come the sour voices from the large Gestapo building in Vilnius.

A multitude of rumors spreads, each more frightening than the next. No one believes the official news. No one knows the truth. Here – so many people arrested; there – so many already transported out; elsewhere – so many already shot. In Kaunas, numerous people are missing. In the provinces, even more. A terrible uneasiness permeates the soul.

"Eh! You can't run away from your fate!" As a mortal you shrug your shoulders. What will be, will be; besides, "We are all guests in this world..."²

Yet a sudden desire surges, a need to read books about the lives of prisoners and convicts, about their hardships, about their spiritual strengths, about their longing for freedom. I accumulate books about the classical land of exile, Siberia. I drown in them. I remember the consoling outcry of Vaižgantas³:

"Lithuanians, do not fear prison!"

March 16. While skimming through a prison book, at 11:30 P.M., I hear heavy cleated footsteps on the stairs.

“Clomp-clomp-clomp...” then German gibberish.

We glance at one another hearing the voices. It’s clear without words:

“Who will they get now?”

The doorbell rings long, authoritatively. Hearts stop. Muted blows of a boot on the door.

Here they are: two Gestapo agents. Gray. Cleated.

“Is there a so and so here? Let’s see your passport. Do you have a weapon? Take your hat and this or that, if you want. You don’t need much. For two or three days. No longer than that.”

A search – very superficial, not worthy of Gestapo fame. They take some old letters, a few innocent manuscripts and whatever else happens to be there: material from which nothing could be learned; material they seem not even to need. It seems only important that they get to take something.

Our hearts are grim. Our faces are stone. Only our hands slightly quiver. And – that’s it. And – that’s all.

“Balys, take care!” My leavetaking is accompanied by two voices filled with such inconceivable ache and with such overwhelming love, that accompanied by them, even a walk to the gallows would feel secure.

“I’ll – make it. But you... Oh, be blessed!”

To the Gestapo building in Vilnius is not far for me. A shuffle, a step, and I’m already there.

One door, another; a corridor, a yard, a door – and I’m already in the kingdom of the underworld.

A drowsy Gestapo at the entrance. Nothing more.

“What the devil? Am I going to be the only one?”

The sleepy Gestapo dallies, emptying my pockets and setting things aside. He yawns, rubs his eyes. It's terribly boring for him. For me – even more boring.

In the hallway behind the heavy iron door, footsteps sound. Many of them. Whispers.

“Sruoga!” I hear the surprised Lithuanian voices. I glance back and see familiar faces. One, another, a third... The Lithuanian intelligentsia of Vilnius.

And me – I'm not alone. They won't make soap out of me yet, it appears.

“Greetings, neighbors!” I yell passing by until they stuff me into the underground coop.

The cage is already crowded. Most of my cellmates look like everyday criminals, though one individual says the rosary all night. There's no room. Somehow I stretch out diagonally on the floor and gaze around. A small light flickers near the ceiling. A tiny window up there is painted white so the pedestrians won't know who or what sighs behind the glass below. Me? A prisoner? This must be a joke! After an hour, the basement doors creak open and a citizen in furs is dumped on us. He speaks with a deep voice. Possibly a bass from the Igula Church⁴? No, a baritone. A cardsharp. Captain of the reserves. Shortly after, two more acquaintances join me in the crowded cell. We are now four – misery loves company.

How slowly, how unwillingly day dawns in the basement! As if the sun were ashamed of something.

Well, the sun rises, except she brings no change. Late in the evening I receive a packet from home. Bacon, coffee and a few other goods.

In a man's life this kind of joy is rare! The family is still free! They extend the hand of aid... No, probably they didn't cry... No, no!

Next morning, a creaky old Gestapo, bowing low, admits a German with shiny buttons into our basement.

“Which one of you here is a professor?” utters Buttons. “Well then, I’m one of those,” I sidle closer to Buttons. ‘Oh, he stinks of good cognac,’ I think to myself. ‘Probably tortured himself all night long...’

“Do you know, Professor, what’s happened in the last two weeks?”

“Hm...,” I say, “what could have happened? No, I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything good. Where? How?”

“What happened in Lithuania during the past two weeks?”

“Really, I don’t remember. You see, at this time I was buried in my work. I was translating a play in verse for the theatre... An iambic, Shakespearean... I was writing a treatise on the Renaissance in Florence... Hadn’t even read the newspapers...”

“You must have noticed that lectures at the university were attended by fewer and fewer students each time, until finally there were none? Where did they disappear to?”

“No, there’s no way I would know these things. I didn’t notice anything. I was on sabbatical from the university to do some work in literature and I myself didn’t go to the lectures. I just started them the day before yesterday, about early German Romanticism... In my mind, there were plenty of students...”

With this, the discussions are ended and the sermon begins. It is orated by this Gestapo Chief of Vilnius, Buttons, the one who savored his cognac all night. He preaches about big things, about German morality, about the wisdom of National Socialism.

“Freedom is rescinded from you for a long time, until the end of the war, eventually till the end of your life,” he intones, waving a clenched fist. Precisely at the moment of Buttons’

rhetorical climax, Jonas Čiuberkis, my colleague and forever the lawyer, gets muddled in his young yet balding head: he bursts out laughing.

“Why are you laughing there, eh?” The lecturer is irked. “Eh, why are you laughing? You want to come along with me?”

No, Čiuberkis doesn’t want to go anywhere with him. Especially since one foot is bare. The devil only knows how he twisted it; now it’s plastered with a grimy cast.

“Here, look at my leg; actually, I can’t get around...” Sometimes it pays to have a sprained ankle.

“There are a hundred million of us Germans; of you – only three million. How dare you go against us!” Aroused from his drunken stupor by Čiuberkis, Buttons is getting hot under the collar.

“As far as all this relates to me,” I begin bravely, “I never walk anywhere. I’m a poet and I don’t involve myself with politics.”

“Oh!” he shouts. “Poets can be even more dangerous!”

“Come now... The Reich is so powerful, I’m so helpless... How could I... I just don’t know how I could be dangerous...”

“How dare you doubt the German military’s might and power?” He gesticulates. “During lectures, during conferences, one or two smiles, one or two ironic comments... We’ve had enough of that. We don’t need much... We are National Socialists, we are consequential: Lithuanian intelligentsia is going against us. Lithuanian intelligentsia has to be destroyed. You’re going to be shipped out first... Over your heads there is a sign...” Here he outlines a big question mark in the air. “From now on your universities are closed, all faculty members arrested...”

“All the faculty? Arrested?”

“All, without exception. The high schools are also closed... You will all go...”

Now even I am laughing. The Gestapo always lies. It's an impossibility that a Gestapo member would tell the truth. If the entire faculty had been arrested, we here in the basement would have felt it. But – nothing, nowhere. Huh, the drunk is lying, scaring us!

He doesn't even offer to take a walk with me. Right away we are all directed from the basement into the yard.

In the Gestapo yard, a pretty group of people stands in formation, about thirty of them; among them are acquaintances. All at once it seems cozy. As the Russians say, '*na miru i smertj krasna*' – out in the open, it's even pretty to die. Two trucks – and we're rattling away to Kaunas. "Good-bye Vilnius – you'll hear from us again!"

IV

...UNKNOWN DIRECTIONS

We sit down on comfortable benches inside the covered tracks. Security is meager: two or three Gestapo soldiers. They place their automatic rifles in a corner and puff on pipes, snoozing.

To jump or not to jump from the truck? To jump would be very easy, especially while driving through a forest. Until they stop, until they start shooting, it'd be possible to sprint a distance... But whether it's possible to escape or not, it would certainly complicate the situation for the others; they'd suffer the revenge. Besides, we're probably very poor sinners since we're so carelessly guarded. There won't be anything serious...

We drive right into the Gestapo yard in Kaunas. Politely, we are asked inside. Some of us are stuffed underground into brigs suitable for bitches to whelp their pups; you try to lay down horizontally, vertically or diagonally, there's simply no way to

stretch out! The remaining men are directed into a cave located under the Kaunas Gestapo Headquarters' stairway. Here there's even less room, even air is scarce. Desolate. Dark. Dismal.

The actions of the Kaunas Gestapo are incomprehensible. They cram us into a doggyish hole, but air it out quite often. They act very politely. They strike up friendly conversations and are gladly answered. For a good half hour all of us are let out into the yard for a walk – the guards are few. For dinner and supper they invite us to the S.S. dining room. Clean tablecloths, comfortable chairs, polite service of the girls. The food is not fancy but well made, filling, plentiful – eat as much as you want. After eating, smoking is allowed: the S.S. even offer us cigarettes, as if we were invited guests.

How do these actions jibe with the repulsive cells?

Most distressing of all, we know nothing of the situation. What's going on in the city?

We manage to organize a news collection. It becomes clear that no one will question us or try us; everything seems to have been done in advance, as if not to tire us...

“Attempts at interrogating or arraigning you would produce nothing. You would all deny your crimes and defend yourselves. We would have to bring you eye-to-eye with persons who submitted information about you... We're not such fools as to reveal our agents, our informers, for such trivia. That is why it has been decided to transport you without any interrogation to East Prussia – to teach you a little Prussian...”

So no one interrogates us. In the morning, again a sumptuous, savory breakfast with S.S. cigarettes. After breakfast, preparation for travel. We're even allowed to write notes to friends in Kaunas and given promises that they'll be delivered. We're seated in a fancy bus, again with a weak guard, and leave Kaunas. To

Germany, to Tilžė [Tilsit]. They say from there we can write to protest our arrests and ‘tie up other loose ends’.

In Tilžė we have the prison church at our disposal – an airy hall on the fourth floor of a pretty brick building. In the hall, we’re alone. The hall is clean, open windows, plenty of air, we can walk around the hall as much as we want. The food – basic prison type, but cleanly made, politely served. The hall guard – an old prison worker, very reasonable, promising not to look when we smoke in the hall, and he keeps his word. Every other day we’re allowed to walk in the yard. A barber is brought to the hall, and his services are free. Our worn out shoes are collected and repaired at no charge. We’re allowed to write home and the letters are conscientiously delivered. After eight days, we are seated in a clean third-class passenger car and sent on our way from Tilžė in an unknown direction.

The hall guard, receiving a slab of bacon, calls our hall senior, the oldest of us, University of Vilnius Professor Jurgutis, into a separate room. There Jurgutis is informed that we are being shipped to a place from which no one has ever returned – a concentration camp. This news Prof. Jurgutis is too scared to reveal. He returns blushing while we attack from all sides. He mumbles only something about women and black stockings.

Aside from him, no one knows where we are going.

The Gestapo’s polite gestures indicate that this is to be a regular deportation to Germany. In the clean third-class car sit only a few S.S. soldiers pursuing a friendly line of chatter, and we feel like ordinary passengers; even more so because Tilžė’s prison authorities have given us a few sandwiches for our trip, neatly wrapped in wax paper.

A group of stocky, well armed Gestapo soldiers meets us at Gdansk’s railroad station. About 200 prisoners have arrived in our train, mostly Belorussians and Poles from Bialystok.

Gdansk's Gestapo now emerge as creatures of an entirely different species. They themselves don't seem sure if they are humans or just some two legged malformations; certainly they don't view us as humans. They begin stuffing us into trucks with many other prisoners. The trucks are small, the people are many. Not everyone fits. The Gestapo pursue those who can't squeeze in with foul words, then bludgeon them with clubs to slim them down.

The club – always the club: a hard but necessary thing. Due to its efforts, room is found in the trucks. So what if one's legs get tangled with another's head like sardines in a can; so what if one's stooped and snorting, another's riding on his back; so what if one's panting, another's screaming? Everybody fits.

V

FIRST NIGHT

We arrive at an unknown location in the middle of the night.

They roll us out of the truck. They line us up in rows of five next to a huge red-brick building surrounded by untrimmed trees.

Hm... if this is where we'll live, at least they'll give us a bed... Rooms, probably already arranged – they wouldn't be preparing rooms for us now... Germans always did know how to organize... This place, too, was probably notified of our arrival, as was the place in Tilžė...

Our glowing prospects are suddenly shattered when, creeping out from the devil knows where, a sort of spindly and skewed S.S. guy begins to wave his fist in our faces and mutter from under his flattened nose.

“Tfu,” splutters one of our men after getting a punch in the eye, “what kind of customs are these?!”

High, wide gates ahead, intertwined with barbed wire. Some type of box hangs on the gate. Above it protrudes a red lamp. From the box a machine gun, or some other such aberration, juts forth its snout... Behind the box, behind the gate, lies a long, narrow yard lined with these funny little shacks. Kennels – no, not kennels; barns – not barns; at night there’s no comprehending what kind of rot this might be.

Suddenly, from the depths of the yard, surface two black men. Brandishing fat sticks, they charge us. One is tall and solid with a voice distinguishing the dragon in the German opera, “Siegfried!”. The second, shorter by half, is evidently a relative of the Crusher, a night beast. He speaks with a strong Polish accent.

A dour yet draconic command drives us up to one of these funny shacks, which reveals itself to be – living quarters! The black night men stop by the door. One on one side, the other on the other side.

Siegfried Mouth bellows with relish:

“Carry the pallets from this barrack to that one!”

I stand first in line with Jurgutis. We’re also the first to step through the mysterious doors guarded by the two dark men.

“Hurry up, you *alte Kamele!*” That’s to say, “You old camel!” Two sticks whack Jurgutis’s back.

“Hurry up, you old carcass!” I am also bestowed a label and two sticks across the neck.

Jurgutis and I are not exceptional – everyone gets the same.

“*Alte Kamele!*” Whack with the stick.

“Old carcass!” Whack with the stick.

Everyone’s rights are equal; everyone gets the same, except those quick-footed ones who bound like deer out of the way.

Hm... Any way you look at it, the customs of this land are rather strange! I'd even prefer the old Asian greeting of rubbing noses with men...

"Whack, whack, whack!" As many times as we went past those men, that's how many times the sticks whacked. The third time around it occurs to us to stick out the pallets instead of our necks. Unfortunately, our discovery comes too late: the pallets have already been carried over.

Again the gargling operatic command:

"Go inside, into the barrack with the pallets: Lithuanians lay against that wall, Poles – by that one, Belorussians – in the middle."

The men with the sticks, like senators of some kind, once again stand by the door. Everyone has aspirations to quickly slip past them and hide behind someone's back in the barrack. But when 200 people desperately want to jump through a small door very quickly – usually the door suffers. This time, the sticks suffered: they broke, poor things.

"We've landed in a madhouse, or some such hell!"

We tumble, we topple randomly, ignoring the ordered arrangement. Well, well, we shall see!

The man, Crusher, announces himself inside: he will be our chief this night and for anyone who disobeys him, there will be – oho!

"There, this vat will be for urination, this one for defecation. Whoever dares look through the side window or tries to clamber through it, that son of a bitch will be immediately roasted like a goose."

Establishing this type of order, Crusher begins trampling around the vats. He snorts over there, sniffs, swears, snores, breathes slower and slower, until at last he's quiet.

“Is Satan finally asleep?” we sigh quietly.

Are you kidding? Suddenly he sonorously swears and once again begins tramping around.

“Hey, you, four legged and two legged old carcasses, bums and curs,” he addresses himself to us. “Who’s got gold? Who’s got watches? Who’s got money? This’ll all be taken from you.” We’d be wisest to give it all to him, he says. He’ll also take bacon. He doesn’t need bread. “Divide the bread up among yourselves. Well, who’s got gold? Who has watches?”

A voice – shouting in the wilderness. Two hundred people are lying like lifeless flies. Not only is nothing surrendered, no one even answers.

“Hey, you sons of all bitches, will you give me your watches?”

Irate at our display of rudeness, he begins to walk all over us. Strange, his way of getting around: he puts his foot where it lands: on someone’s stomach, someone else’s chest, yet another’s head. And he’s jabbing with the stick – he has to lean on something. There’s no light in the barrack; a man could fall down.

“You Judas, get your foot off my head!” someone shrieks in the dark.

“Rattlebrain, hand over the watch!”

Some kind of scuffle. The accelerated breathing of two men. An angry wheeze through the teeth.

“What’s he up to now?”

Suddenly a muffled blow, something heavy and soft slams against the excrement vat and crashes to the floor.

“Which of you bums stamped our Crusher in the stomach? Who’s the one kicking like a rabid camel?” screeches a voice of officialdom.

No one’s like that here. No one will admit to so ingloriously defiling that majestic stomach. Everyone’s silent.

“I’m asking for the last time, dogshit: who kicked him in the stomach?”

Look for fools somewhere else – as if you’ll find them in the dark! No one saw. There’s no one like that here, no kickers or fools.

“Oh! So that’s the way it is? I’ll show you!..” What he promises to do, there’s no way of describing.

“Oh, Jesus, Mary! Lord!” shrieking voices in the dark.

Crusher is enraged, but no longer having the guts to wade through the sprawling crowd, he begins pelting those lying near by with his stick. Anybody he can reach.

“These guys arrived from hell itself!” sighs my neighbor, a Pole from Bialystok, just in time to get brained with the stick. He thrusts his head under the pallet and so do I.

After knocking a few more ribs and necks with his stick, Crusher simmers down, he’s vented his spleen. A human after all, not a machine: he tires.

He sighs heavily, still seething with rage. For a long while he still talks to himself, rustling around the vats to accomplish this and that kind of elimination, until he begins to loudly snore.

His snoring is sweeter than the warbling of a nightingale.

“Maybe that lyncher won’t wake until morning! May the heavens not begrudge him the very deepest sleep! May some henchman strangle him in his dreams!”

Morning isn’t far away, but...

Scientists discovered dynamite... Why don’t they discover an instrument that will give this night a quick little push and forever roll it away?!

VI

SEASIDE RESORT

Slowly, so very slowly slinked away the first bitter night. Finally the sun began to dawn. Our night Crusher disappeared somewhere, evaporating like the dew.

Crowded and cramped, we whispered. A touch here, a pat there: who's missing what? Everyone still has his head. No one's complaining about a lack of ribs – that's most important. Who's short a knife, a watch, a sack? Trivia! Who cares!

Some kind of incredible officials with crosses on their backs and numbers on their chests chased us out of the dwelling, ushering us out with harsh words. They lined us up along the barbed wire fence – as if to say, 'Now, await your fate.'

Once in a while, a huge wagon rumbles past, drawn by ragged, tattered, tottering, withered people. Once in a while, some kind of being in striped clothing runs, walks, crawls past – and everything is again quiet.

“Men, look there! Some of our own, from Kaunas!” one of our group yells out.

True! We recognize them! How many of them! All dressed in striped, ragged, muddy clothes; a striped pancake on their heads for a hat; the wooden clogs on their bare feet frequently slip off, and they often stumble while walking. Bent double, they’re dragging huge vats, or something.

Members of Lithuania’s intelligentsia from Kaunas had been arrested a day earlier than we were. They also arrived here a day ahead of us, having visited Tilžė’s, Ragainė’s and Marienburg’s prison basements.

We greet them from afar. They don’t answer us. They sadly glance over, turn back. What’s with them? Why are they so rude? Why aren’t they interested in our arrival?

“Eat everything you have! They’ll take everything away!” one of them shouts in a breathy voice and turns away like a stranger.

“Well, what do you know! So that’s what’s going on here!” we sigh, and rummage through our luggage. We dig up some sausage, some bacon. We chew our cuds. We don’t even notice the approach of this lively fellow with a green triangle on his chest and a red cross on his back.

“Greetings, Lithuanians,” he says in German with a Rhineland’s accent. “We knew you were coming. We were waiting in fact. The sausage – Lithuanian?”

“Who might you be? An official?”

“No. A prisoner. The same as you.”

“We’re – the same? Prisoners?”

“What else?” he laughs, gobbling our sausage.

“Tell us, for crying out loud, what is this place? Where’d we end up at?”

“A concentration camp, Stutthof.”

“A concentration camp?!?” We’re ready to keel over. “We’re already in a concentration camp!!!”

“Don’t be upset,” exclaims the young man. “Now, it’s possible to live here.”

“A concentration camp!”

“Hey, compared to the way it used to be, this place is a seaside resort.”

“Resort?”

“Look! Pines are growing. Isn’t that just like a resort? And the sea is three kilometers away. There’s no shortage of air... Nonsense. You can live here. Just don’t drink the water. It’s infected with all sorts of typhus and cholera. See how the chimney’s smoking?”

“It stinks of burning rubber...”

“That’s the crematorium. Sooner or later, we all take off through that chimney.”

“Us too? Through the chimney?”

“And how are you any different?”

“Don’t tell me the chimney is mandatory for everybody?”

“Some haven’t taken off yet. And I’m still alive, as you can see, even if I’ve been bumming through camps for the past seven years. Remember three basic things: watch that your bowels don’t go bad, that your legs don’t get mangled and that your kidneys don’t get knocked out of place. All that ends with the chimney. Otherwise, it’s possible to live here...”

“Some seaside resort! Consolation, like hell!”

“And what do you think? You see here, men hauling a wagon with garbage? It’s okay, they’re managing, even if they’re bending over. A year ago we hauled sand in that wagon. Seven kilometers. S.S. men with sticks stand in the wagon. We run at a trot. With an empty wagon and a full one. If you can’t keep up,

you get it with the stick. If you fall, you never stand up again. Those were some times!”

“You’re not lying by any chance? You’re scaring us, you scum. Aren’t you?”

“I’m a Rhinelander. From Cologne. Johan Bloy. We Rhinelanders don’t lie. Steal – sure I can. So what? But lie – never!”

“So why are you here?”

“Eh, for trivia. It just didn’t turn out. I’m no good at life. Fifteen times they tried me for stealing, but the sixteenth time I got nailed – they sent me to camp...”

“Who were those two who clobbered us last night?”

“Oh! That loudmouth – that’s Lehman, first senior in camp. The second one, he’s a nothing. That’s Stasiak. Trash.”

This forthright young man gave us very useful information.

“The camp is an entirely separate republic. Autonomous and independent, like a maharaja’s dominion. It has its own sort of self-rule. The head of this autonomy is the Lageralteste, the camp senior, chosen from the prisoners. It’s quite an honor! He’s the prisoner’s representative in the camp government. Someone needs a kick in the ass – he does the kicking. Someone needs to be hung, he does the hanging – and grabs the prisoner’s bacon for himself. Lehman – he’s not a bad sort of person. He just yells too much. He got ruined by armed robberies. I’ve always said, and I still think so, it’s a lot more dignified to pick pockets than to take a gun and bust down doors. But Stasiak – pure trash. In the residential barracks, I slice bread, he deals out the slices. Every day he steals three loaves. He steals a pot of jam, a stick of margarine. A real bastard. But he’ll do fine. If he stays lucky and no one butchers him, he’ll work his way up to executioner! Mark my words...”

Bloy blanched. "Shit, the Political Division is coming," he whispered. "I'm strictly forbidden to talk to you..."

"The Political Division?!?"

Such a portentous term! We craned our necks like geese and froze. What's going to happen to us now?..

The Political Division came over with four typewriters carried by four prisoners, followed by two uniformed S.S. men.

"*Na, bracia litwini,*" that is, "greetings, brother Lithuanians, how's it going?" One of the Poles with a typewriter gave us a friendly smile. "We've been waiting for you..."

It's crazy! They too have been waiting! When are they going to start entertaining us?

How proud they are, how powerful! They're carrying typewriters! Perhaps they're even going to be our interrogators and judges?

They call us one by one. We have to stand up straight, stretch out tall. Hands resting on the hips so that each man resembles a samovar. We have to answer quickly and so loudly that even a deaf man could hear. Everyone's first name, last name. Little family items. An address, which will be useful to give notice when you expire in camp...

"Why were you arrested?"

"We don't know," everyone answers, as if prearranged. That's how they record it on our papers: reason for arrest unknown. So what!

They give each of us a number. "This," they say, "is now your pass; don't lose it. You can lose your head, but not the number: it's more important..." The numbers are distributed: twenty-one thousand three hundred and still a few tens. On the numbered slips of paper is written: *Schutzhaft-Politisch*.

"Are you imprisoning us for long?"

“*Da konca wojny*,” that is, “till the end of the war – *Schutzhaft-Politisch* – red triangle.”

“And what is this: *Schutzhaft-Politisch*?”

“That’s a political custody arrest. You’re in the camp for your own protection. You are the kind of felons that the irate public might rip to pieces for your actions. The government, concerned with your welfare, sat you down in a camp – to protect you from the public’s fury...”

“But maybe to protect the public from us? So we couldn’t transgress any more against the government?”

“No, no. For those things we have another paragraph. *Verbeugungshaft* – a preventative arrest, so you don’t get into even more trouble. These prisoners wear the green triangle. They’re criminals. We’re protecting the public from them. But the political ones – we’re protecting from the public...”

“How thoughtful!”

“And what do you think? In the Third Reich there has to be order... *Marsz do lazni*,” that is, “march to the bathhouse.”

Thus ended our interview with the Political Division.

Well, it seems we’ll get along with the Political Division: at least they don’t fight...

VII

THE POLITICAL DIVISION

The camp's Political Division failed to live up to its illustrious name. And in fact they did have fights too, but more for the fun of it, for physical exercise rather than for political reasons. Actually, the so-called Political Division was an entirely useless and meaningless institution, irrelevant to both life in camp and the fate of the prisoners.

Officially, the chief of the Political Division was a Gestapo representative. During 1943–1944 the Division was directed by **Malstaedt**, a German S.S. Lieutenant from Gdansk. The devil only knows how and why this guy landed in the Gestapo; he probably sneaked in to escape combat duty.

Malstaedt was short in stature. Forty years old. Brown hair. Not Prussian looking. Always polite. Always the gentleman with his clean leather gloves. A close shave, daily. Shoes, spit-shined.

He was the recipient of the list sent from outside Gestapo agencies naming the arriving prisoners. After signing this list, he passed it along to other camp agencies. For prosecution of prisoners, special prosecutors from Gdansk would arrive; broad shouldered, muscular, solid boxer-types. Malstaedt's division had only to locate those to be prosecuted, and even this he couldn't always accomplish. A few inconsequential individuals were occasionally handed over to him for questioning. Then it seemed that the prisoners interrogated him, rather than the other way around. He stuttered and coughed and he never knew what else he was supposed to ask.

He sat in the large red-brick building which accommodated the entire camp headquarters. Sometimes screams and vile curses emanated from the red building, reaching the camp's yard on the other side of the fence. The prisoners smiled then. The prisoners knew: that was Malstaedt quarrelling with the camp chief. The subject of their feuds? Who the hell knew? After these contretemps, Malstaedt always swiftly removed himself to the forest to clear his head. These were the only occasions when he displayed initiative and alacrity; at other times, it wasn't evident.

The summer of 1944 marked the demotion of poor little Malstaedt. They rode him out of camp. He was now obliged to guide prisoners from Gdansk to Stutthof, a very lowly job.

In Malstaedt's place was assigned Gestapo Lieutenant **Truhn**, a shriveled guy of medium height; but he too had nothing to do. He rarely showed himself in camp and was just as unpopular as his predecessor.

The S.S. considered the camp its personal property and would get furious when outsiders intruded into their affairs. The Gestapo, actually a separate organization, counted among these outside intruders. The camp's S.S. chewed them out incessantly,

in an attempt to erode or uproot them from camp. This is why the Political Division was, not officially but in reality, led by S.S. Master Sergeant **Lüdtke**, the little son of a business man from Gdansk. Lüdtke was spindly and wrinkled, with a head resembling a garter snake's. His hat always slouched down over his eyes. Not once in two years did he ever smile. He never had much work, even if he was a sadist.

Lüdtke was under the impression that everyone sent to the camp by the Gestapo was either a criminal or the most ardent German enemy.

"He who blocks the road for Germans has to be destroyed," Lüdtke liked to advertise to the prisoners. And naturally, he would have destroyed them instantly if only he had this power. Lacking it, he struck back in other ways.

Usually, when a party of newcomers arrived in camp, Lüdtke would mount a gymnastic exhibition. His favorite number was – 'leap like a frog'. You squat, stretch your hands out forward, and "Leap!" across the entire camp yard!

"Leap, leap, leap!" The newcomers hopped as if for their lives, like frogs fleeing flaming bogs.

In this event, whoever failed to perform with the zeal appropriate to wartime, or worse, surrendered to the lure of sabotage, Lüdtke would immediately reprimand with a whip especially designed for this purpose, or a piece of board, or a chunk of brick. Sometimes a newcomer was straightened out by the impact of a cleated boot.

Another popular gymnastic number was 'the foot race'.

The newcomers had to run according to Lüdtke's commands. Run and do tricks. Run and lay down, run and lay down. This event was often held in spring and fall after a heavy rain, when puddles and mud stagnated in the camp yard. And there was

trouble in store for the newcomers who felt sorry for their clothes! The point of the competition was not to see who would run farthest, but who would tire soonest. And those who tired quickly turned out to be lazy, disobedient, willing dupes of sabotage, without proper respect for the government's authority...

No! Even if you happened to be tired for some reason, it was highly recommended not to show it during those gymnastic exercises.

Lüdtke, such an impressive figure, occasionally put in an appearance at the newcomers' registration desk. But even here he didn't have much to do. For one newcomer, a slap on the ear; for another, a fist in the chin; for a third, a shoe in the stomach; for a fourth, a stick... and that's all. It's hard to think of something new. The possibilities are not limitless. Always the same tricks. It's boring, in fact.

Lüdtke's most solemn duty was to announce who was to be shot and who was to be hung. Day or evening or whenever Lüdtke would show up in camp, it always felt like a breeze blew in from the North Pole. The devil only knew whose name would be announced when. At any given moment you might hear your own. Sometimes one or another name sufficed, sometimes he rattled off a few score. No. No one looked forward to Lüdtke's visit.

But in this case Lüdtke's merits shouldn't be exaggerated: he wasn't the one who chose the names of those to be shot or hung. This camp was responsible solely for imprisonment, torture and punishment. The Gestapo agency which forwarded the prisoner decided his ultimate fate. And this same Gestapo agency – and this agency alone – could free a prisoner from camp. The Political Division was simply an intermediary, a hangman's assistant. Even the reports addressed to the higher Berlin government about prisoners' demeanor were composed not by the Political Division,

but by the camp's chief, a chronic, bitter antagonist of that division. The Political Division merely collected the prisoner roll sheets and documents and filed them – and even this they barely managed to handle. It was the most disorderly division in camp.

In the fall of 1944, a Pole ran away from camp – one of the Warsaw insurgents¹. It had to be noted in the books that he had made his getaway. The Political Division began to search for his documents – but lo and behold, there are no documents! They searched one day, they searched two... The evening of the third day they found them wedged somewhere near the furnace. And in those Gestapo documents it was written: 'This prisoner must be hung without delay!'

Now, how is he to be hung when he's fled the devil knows where!

So the verdict remained unfulfilled. The man who was to be hung not only wasn't hung, he wasn't even caught!

There was one type of prisoner who was released from camp: the one sent to camp merely for discipline or reform. The job of the Political Division was to give an appropriate sermonette to those being released and to hand out their documents. All of the prisoners to be released had to sign a paper with these points:

1. All of the belongings taken from the prisoner have been restored.

2. The prisoner suffered neither from disease nor mutilation while in the camp.

3. The prisoner promises not to say one word about what he saw, heard or endured in the camp.

4. If, in freedom, the prisoner hears of someone working or talking against National Socialism he promises to immediately inform the police.

5. This document is signed of a free will. No form of coercion was used.

What is true is true: no one put pressure on anyone to sign such a document. If you want to – then sign; if you don't want to – don't sign. Those who signed were released from camp; those who didn't sign remained in camp to meditate until they did decide to sign. But a second opportunity to sign was rare. The detained meditator meditated so hard, that he and his meditations went up in smoke, through the crematorium chimney.

The Political Division also had a prisoners' file, which was officially managed by tiny S.S. Tech Sergeant **König**. In private life König had been an innkeeper, a whiner and a musician – at least he blew a horn. He lived in fear that somehow the army would draft him and send him to the front, which was why he always tried so hard to impress the higher authorities. But he was also afraid of offending the prisoners: his motto seemed to be, you never know how things will turn out in the end. How the little man struggled! Of course he couldn't help the prisoners, but he never did anything particularly bad to them either. When Lüdtkke was within hearing distance, König yelled at the prisoners, he bubbled over, his spit flew all over the place. When Lüdtkke ambled away, König stood around talking to the prisoners like with old friends, offering them cigarettes. All the prisoners knew König yelled to keep up appearances. He had a good name among the prisoners. In two years, not once did he even shove a prisoner, and that made him a significant exception.

The Political Division boasted a photography subdivision as well, under the rule of a tech sergeant. Happily this loudmouth peon rarely interfered with camp business. Once in a while he would approach the newcomers' registration desk, vociferating, fustigating, slugging one or another of these guys – but that was

it. He did it not because he had bad intentions, but because he was a Prussian-German and simply didn't know what else to do. All his anxieties were focused on servicing the war widows and grass widows in the neighboring village of Stutthof – he couldn't be bothered with photographic details...

The work of the Political Division stumbled ahead somehow: the more workers there were, the greater the degree of disorganization. At last in January of 1945, before evacuating the camp, the bureaucrats ceremoniously burned all the division's documents in the yard, thus finishing off the infamous Division.

VIII

POLITICAL DIVISION EMPLOYEES

All of the camp's working prisoners were divided into labor detachments. Every labor detachment was assigned an S.S. man, a Kommandoführer – detachment leader – responsible for the detachment's order and output. But the actual work was supervised by one of the prisoners, specifically appointed for this job by the camp government. This type of prisoner, the labor leader, was officially called by an Italian word: capo, meaning head; the Germans, having borrowed the organizational methods for concentration camps from the Duce, had even retained some Italian terminology.

But we used to give 'capo' a Lithuanian interpretation, and in this we weren't alone. Many were convinced that the word capo was derived from the Lithuanian word *kapoti* [to chop]; as we saw it, the highest assignment of the capo was to "chop up"

the prisoners. Other believed that the term was a cognate of the Lithuanian *kapas* [grave]... Judging from the capo's actions, both etymologies were equally appropriate. The capo's assistant was officially called Hilfscapo, whom we naturally named: *puskapis* [half a capo or half a grave].

During 1943–1944 the capo of the Political Division's labor detachment was prisoner **Schreider**. He was still a young man, between twenty-five and twenty-seven; tall, slender, with black curly hair. The women used to say – very handsome. They not only said it, they positively swooned in his direction. Schreider was the son of a high ranking German bureaucrat, an engineer. At the beginning of the war he'd been a sailor in the Navy, but slid from sailor to concentration camp prisoner on account, I believe, of kleptomaniacal tendencies. In camp, he did wear the insignia of a political prisoner, a red triangle – but then, all the other sailors who had ended up in camp for burglary walked around with red triangels, too. Unrepentant, Schreider even attempted to use his innate gifts in camp. Having just arrived, he received recognition of his talents: a signboard strung over his chest and back. On the board was inscribed: "Look, this bum robbed his prisoner friends!"

He banged around with these boards for a few weeks. Having rid himself of them in one way or another, he landed a job in the Political Division. Well, what of it? He was literate, and even German! Which was why he became a detachment capo. Here he was in his element – he'd found his calling, his true vocation. He was one of the most conscientious of the camp's swindlers; and he did the work of a murderer with the breath of inspiration.

Schrieder was the one who measured the height of a new prisoner and fingerprinted him. On his desk there lay a whip woven of wires, or a club.

The newcomer arrives, scared, shrunken, shriveled, having already been beaten senseless more than once, not understanding one word of German. Schreider eyes him once – he already knows how to deal with him.

Schreider calls the arriving prisoners one by one. The prisoner being called sometimes doesn't hear, sometimes doesn't understand that he is being called, especially when the prisoner is not a German, with Schreider torturously mispronouncing his name. The newcomer frequently doesn't know where to go or how to stand – and how could he know that when a prisoner's name is called he's not allowed to step forward – he's to trot forward? He doesn't know a lot of other important things. But Schreider always instructs this kind of ignorant newcomer – with a board across the ear, with a boot in the stomach, with a fist, with a whip, with a stick...

The newcomer who is called comes forward, walking like a normal person. Schreider meets the newcomer in the doorway and slams a boot into his stomach. The newcomer flips head over heels into the yard. Schreider calls him again; again he walks and again he falls... This goes on until the newcomer understands that when he is called he is supposed to run. The newcomers standing further back, having watched these antics, already get it – they run forward without even being told! But Schreider finds some new obstacles for them. The iron rule is that no one ever tells anyone how to do anything in camp – you have to figure it out by yourself. And the stick helps you figure it out right fast.

So it is with Schreider: he teaches a prisoner until he begins to understand German and stands in the place and in the manner Schreider wants him to. Schreider then ushers this enlightened newcomer out of the registration room with a boot on the butt or a stick on the back.

Of course, Schreider didn't always act like this. Sometimes he behaved like a well-mannered gentleman, a wonderfully considerate cavalier. These attacks of politeness came over him when a newcomer happened to be well-dressed, wore a watch, or a ring, carried tobacco or other valuables. Schreider lovingly addressed this type of newcomer. If the prisoner was a woman, he coyly smiled at her, comforted her, hugged her... Usually at this time some little treasures would begin to find their way into Schreider's pocket. But a newcomer who had nothing – what could he be worth?

Did someone force Schreider to torture people like this?

No, nobody forced him! He did this all on his own initiative. It was great fun for him – fun and worth his while. His craving for glory was gratified. After all he was the chief, he threw the punches!

Well, to forbid him, of course, no one did that. It's not the S.S. doing the beating; prisoner is beating prisoner! Blood is dripping from a head? Who cares! That's the purpose of a concentration camp, so blood should drip from a head. It's dripping – and that's all. Is that a big deal?

Any way you look at it, there was an incentive for the thugs. Besides Tech Sergeant König, there were other S.S. men who never harmed the prisoners, who even tried to maintain friendly relationships with them. When a higher official happens to wander by, this softhearted type squabbles with the prisoners, waves his fist, swears heartily. But the official has barely turned aside when the softy thumbs his nose after him, and again socializes pleasantly with prisoners.

Prisoners fighting and beating other prisoners was considered a good sign by the authorities. If an old-timer beats a newcomer, the old-timer must have already 'reformed', 'repented' of

his crime, 'caught on to the game'. If you wanted to gain trust in the eyes of the authorities, if you aspired to make a career in the camp republic, or even if you simply wished to rise in esteem among your fellow prisoners, your easiest recourse was to beat up the others, especially the newcomers. This was a general rule.

Schreider was one of these career-oriented thugs. He even managed to turn his gift for beating into a nice little business – for according to the camp's laws and ethics, assault and battery was no crime. Young Schreider became quite a well-to-do fellow. He pattered through camp in patent leather slippers and little leather gloves – the last word in wartime elegance! His foppery especially grated, given the indescribable poverty that reigned among the other prisoners.

So formidable became this Schreider that he began to ignore the most basic tenet of camp life: "If you want to live – don't forget the authorities!"

Schreider didn't like to share his treasures with anyone. To him the authorities seemed a noisome distraction from the good things in life. Schreider forgot that the authorities are always more jealous than the most hotheaded lover. So they watched him and gnashed their teeth, then suddenly struck. They accused him of illegally mailing prisoners' letters from camp for money. He was ditched from the Political Division and landed in the forest detachment – back to uprooting stumps and carrying logs. But even in the woods Schreider managed to stroll in his patent leather slippers and his little leather gloves. He never picked up a shovel. In the sun he warmed his belly and sucked his cigarettes. He strayed and sauntered around for a bit and made himself at home.

Towards the summer of 1944, orders arrived to send 3,000 prison workers from Stutthof to Police. Police, near Szczecin,

was a synthetic fuel factory. A persistent rivalry between the Germans and the English focused on this factory. The English bombed the factory – the Germans built new walls from the rubble. The English bombed – the Germans built, going at it like two goats on a bridge. So, 3,000 Stutthof prisoners were sent to help reconstruct the oft-bombed factory. At the head of this labor detachment, taking his place beside so many professional and amateur thugs and murderers, was Schreider. He didn't do badly here, either.

Of all the Stutthof prisoner labor detachments, the Police detachment was the richest in corpses. Within three months, 1,000 from this detachment had made the acquaintance of St. Peter, and another 1,000 lay immobile in the hospital. A large portion of the latter complained of broken bones, and no wonder: the Police prisoners' bones snapped like dried spruce branches. Notorious, infamous, talented bandits were in charge of this labor detachment. Among this noble company, Schreider gained special distinction in performing this bone shattering work. After breaking a few heads, these murderers lapped moonshine. Indeed, one time they lapped so much that five of them fell dead on the spot: **Hölzl, Karl Friedrich, Legge**, and two more.

But Schreider didn't perish in this operation either. He was a golden boy. He was lucky.

Once Schreider was shuffled out of the Political Division, his position as capo was taken over by an old convict who had worked in this division earlier, **Franciszek Dziegarczyk**. He was a Pole born in Westfalen, a four-year veteran of the camp; a political prisoner – intelligent, quick-witted – he had endured the most hellish conditions imaginable. And what a schemer, what a finisher, what a con man he was! Though he often cursed the fact

that he had to work for such an establishment as the Political Division, he made no efforts to remove himself. His position wasn't bad, in fact. The workload was meager, and he got extra food from the S.S. kitchen – an indescribably important factor in camp. It's true that the Political Division had less than a glowing reputation with the prisoners, but in daily camp life this division was less significant than the little workshop of potato peelers.

Franciszek Dziegarczyk, usually referred to by the German name of Franz, didn't beat the prisoners and didn't rob them blind like Schreider; he took no interest in them at all.

A party of newcomers is herded in. They have to be registered, but Franz is gone. Vanished like a worm in a well.

"Where's Franz? Where's that damned devil? Where's that mad dog?" yells his chief, S.S. Tech Sergeant König, swearing and running in circles through the camp.

Where can you find Franz, that damned fool? In which hole and with whom is he guzzling moonshine? Who knows!

Instead of Franz laboring at the typewriter, it's König himself, angry as a wolf that's lost his tail in a thresher, swearing the foulest oaths he can remember.

He'll kill Franz, that fool, he'll slaughter him like a pig. Hell feed the madman's guts to the dogs.

König is cursing with all his might as he clatters away on the typewriter.

When König has almost finished the job, Franz hobbles over drunk as a skunk, barely able to stand.

"You scumbag whoreson of all devils put together," Tech Sergeant König yells, clenching his fists. "Where did you get smashed, you pig? Huh? Sit down and write, you shit-faced asshole!"

Franz is obviously in no shape to write. Franz slogs around the furnace. Franz lights his pipe with a firebrand and appears to commune with the ghosts of the furnace. Franz is no longer in tune with life on this earth.

König continues to type. König swears. König himself will hang the degenerate.

With the work completed, Franz goes off to tend to his hang-over; along with him goes König – to get drunk.

Sometimes in the evenings, Franz and König would swagger arm in arm along the camp's fences, bellowing drinking songs in full voice. Sometimes they were found collapsed in the camp hospital, sometimes in the prisoners' barracks, sometimes, strange to say, even along the women's barracks...

This Franz was a wonderful Political Division capo – it was possible to live with him.

Oh, if only all capos could have been like that!

The third important employee of the Political Division was **Speider**, a German from Lodz, an accountant by vocation. He was in camp for heavenly reasons. He was a Bibelforscher – a Bible student, a Jehovah's Witness. Hitler shoved these guys into camps without blinking.

Speider was a little man with a very sensitive heart. During the newcomers' registration when Schreider was beating and banging, Speider would have a tear rolling down his cheek. With trembling hands, Speider clattered at the typewriter, but he couldn't help the one being beaten. Even at the beginning of 1943, he lamented the shame of bearing a German name.

Once in a while the camp chief would invite Speider to philosophize and attempt to persuade him to renounce the Jehovah's Witnesses. Speider only had to sign a repudiation of his particular interpretation of the Bible and immediately he would have

been released from camp. But Speider, like all the other professors of this religion, was a stubborn defender of his faith. During his discussions with Speider, the camp chief would soon lose his patience. All over the camp we could hear these two feuding on the second floor of the brick house.

Speider yells as loudly as he can:

“Jehovah! Jehovah!”

The camp chief yells back:

“*Saubund! Scheisse!*”

This uncomplicated dialogue goes on like this for a while:

“Jehovah!” “*Scheisse!*”

“*Scheisse!*” “Jehovah!”

Finally Speider, with his face bright red, runs headlong down the stairs from the second floor and turning around still repeats: “Jehovah! Jehovah!”

Speider, a German and part of the Political Division, no less, could easily have done this or that good deed for the prisoners, but he lacked the inventiveness and energy for this. He was concerned only with other Jehovah’s Witnesses. When a new Bible student arrived in camp, Speider immediately revived, stretched, his nose even began to shine. Each new Jehovah’s Witness he would comfort and coach and console, and provide a passable place for him. He didn’t care about people of other faiths, unless he saw potential for converting them into Jehovah’s Witnesses.

No, not all were equal brothers in Jehovah!

The fourth typewriter was manned by **Joseph Rentsch**, who was not a Political Division employee, but the representative of the labor bureau – *Arbeitseinsatz*. Rentsch had a very kind heart and possessed various talents, and it was because of these talents that he landed in camp. He was an unsurpassed master at forging signatures. He forged like an artist, and very quickly. He’d

squint his left eye, stick the tip of his tongue through his teeth – and there’s the signature, even if he’s seeing it for the first time. This rare talent stood him in good stead. If some matter came up, he’d sign for any of the camp’s little chiefs, and none of them dared argue that it wasn’t really his signature.

“Maybe I was drunk when I signed such crap. I don’t remember.” The little chief would scratch his head, finding his signature out of place, but he would never argue its authenticity.

Such was the kind of inborn talent, indeed genius, Rentsch possessed. If Rentsch found himself at first unable to forge a strange signature, he couldn’t sit still. Sometimes he even confused himself. He wasn’t able to distinguish the authentic signature from his forgery. Indeed, he’d once got disoriented with some promissory notes. He gave the bank a signature of his own name, but written in someone else’s handwriting. He just couldn’t tell them apart anymore. For this unfortunate error he ended in camp, where even after many years he still had to deal with the Budapest banks’ litigations over the mysterious origins of the signatures on the promissory notes. His nationality was mysterious for other reasons. No one in camp, perhaps including himself, knew what he was: a German? a Jew? a Czech? a Hungarian? He spoke all these peoples’ languages fluently; by his appearance he fit everywhere, and he was always very useful. Judging from his character’s peculiarities, he was most likely a gypsy’s child.

Besides all this, he was also a great actor.

You’d happen to meet him somewhere and right away he would sympathetically ask:

“Have you had dinner? Are you hungry?”

Who doesn’t want food in camp! What kind of question is this!

“I have beefsteaks. Wonderful! Prima! Extra! Let’s go. I’ll feed you.”

So we go to the place where he lives or works.

“Here. Wait by the door. I’ll bring them right away.”

After kindhearted Joseph’s consolations, you stand by the door. The beefsteak smells so good from far away: with onions, broiled brown, swimming in juices... Gulp... you can barely keep from drooling!

You swallow your spit for half an hour, you swallow for an hour... The invisible beefsteak begins to stink, but Joseph – he’s vanished. After another hour creeps by, this Joseph crawls out of somewhere: “Well, did you get the beefsteak? Did you eat? Was it good?” Joseph rubs his hands together in joy, having managed to treat his friend so well.

“No, dammit! I didn’t see any beefsteak! Look, you told me to wait by the door and you haven’t shown up till now!” you snap, irate, but still dreaming about the mythical beefsteak.

“What do you mean?” Joseph asks, amazed. “Didn’t they bring you the beefsteak?”

“No, no one brought it. Who’d bring it to me? Only the block chief chewed me out for standing around all this time and not working!”

“Oh, the devils! How could they! I ordered them to... Probably they swallowed it themselves...?” Joseph waves his hands in surprise. “Wait here a moment... I’ll be back right away...”

And again he disappears, leaving you waiting by the door.

You can wait here until you and the whole damn cow rot!

The beefsteak, naturally, doesn’t exist. The beefsteak, naturally, never existed. But the intentions were good, his and mine. In the end, what is he guilty of? Promising a beefsteak he himself hasn’t seen for eight years? He went from prison to a camp – and

he'd been in more than one concentration camp. It's not without reason people say: "With promises – come comforts..." Joseph comforted people. He comforted them very often. He was a little man with a very big heart. He was a highly accomplished liar.

Joseph, like a prison trustee, was always assigned responsible tasks, and he was an influential person – lying everywhere superbly. Even in camp, when he happened to fall head over heels in love with this shriveled, hunched lady with large glasses, he lied to her in his exemplary way. He narrated countless stories to her about his riches, about his brick houses in Prague, about his estates in the Hungarian steppes... Meanwhile, the only wealth he had was the forged promissory notes in the Budapest banks.

IX

NEWCOMERS' INITIATION

A Newcomer, docketed by employees of the Political Division and labelled with a standard prison number, ended up in the camp bathhouse where he was cleansed in sundry ways.

Arriving at the deteriorated barrack called the bathhouse, the newcomer discovered S.S. Staff Sergeant **Ziehm** already seated behind a desk, and sometimes even **Hapke** himself, also an S.S. staff sergeant, but much more clever than Ziehm, holding a higher work post.

Hapke was in charge of prisoners' personal belongings and all office supplies. Ziehm, his assistant, was responsible for the clothes, shoes and suitcases of all prisoners.

Hapke, son of a Gdansk city merchant and an accountant by profession, had loitered in the camp's offices since the start of the Polish-German War; in the fall of 1944 he bragged that

he'd already spent five years in the war, though of course he'd never fired a shot. He spent all his time warring with weaponless prisoners – slugging, strangling, stealing.

Hapke was the haughtiest S.S. in the entire camp, nicknamed by the prisoners: Count von Stutthof. He was extremely proud of his race, his status, his S.S. uniform, his leather gloves – stolen from the prisoners, of course. His posture was perpetually stiff and erect. Hungover as he so often was, he had to deliberately concentrate on maintaining his poise. His hat was always pretentiously sloped over his eyes. Sharp-tongued Poles liked to say:

“He walks proud as a pregnant whore.”

German prisoners would add:

“*O, er macht sich wichtig.* He thinks he's something else.”

To uphold his grandeur, Hapke remained continually vigilant lest some prisoner forget to bestow appropriate honors to him. Hardships awaited any prisoner who forgot to remove his cap in front of Hapke, or neglected to stretch upwards at attention like a dog being hung! Hapke had an exemplary fist, and the prisoners' teeth were never noted for their strength... He was one of the most despised S.S. in the entire camp, getting under everybody's skin with his insolent badgering. He poisoned the fate of many a prisoner.

Sometimes Hapke knew how to act the gentleman. He had his own labor detachment of prisoners, which worked under a roof in a clean office; the job was easy. For this work, he chose the most intelligent prisoners and he was quite decent with his detachment's members. He even supplied them amply with food, as well as with other goods of the camp.

In the bathhouse detachment, among others, worked a political prisoner named Julius, an ex-major of the Lithuanian Army. A tall, well-built man with a very kind heart, he socialized

comfortably with all prisoners and was very well received by all. One day among the newcomers he spotted a traitor, a Gestapo agent from Lithuania – the same one in fact whose expose had put Julius in the concentration camp. The agent himself ended up in camp because of little murderous jobs he undertook on the side. Julius, spotting his Judas, informed his Polish detachment buddy about the type of bird this newcomer was. The Pole hustled over to Hapke and announced to him the rarity of this newly arrived guest. Hapke thundered, cursed, foamed. With heavy tread he approached the traitor; with both hands he grabbed his throat and started to strangle him:

“You, Judas, you stuck my Julius in the concentration camp! I’ll show you, you sonofabitch!”

And Hapke choked that little Judas, and boxed his ears and slammed his head against the barrack walls. The Poles, seeing what Hapke was up to, took on the traitor as their own responsibility, knocking him and punching him, wherever they could lay hands on him. He couldn’t show his face anywhere in camp without the Poles and Germans pounding him.

Yes, customs of camp were rather weird. The moment a spy, a traitor, a Gestapo agent landed in camp – he was a goner. Usually, it took three days at the most before his life came to an end. About killing a traitor, the authorities said nothing. The Lithuanian camp colony, in the case of traitors, restrained itself and didn’t destroy them. But as soon as Poles or Germans discovered a traitor, they got even with him on their own initiative and with great relish. What a doddering idiot that Hapke was! He was the first to grab the traitor by the throat, showing the others how to act with a Judas! And this was an S.S. man, a staff sergeant, a servant of the Gestapo.

Ziehm, who also had his own labor detachment, had a much gentler nature than Hapke – he looted but wasn't jealous of others. A job in his detachment was considered one of the best and most lucrative in camp.

Ziehm, who was a tall, good-looking guy, liked to lecture the prisoners that the S.S. was comprised of the most honorable men in all Germany, that the Fuhrer had selected the best of the best and made them into his corps d'elite. And he, Ziehm, was among these corps d'elite. Ziehm was relatively harmless but he was a pig.

For several years, a young Russia worked for Ziehm. They had an understanding, they got along. Then one day the Russki went a little crazy; he pounded Ziehm on the head with a hammer. Ziehm bleated like a slaughtered ram, dripped a bit of blood – in two weeks he was well. The Russki was very solemnly hung for this. A short while before the hanging, three of the Russki's neighbors were bumped off, though they'd had nothing to do with the hammer. Ziehm didn't raise a finger. His conscience didn't bother him...

A newcomer finding himself in the bathhouse, first of all had to hand over all his money, gold, rings, watch, his fountain pen, as well as other valuables, to Hapke or Ziehm. All these things were entered in the books, packaged separately, and a prisoner signed a list of what he surrendered. But what was entered in the books was far from accurate. The frightened prisoner didn't even notice what was missing in the books. For those working in the bathhouse, here was the first source of profits. The valuables and money taken from all the Jews, frequently from the Russians, occasionally from the Poles, weren't entered in any books. This loot was dumped into a basket; later, back in the office, the contents were counted and given over to the treasury. But of course

not everything in the basket ended up in the treasury – it disappeared en route.

The food and smokes brought by newcomer prisoners went for the bathhouse detachment's exclusive benefit. Sometimes the S.S. also grabbed its share here but the labor detachment knew how to screw them, too. The newcomers arrived by the hundreds and thousands – the labor detachments of the bathhouse were rich!

The small items of the newcomers – wallets, pipes, cigarette cases, shaving mugs with soap, lighters, toothbrushes, a large portion of underwear, knives, razors and so on – were thrown into a general basket destined for the S.S. warehouses. But a sizeable portion of this fortune fell into various pockets along the way.

The prisoners' outerwear, shoes, at least one change of underwear, were tied in separate bundles and later guarded in Ziehm's establishment. But even here life didn't flow according to the books. First of all, clothes of Jews and Russians were thrown into one pile. From fall of 1944, Polish clothing also went into this pile. All this was appointed for use by the S.S. Organization and the camp. Mere chaos controlled these bundles of clothes. This was another source of profit for the labor detachments – it required only a certain deftness of the hands.

Of course the wrapping of the clothes into separate bundles provided no assurance that the bundles would remain intact. My new suit of English cloth, new shoes, Alpine pullover, leather gloves, silk shirt and socks were gone from the bundle within a week, without a trace. The same happened to many of my friends. The culprit who snatched our things, naturally, could not be found; no one even looked for him. There was no sense in looking.

In January of 1945, when the Stutthof Camp was being evacuated, a few hundred thousand coats, suits, pairs of underwear, pullovers, pairs of shoes, caps, hats, were dumped into one pile, transported to the city of Łęborg, and heaped like slop into warehouses – storage bins. A part of this booty was stolen on the way. As for the rest – who knows who finally got it? The prisoners who had managed to survive never got their things back, of course. All money, all jewelry entered into the books – vanished.

Right before evacuation of the camp, I dropped in on Ziehm.

He's flushed, he's moving boxes, packing with trembling hands.

"Sergeant," I say to him bowing low, "maybe you'd let me get my passport from my coat pocket?"

"What? A passport? Why do you need it?"

"Just to have it... As a souvenir... It got left in my coat pocket..."

"Getting ready to run, snake?! Impossible! Get out!"

"But Sergeant, you never know... Of course the Third Reich is mighty... it will conquer... but a passport stays a passport. After all, Sergeant, you're obviously getting ready to run..."

"Get out, animal!" The way he jumps on me! "I'll kill you, you worm! Out, out, you beast!"

From a sod like Ziehm, I didn't expect such energy. Like a sheaf of straw, I tumbled backwards through the door.

So my passport remained orphaned, tossed in some unknown gutter...

X

SHOWER FOR BODY AND SOUL

We, the newcomers, representatives of Lithuania's intelligentsia, were herded into the bathhouse and robbed according to traditionally established order. Of all my treasures, only eyeglasses remained. Some even had their glasses snatched – grope without glasses the best you can. Then they cut, clipped, cropped wherever they found a hair, until we were more naked than Adam while he still lived in paradise. They sprayed us with some stench, a so-called disinfectant. They measured heights and weights and wrote it all down in books. They raced us through a cold shower; not everyone managed to get wet. Officially, though, we were washed.

Chased next into a cold dressing room, we were issued dismal rags of indefinite color, officially called underwear, and clogs. The men of medium height fared pretty badly, but for the more

husky or gangly, it was worse: neither did the clogs fit on the feet, nor did the shapeless thing called a shirt fit on the back.

“For heaven’s sake,” I begged the bathhouse worker, “don’t you have something I can wear? You can see yourself it doesn’t fit. Be good, take a look. Can you find something decent?”

The bathhouse worker, a prisoner like me, but unlike me a seasoned, well-placed and relatively rich one, bellowed in a bestial voice:

“What? This is no store! This is a concentration camp! Get out, you bloody nag! Out!”

Some obscure but unquestionably hard object shoved against my back, something thundered in my ears... Later, I couldn’t remember how I made it to the yard with the clogs in hand, where my other colleagues already stood in formation.

Ruined clogs on bare feet. Spotted rags instead of underwear. Nothing more. Everyone’s standing in lines between the barracks, in the draft. Everyone’s standing and chattering their teeth.

We’re almost naked – wet from the shower – in the cold wind – in the month of March!

After a sad eyed survey of my clogs, I too snuggle up in a line. I snuggle up and chatter my teeth. What else is there to do except chatter? While my teeth chatter, an hour slinks by, two hours...

“Tfu, the devil!” A man doesn’t even know what curse would work to lift the weight off his heart. We’re all going to croak from pneumonia!

After three hours of this nonsense, snorting around in the draft, they finally begin to steer a few of us at a time into a shack, a sort of barrack, called *Bekleidungskammer* – a dressing stall. In this hole, we at last get some clogs that fit, and outerwear – a

skimpy cotton pullover full of holes, a blue striped convict's jacket with matching cotton pants, spotted with mold, dingy and dirty. They gave us a muddy, striped pancake of the same material, similar to a beret, that stuck only to the top of the head. This was the entire wardrobe for the month of March, when frosts at night were common. They also presented us with two little rectangular pieces of cloth imprinted with our rank and file numbers and a red triangle, and gave orders to sew them on; one on the left breast, the other on the right trouser leg.

Dressed in this fashion, we were ushered into the residential barrack, to the Two Block.

The chief of this block was a German prisoner, **Esser**, a thug in camp for various slayings. His aide was **Toni Fabro**, a wild Tyrolian who wore the badge of a political prisoner. He had been shuffling about in various camps for approximately eleven years, but no one knew why he'd been put in camp in the first place.

The residential barrack was composed of three sections: a day room, sleeping quarters, and a washroom.

In the residential barrack, our hairstyles were immediately improved: in the bathhouse they sheared our hair with a machine, but here a razor, similar to a knife for carving ducklings, was used to shave a stripe about three centimeters wide across the center of our heads. They didn't shave half as much as they scraped: the tops of our heads were bloody. With this, our convict uniform was complete; we were inspected by a plucked shinbone of a man, who crawled out of somewhere. He had already endured a whole year in camp; scraggy and scrawny, rasping and hacking, having gone through all kinds of hell, he was now some kind of assistant to the assistant of the block secretary, Toni Fabro.

“Well now, you slimeball Lithuanian intelligentsia,” Shinbone greeted us, “march outside!”

He says march – we march. We pushed our way out into the yard; the hell with him!

In the yard, he began teaching us the convicts’ dress parade. You have to walk in step and the clogs have to “Clump!” often: “Clump-clump-clump...” In two years I never learned this march properly. This science proved too complex for my poor head, though sharp cuffs on the ears often elaborated on the secrets of the march. Many of my friends were much more successful in this schooling.

The second exercise was to learn to stand at attention – to stand in the convicts’ dress parade stance. To stand and freeze, hands pressed against the thighs, elbows sticking out from the waist a bit, so that the entire figure resembled a two legged samovar.

There! In this position the convict is obliged to listen to S.S. orders and march in place when the authorities are looking. Dangling arms are strictly forbidden. For swinging arms during the march, there is the minimum guarantee of a sweet cuff on the ear, but more often you get a stick in the side or a brick in the back.

Finally, the third and last segment of our schooling was to learn the correct “*Mützen ab*” and “*Mützen auf*”.

After the “Attention” command, comes the command “*Mützen ab*”. At this time, everyone has to pull the pancake off his head in one blink, slam it into his thigh and immediately freeze. Here it was most important that everyone’s pancake slam into the thigh at the same time, that it be heard like an orchestra of only one short “Slap”, not “Slap-slap-slap...” This isn’t such an easy thing to do.

When the command "*Mützen auf*" is sounded, all the pancakes simultaneously, in one blink, have to turn up on the noggin. It doesn't matter how the pancake lays, as long as it's up there.

While studying this arcana, we heard revelations from Shinbone's lips for the first time about what transgressions the Lithuanian intelligentsia are notorious for. Foulmouthed cowhands, and only they, would have learned anything here.

Having completed this course of study, having sewn the numbers to our chests and thighs, having clothed ourselves in the striped rags and with bloody streaks on our heads, we were full-fledged initiates of the camp – convicts.

Nothing more was done with us till evening. Only the wild Tyrolian, Toni Fabro, advised us to examine our consciences, dump the past, indeed our intellectual essence, and prepare for the entirely new, unknown, unimaginable life of a bandit.

XI

STEPPING THROUGH THE SLEEPERS

In the evening, the prisoners returned from work. Our barrack was more than stuffed with people; we were like sardines packed upright in a tin. There's nowhere to turn, nowhere to stand. The combined clamor of the crowd spilled out into cursing; the cursing undulated in the crowd's clamor. It felt as if instead of the lamp, a huge expanding curse was hanging overhead, radiating in all directions.

Suddenly, from the corner by the stove, comes the gargling voice of a dragon. It's the wild Tyrolian, Toni Fabro, screaming:

"Raus! Raus! Raus! Everyone out of the barrack!"

At the other end of the hall a melodious bass, sounding like a rustic organ, starts to bay harmoniously, accompanying Fabro's hysterical obligatto:

"Get the hell out – scam!"

Enlivening this duet, an antiphony of sticks slaps in various sections of the barrack:

“Ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta,” they soundly slap.

Who’s hitting whom? Why? For what reason?

Thunder only knows in this jam! The only thing for certain is that the one doing the hitting is the one who has the stick. The one being hit is the one who happens to be standing closest to the one doing the hitting. Nothing else is clear.

The entire crowd swerves to the door. The door is small, narrow, suddenly stuffed. The thugs can’t reach the front rows but this doesn’t upset them. They pound away on the necks of those in the back.

Finally, all the prisoners are drummed outside. Right away begins the return trip. Some, urged on with sticks, are herded into the sleeping quarters; others are jammed into the day room. We are packed into the latter.

Entering the room, we can’t see a thing. It’s like the autumn fogs of London streets. Somewhere something is flickering – a little light of uncertain source. Someplace hoarse voices gargle, hack. Someone somewhere is thumping away like a thresher threshing oats.

Preparation for sleep: sacks filled with bits of wood shaving are spread on the floor; these sacks are officially referred to as pallets. While these sacks are being spread, dust rises and the entire room sinks into fog. Even the giant posters hanging on the walls, with their melancholy and martial slogan: “Lice – your deadly enemy!” can no longer be seen.

The convicts are put to bed. The convicts are laid on their sides. A convict lying on his back would take up too much space. The government creates order: it makes certain that each convict lies pressed to the next one. So that’s how everyone lies down;

that's how everyone lies all night. If one's side cramps and he wants to turn over, he first has to stand, then turn on his other side. But this method of relief isn't always recommended.

One bedraggled blanket, riddled as a sieve, is distributed to every four men. While standing up to turn on your other side, you drag the rag from your neighbors, wake them, and for your rudeness they call down upon your head devils of every description, punctuating this discourse forcefully with kicks. No – you're better off with side cramps forever rather than to attempt turning over.

Before bedding down, you must, naturally, remove your outer tatters; however, the underpants have to go, too. Because the undershirts are frayed and short, you feel as naked as a reject from Eden while reclining on these prickly shavings. Why the authorities insist on this is a mystery, but the bare-ass rule is strictly enforced.

At long last, the convicts are neatly tucked in, one snuggled to the next, squeezed like sugarplums in a tidy box. Now the night begins.

The convicts have barely closed their eyes when an inspection commences to see if some delinquent has slipped his underpants back on. Such an inspection can be accomplished only by examining the extremities. The convicts are lying stuck to one another; a foot can't even be planted between the rows; but the pants business simply must be checked.

And so these inspectors march through the sleepers with negligible concern as to where their feet land, what their sticks hit. Direct hit on a stomach – the stomach is okay; direct hit on a forehead – how is a forehead worse than a stomach?! The sleepers moan some, but don't dare to mess with the authorities. One

found with pants back on is flogged with sticks on the spot and thrown into the cold hallway for the whole night.

It's not much better when a convict decides to take a walk at night to relieve himself. He too has to climb on heads – there's no other way. A simple convict doesn't have a stick. He's equal to the others. Naturally he catches hell for attempting to walk on someone else's stomach! He gets kicked by so many feet that he actually flits and flies across the room. It's like the man said – this is a concentration camp, not a seaside promenade. You've got no business loitering at night!

At last the thugs discard their sticks and sizzle the last panful of pilfered bacon on the stove and chew the last of the purloined potatoes, frequently exhorting the hungry, sleepless crowd to shut the hell up.

The swearing dies down, at last no one is raising hell – but sleep doesn't come in this kind of squeeze and in this kind of cold. The windows are broken, we're lying shoved together half naked.

Look! Something's moving, squirming around your neck, pinching your side, climbing up your thighs. You grab at the area of this suspicious disturbance and in the palm of your hand a few beasties remain. They're muddy white, grayish and spotted.

'Where'd these little bastards come from? Look how many there are!' And what do you do with the captured ones? 'I'm not a dog, I can't chew the damn things!' You flip them over in your hand, flick them further into the dark, onto some invisible neighbor. You're certainly not going to stick them back under the blanket. But the neighbor doesn't remain long in your debt. He too lets fly with a fistful. We trade gifts, so to speak. This happens once, again, a third time... Eh! A futile job. These riches are limitlessly abundant; you can't snatch them all. You just grit

your teeth a little harder and try to ignore these annoying trivialities. Is there a choice? You try with all your might to fall asleep; there's no telling how much energy tomorrow will require.

Wake-up time is five o'clock in the morning. Your head feels like a split crock leaking curds. There's an urge to vomit. The bugs have been busy, you're covered with sores.

My dear friend Jonas, the Protestant from Biržai, scratching open his eyes and raising his head, whined:

"Mother of the garden beets! Where'd I stick my foot? I can't seem to pull my toe out..."

He did get his toe back, but he couldn't figure out if he was responsible for this transgression himself or if someone else might have been involved. During the night, good-hearted Jonas's big toe found its way into the mouth of the convict lying in the row by Jonas's feet; but this convict died during the night and it seems that before dying, he bit into the strange toe he found in his mouth.

"Don't tell me I choked him with my big toe?!" moaned Jonas.

He didn't moan for long. The order was: "Wash!"

The convicts crushed into the corridor, cursed and crumbled and collapsed on one another. The corridor was piled high with corpses.

Some guy disillusioned with life had died that night. You're not going to just lie there hugging a corpse! In this case, the neighbor of the corpse took charge and tried his best to drag the corpse into the corridor. Getting rid of the corpse gave more room for sleeping, at least for that night. Of course people sometimes made mistakes in the dark. Sometimes an unconscious guy, or one still breathing but obviously on his way out, was tossed into the corridor. These pseudo-corpses were usually finished off

in the corridor by the night's cold and the clogs rushing to wash in the morning. A corpse might revive in the corridor's cool air and attempt to crawl back inside to sleep. Still, genuine corpses did accumulate in the corridor during the night – five, ten, twelve of them...

Crashing your way to the washroom, you push against the crush and curse. Arriving, you find it was hardly worthwhile squashing yourself into the washroom!

The faucet feebly sputters in the sink, dribbling and dripping and then ceasing altogether. No, not quite enough for a few hundred people. To wash or not to wash, that is the question; but either way a blow on the head or on the neck is guaranteed.

There's an incomprehensible din in the washroom. The authorities thrash one prisoner for not removing his filthy jacket and for not hanging it on the hook before attempting to wash, and smash another prisoner for removing his dirty jacket and hanging it up... He hung his jacket up and someone swiped it. The jacket was there – it's there no more. Someone has to be punished for the stolen jacket. What in the devil's name would be the purpose of authorities if no one got beaten for a theft? According to ancient customs, the guy who stole it should be beaten, but try finding the fiend in a shrieking crowd!

The castigation intended for the thief has to be delivered to the one whose jacket was stolen. Let that be a lesson to him! Next time he'll know and spread the word to others: never snitch to anyone about anything. Someone stole your jacket – steal another's but don't snitch. In your search for truth, you might just get a jab on the jaw, and it could always be much worse than that. A convict has to drive the nail into his own head: the victim is considered the guilty party.

Those who did manage to whip their way to the dripping tap didn't gain very much.

You moisten your face a bit, but what will you dry yourself with? There's no towel. Indeed the towel is not allowed, the towel is in fact contraband. No less forbidden are handkerchiefs. Your own were taken away and camp handkerchiefs are not issued. So, dry yourself with your pants or clogs if you want – if someone hasn't already swiped them during the night. You'll get shoved wet-faced outside anyway. You'll be lucky if you're not covered in a solid sheet of ice.

No, next time around there aren't many fools who even try to wash!

Yet these fools do turn up from time to time...

XII

THE FATE OF THE DEAD

“Hey you! Get over there! Professors, lawyers, priests, prosecutors!” The wild Tyrolean, Toni Fabro, secretary of our block, is in good voice this morning. Spit dribbles down his chin. “Hey you, shit-for-brains! Stand here, along the fence, on the right!”

So we stand for him here, along the fence, on the right. After railing at us with his foul mouth and gesticulating with all fours, he says:

“Okay, pig snouts, go carry the dead. Pick them up from the block and the corridor. Lay them out by the hospital. But watch out! Don’t ditch them or I’ll break your face!”

What can we do? We go look for the dead. Ugh... I don’t get it! What’s going on? Here am I, a poet, a lyricist dragging corpses around!

“Uh-uh, you sons of bitches. Don’t make faces! Why bother? In a month you’ll be the same! Faster, you dogshit!” foams the wild Tyrolian.

‘Maybe this madman is telling the truth.’ You sigh and grope for the corpse’s leg.

How in the world do you carry it? I can’t figure in out. This corpse is horrible! It’s blue and black... And the white beasties, not having had time yet to escape to other bodies, hurry and scurry in clusters on the clothing like lambs frightened by a mad dog.

Finally, urged by a cudgel on our ribs, we cling to the corpses like cockroaches to jellied pigs’ feet.

Some of us fared better than others – with four men clinging to one carcass, a man on each leg and arm, a corpse floats away, his ass barely dragging in a puddle.

So this is the fate of the dead – isn’t it all the same for the corpse? Today he’s dragged by four, tomorrow I may be bounced around by one leg. For these trivialities, a corpse should not feel insulted.

I didn’t fare too well at this assignment. Two of us, my dear friend Jonas, the *Prot*¹ from *Biržai*, and I, remained by one body. Jonas hefted the front end of the carcass onto his farm worker’s shoulders and I hitched myself into the corpse’s feet, almost like a plow for unearthing potatoes.

Along the way, our corpse begins to sigh in a depressed, distressed, muffled moan.

“Damn!” mutters my dear friend Jonas, the *Prot* from *Biržai*, “Why are you sighing! Once you’re dead, stay dead. Don’t sigh for mercy’s sake! Who ever heard of such a thing: dead and sighing!”

We sway for another thirty feet and our little corpse opens his eyes and speaks out in such a quiet and gentle voice:

“I’m terribly uncomfortable... I’m choking... Friends, let me go... I’d rather walk by myself...”

Jonas and I look at him. No doubt about it, a dead man is talking. He puckers his lips, puffs his cheeks, rolls his eyes. He’s dried like a skeleton and over the bones stretches blue-flecked skin.

While quibbling with the corpse, we carried him the rest of the way to the hospital. Along the hospital’s window sills, on the snow, several rows of corpses were already laid out. Some lay with their eyes closed, others lay with open eyes, but all lay naked with numbers marked with indelible pencil on chest and belly, just like on a parcel. There must have been a former postman in our government ranks to send the corpses to heaven so neatly numbered.

Some corpses still had on clothes. Some gaped and blinked. A few twitched hands and legs, maybe even pondered getting up and running? Several corpses sat up in the snow and looked around with hazy eyes, as if they’d gorged themselves on loco weed.

A heart grows heavy being so near these corpses, but a heart doesn’t get much lighter moving away from them and doing nothing...

Heads hanging low, my friend Jonas and I left the corpses to go do our chores and wait for our turn to lie down on the snow. Some kind of demon haunted our souls when we left the blinking corpses behind. What can a man do?

Having found an out-of-the-way spot behind a barrack, we hid and stared afraid to see what our corpses would do next.

Poor broken devils.

Perhaps remembering his younger days, or his mother, or his beloved country, no longer able to rise or stand, one corpse began groveling, crawling across the yard. He calmly gritted his

teeth as if he felt no pain; he didn't moan, as if he hadn't been trampled in the corridor at night, as if he still had important business in the world!

Following his example, a second, a third corpse started moving...

Even if they are corpses, they'd still like to live a little!

About man's love for his neighbor, about humanism, so many, many books have been written... Eh, never mind! They're all out of date!

As I and my friend Jonas, the Prot from Biržai, watched, our hair stood on end.

"Mother of the garden beats!" Jonas murmured in surprise. He could no longer even curse decently.

Suddenly, from the hospital door, out jumped the devil. Fact. A true devil, even if he remarkably resembled a modern man with a white apron across his bulging belly. He saw the crawling corpses and swore as only the devils in hell know how. Grabbing them by their feet, he yanked the naughty corpses back onto the pile. He battered their shins and heads with his shoe, laid them out in rows, and checked the numbers on their bellies. Satisfied with his work, he looked them over. Not a single corpse moved, blinked or gaped.

"And you shitheads, what're you doing here?" Jonas and I heard the smack of a stick across our backs. "Do you want me to cut your guts loose?"

Without even pausing to check who had offered such a friendly service, we hustled back to our block for our next activity.

In the spring of 1944 a reform was passed concerning the proper handling of corpses. We were no longer required to drag them through the barracks by the feet. Instead, each body was undressed in the block and a number marked with indelible pencil on its chest. It was then laid out on a wide board – the same

one used for slicing bread. Having covered the body with a blanket, four men, led by the block chief, carried it out in an even march. If there happened to be more corpses, they would pile them neatly, naked, one next to the other, several layers high, then cover them with a tarp and drive them away – as neatly and trimly as if it were a load of jam.

Once, in the neighboring block, a loud uproar began in the early morning hours. Screaming, shrieking, swearing like the devils, so loud the barrack walls themselves seemed to bark.

Nine people had died in the block overnight. The block secretary undressed them, wrote the numbers on their chests, lined them up primly in the washroom and presented notice to the authorities of the number of dead, with appropriate numbers and the block chief's signature.

The block chief, it seems, having boxed a goodly number of ears, heads into the washroom to rinse his hands. He splashes his little hands under the tap, hums "*Marsz, marsz, Dąbrowski*"² and glances over his shoulder, just in case, at his corpses lying in the corner like a pile of Northern Pike.

"Hm... hm... what the devil?" The block chief is amazed. "This is crazy!"

He quickly strides over to the corpses.

"One, two, three... seven, eight... Well yes, eight! Of course, eight... Franz, Franz!" rants the block chief calling his secretary. "Franz, I'll drown you in the latrine!"

Franz, the one being called, trots up all out of breath.

"You sonofabitch, you stuck me with a piece of paper to sign saying that nine died today? There's only eight left! Can't you count, pig?"

"What do you mean eight?" Franz is astonished. "There were exactly nine, cut and dried. I counted them myself."

“Then count how many are lying there, idiot!” The block chief is working himself into a lather. “I should lay you out like a dead cow in place of the ninth corpse!”

Franz is visibly distressed. Looks here, looks there – there’s no ninth, no matter what! What imbecile could have stolen a corpse? For what? Maybe he was hungry...

Now all the block chieftains swarm and stream like cockroaches being steamed. Milling around the entire room. Looking for the corpse. Looking under beds, between beds, under pallets, groping everywhere, anywhere it’s possible to grope... Looking and swearing, swearing and looking.

Then, from the washroom emerges some kind of indefinite creature of the shadows, once perhaps something like a man. Perhaps he really once was a man, who knows? Now he is crippled, crooked, doubled over, with protruding ribs, jutting cheekbones, naked, with a number painted on his chest... No, now he has very little left in common with a man. Spotting him, the block chief bends over in the corridor in the pose of a bulldog about to lunge at a gendarme’s calf.

“You dead man’s crap. Where do you think you’re going? Where do you think you are, dogshit? Where’s your place?”

“*Panie blokowy,*” in Polish meaning Mister block chief, groans the ghost once similar to a man, “my stomach hurts so bad, *brzuch boli,* hurts so bad – hurts so bad I can’t stand it... I went... I’m sorry...”

“Tsk, you pig slime, you dare talk to me? Where’s your place? March to your place! Come on, hurry up!”

“I’m very sorry, *panie blokowy,*” groans the ghost. It sighs and sways away to its place.

He lay down naked on the cement next to the eight other naked corpses. A broom’s bristles he took for a pillow. He lay down and died. What was there left for him to do?

In the concentration camp everyone obeys one law: he who is sentenced to death, dies. Hell with it all!

Usually, the corpses in camp were a fairly obedient lot – even in cases of mistaken identity.

A corpse-to-be sews on a healthy convict's number instead of his own – maybe he's getting ready to run. Or the block secretary's head aches from guzzling varnish; it aches so badly, in fact, that he's not even able to read the number off a corpse correctly. He writes down another number, a live man's number. The number of the deceased remains on the books – crossed out is the number of the healthy and live man.

A citizen who turned up in the corpse count owing to this kind of misunderstanding usually died quickly in camp. There were plenty of diseases for him to die from, or a brick might land on top of his head, or he could take a hard fall somewhere, get his bones all busted up, or hang himself in the usual manner... Of course, if he wan't smart enough to die at the right time, many stood by ready and able to help him fulfill his obligation. When this volunteer corpse finally died, the number of the first corpse – the one for whom this one laid down his head – could be crossed out in the books. With both of them dead and both numbers crossed out, the books were in order once again.

Looked at through the eyes of the authorities, this citizen who landed among the corpse numbers by mistake had to die. If he were allowed to live, he could cause a lot of trouble.

The central camp headquarters in Berlin have been informed that he is dead. If a message were sent admitting the mistake, Berlin might think the camp administration is incapable and irresponsible. Is this necessary? Who needs it! Any way you look at the thing, this walking corpse is a very undesirable element. For example, if a prisoner knows that he is officially dead he can escape and no one will be able to trace him. Everyone knows

someone is missing – but who? No one knows. The living are present and some corpse is absent! How can you tell which corpse has flown the coop?

One prisoner planning to escape actually did deliberately put his number on the corpse list. Another prisoner sewed his number on a dead man's pants, and the dead man's number on his own. This allowed him to stay un-dead a few weeks, enlisting the help of others for his escape attempt. He was almost a free citizen: he'd already had himself crossed out in the books of the Political Division and the labor bureau, as well as of the administration. Everyone's forgotten him. He can just sit back and wait for a comfortable moment and then vanish from camp in the guise of the corpse!

No, in the eyes of the authorities the live corpses weren't likeable customers! And so they died.

From the middle of the summer of 1944, however, even live corpses hesitated to die. They wouldn't die – and that was that. When even corpses turn stubborn, what can you do?

The authorities get angry, they swear, cross out names in their books and send corrections to Berlin. Bricks cease falling on the heads of the living corpses, ribs no longer break and assistants for hangings are no longer around...

On the whole, much changed in camp during the summer of 1944, but who among those who had been in camp since the very beginning of 1943, could believe the changes when they were actually invoked?

XIII

AN INVENTORY OF NEGLIGIBLE SOULS

After we coped with the corpses, that same day they hustled us to the other end of the hospital, where we filled out forms from early morning on. They were health forms: first name, last name, general family information, who should be notified when you croaked in camp and where this party was located. Officially, this last question sounded somewhat different: "Whom do you want to correspond with?" The hospital is concerned to whom the newcomer is going to send letters! Unofficially, the clerks tell you in their straightforward manner why this question is necessary, so there will be no misunderstanding. They waste no time in putting the newly arrived camp prisoner into a very realistic frame of mind.

You even have to declare if you're some kind of wino, whether you drink varnish or redeye. "And what are your relations with

beer? Do you habitually puff a pipe? Are you by any chance kin to drunkards and pipe puffers? Haven't you contracted some dread disease? Was your granny perfectly normal? So from what ailments did she pass away? And what nationality are you? And from what country did you hail while you were still called 'human'?"

The questions – very serious, all health related, of course. Finally:

"How are your teeth? Did they just fall out or were they knocked out for some good reason?" And the most important question: "Do you have any gold teeth? If so, how many and what kind?"

Some babbler tried to convince the others that this questionnaire was being administered solely to take an inventory of the gold we had on us. None of the other information on the questionnaire was ever used anywhere, but the teeth – that was important business.

The convicts were the S.S. Organization's private property.

Gold teeth were, therefore, the most important part of the convict, and were immediately credited to the S.S. stock of gold. Once your teeth have been noted in the book, you are obliged to diligently defend them. Don't trade them in for a crust of bread! Watch that no one swipes them! For a missing tooth of gold, you're as responsible as if you'd stolen a golden nugget from the S.S. Treasury. Teeth are deposited only temporarily in your gums. When you croak, you must conscientiously turn in your golden hoard to the treasury. The medical examination of a corpse winds up with the dental checkup. The gold is ripped out of the corpse's throat, entered into the book and delivered to the treasury – that is, if it's not filched along the way.

Actually, it's wise to leave your teeth at home when going to a camp. First of all, they're of no use in camp; and second, it's not very safe to show them. You have to constantly beware that someone doesn't knock them out for you. Your cheekbone might get chipped, and the gold tooth will be lifted and you'll still be liable to the authorities for the missing gold.

So who needs teeth?

Following the newcomers' health query, we are immediately set to work, delivering dinner soup.

The soup has to be taken from the kitchen. Entering the kitchen for the first time, you don't know where to go, how to stand or even which soup to take. No one's going to explain how and what is to be done. The kitchen crewmen, all overstuffed, burly boars, glare at the newcomers who've come for the soup as if they were deadly and personal enemies. The boars look like they mean to tar and feather us, but settle for walloping heads with broomsticks and ladles, speeding us along with their cleated shoes. As if the petrified newcomers might attack or overturn the boiling kettles! To flee the kitchen is to flee a murderers' den – in a complete daze!

Two of us carry the soup kettle. It's iron. It doesn't look too big, holding only fifty liters, but it's terribly clumsy to carry. The thin iron handle cuts hard into the palm. The wrist burns, it feels like it's breaking. The kettle pulls the arm from the socket. The loose clogs slip off the feet. You stumble. Stumbling, your feet get banged up. With bleeding feet, you stumble even more. Hot liquid splashes on bare hands and feet... It's hard as hell carrying that damn soup!

We're led by a blubbery bandit from the block hierarchy, a prisoner. This is the Russian Mituha. He leads us and swears.

We carry the soup to its place and set down the kettle. Blubbery Mituha immediately pounds my head with both fists.

“What? Why? What’d I do wrong?” Instead of an answer, I get more clouts on the head.

Questions in camp are taboo. You must be psychologist and prophet in one. You must predict when and in which bandit a brainstorm will begin to brew, and what it’s all about. You must forecast what ill winds will blow through the mind of a hoodlum, since you’ll be beaten till you understand what he wants – without him saying a word, of course.

After a dozen or so swats on the head, I, too, understand. This Blubbery Mituha wants me to carry the kettle three steps further. Only three more steps!

In the afternoon, an inventory of our negligible souls begins. This time the questions are most important, most serious.

This documentation is effected by an establishment called *Arbeitseinsatz* – the Distribution of Labor Bureau. First name, last name, year of granny’s death. Most consequential: what work can you do? This is an especially weighty question, for the answer determines the convict’s fate: will he live or will he die?

Shoemakers, tailors, woodworkers, carpenters, blacksmiths, locksmiths, electricians, electrical engineers, glaziers, mechanics, masons, plasterers, barbers and other artisans: these professionals usually get jobs according to their specialties, almost always under a roof. From the very start, they find themselves in a privileged situation. They can manage to make some sort of living until they get accustomed to the camp. And once they’re established, they get other jobs that pay on the side. They become the camp aristocrats.

In our group were two or three bookkeepers and they were recruited at once to an easy job with a roof overhead. One econo-

mist, a price assessor, turned up, and he didn't have it bad either. He managed to land a position in an office where he shifted as a story-teller. A doctor, a professor of internal medicine, was requested to treat prisoners in the hospital, but only after five weeks had gone by. The rest of the intelligentsia – lawyers, priests, professors, writers, natural scientists, high school principals, engineers, economists – what could they be worth from the standpoint of a concentration camp?

My dear friend Jonas, the Prot from Biržai, exclaimed that he could make good beer. And his moonshine didn't taste bad either...

The camp's authorities laughed hearing of such a specialty. They didn't enter it on the document sheet but they did jot it down in a separate, private booklet. In due course, the talents of my friend were widely used by the men in authority and this was 'to his health'.

"And what can you do?" the work distributor asks me.

"Not much," I answer standing at attention like a samovar. "I could manage to type... I've been writing for more than twenty years... I know how to write poems, plays... I could teach drama, acting, the Stanislavski Method, maybe... I know a little about directing. I've also organized acting studios and theatres more than once..."

"Scheisse! Shit!" the work distributor says to me. "That's not work. You mean you can't do any decent work?"

"I could describe the camp for a newspaper..." I'm frightened, I rack my brains for a better specialty.

"What? Write an article about the camp for a newspaper?" yells the irate bureaucrat. "I'll show you a newspaper! Write: this one's a bastard, a *Saubund!*" He means me! "He knows nothing and is without a profession," dictated the work distributor to his secretary.

Almost our entire group of intellectuals turned out to know nothing. We were suitable only for the most difficult work which required no education – and suitable too for the crematorium chimney.

During those first few days in camp, already it was possible to see a lot, to learn a lot...

XIV

THE KINGDOM OF CRIPPLES

In the morning, following inspection, the convicts assume formation and file off to work. The departure is supervised by the camp chief himself along with his assistants. During the dress parade, your cap must be off, your hands must press against the thighs so that they don't flutter, and you have to stretch upright as if a board were laced to your back.

Groups of various technicians go first. They work at their specialties under a roof; they know how to get better food; they have sundry outside enterprises. Even if they're ragged, even if they're muddy, they're still humans that look like humans.

The last to move out is the *Waldkolonne* – the forest labor detachment – to hew trees, drag logs, uproot stumps, carry soil, and so on and so on. The work is hard in cold and rain; the food's the poorest; there are no transactions of any sort on the side.

The huge *Waldkolonne* is divided into gangs of a hundred. At the head of every hundred walks a capo, the work leader, and a hilfscapo, the capo's assistant.

The capos – cheerful, clever, adroit young men with red brassards tied on their sleeves – are going to all kinds of trouble, slashing at their slaves so they'll march past the camp chiefs in a more impressive manner. They bark and screech at some prisoners, they spur others on with their feet; they rap on the heads of a third bunch; they swat with sticks at still others...

All this occurs in full view of the chiefs; this displays the capos' sense of responsibility and conscientiousness. But their efforts don't come to very much.

It's hard to straighten the lines of formation. It's hard to march in step. The population is very mixed. There are some sturdy men, obviously recent arrivals in camp, who stride firmly, proudly raising their heads high. But the greater mass is a struggling penury with hollow or bloated faces and swollen feet, all of them starving. One still has clogs; another is barefoot, though it's only the end of March. Hunched over, bent double... Clearly, not one of them looks like he'll return alive from work... And in the evening when this column comes back, it does carry back a few corpses. Three, five, eight, ten...

In the morning after all the columns have left for work, a shoal of specters seeps out from somewhere into the yard. It's all so strange!

This sea doesn't walk; it slinks. Slowly, very slowly, without a sound, as the shadows of a fleeting cloud.

Slinking... Once, maybe not even so long ago, these specters were humans. They had a shelter, a home, parents, sisters, brothers, maybe a wife, maybe children. They had a homeland, they had a life – a will, freedom, desires!

Slinking; clinging one to the other; one holding up another; leaning on each other. No one nags them anymore; no one hits them anymore. Nothing in the world matters anymore.

Their clogs no longer clump. They no longer have energy to raise their feet from the ground. They drag their feet along the ground so slowly that even their shuffling is barely heard. Some hang their heads down on their chests, sometimes still scanning the ground, sometimes not looking anywhere. Others, with misty sleep-filled eyes, still glance around, but they see nothing, understand nothing, want nothing. Others lean back against their friends, close their eyes as in a casket and barely, barely drag their heavy feet. But the faces, the faces! Each is more horrifying, more anguishing than the next.

It wouldn't cause such agony to look at these faces if the feet didn't move, if they were really corpses!

What could you possibly expect from a corpse? A corpse certainly doesn't care. But when such a face still goes to work!

What kind of moral, what land of historical justification could be imagined for those who send others to a concentration camp, without so much as a second thought? None. They might redeem their human wretchedness only if they themselves ended their days in the hell on earth to which they sent others, oppressed by the same lunatic ideological fictions they imposed on their victims. Otherwise they will be eternally damned in memory, even by the children of their children.

Slinking, slinking... humans of all nations, of all professions. A month ago, or two or three, they had arrived in camp sound, whole.

A newcomer can't even force himself to get near the specters – the stench of rotting corpses drives him away. Their hands are crusted with sores; their feet are covered with sores. Under the

sores mill various parasites ignored completely by these former members of the human race.

Slinking, slinking... So slowly!

Occasionally one, occasionally another wanders off from the tribe. He totters around as if unable to decide what he should do now. He takes one step to the side. Another step. Keels over onto his knees. Drops his hands to the ground. Crawls a few paces. Looks around with the eyes of a madman. Lowers his chest, then his face to the earth. Becomes rigid for an instant. A shudder jolts him. He raises his head. His eyes show a terrible longing, terrible yearning. He utters not a word. Not a moan. Lips won't even move. Silently he crawls towards a secluded spot. To the fence, to the barrack wall he crawls. He lies down. Closes his eyes. Now, nothing matters anymore.

Another specter doesn't even move away from the flock. He falls to the ground and lies there. His neighbors have no strength. They can't manage to raise him. Those slinking behind trip on him, stumble. Some are still able to lift a foot over him; others can't even do this. They stumble and fall on top.

Slinking, slinking... What a lot of them! One hundred, another hundred, a third...

This is the camp's detachment of cripples. It too is a labor detachment! The cripples 'go to work' and 'work' according to their capabilities.

It's a very stable detachment: never diminishing, never disappearing.

So what if most of this detachment's members die off during the day – in the barracks, en route to work and during 'working' hours! In the evening the forest labor detachment will return. It will supply cripples for tomorrow, no fewer than the number

that died during the day. The cripples' detachment will not suffer in regard to size.

The forest detachment receives new members to replace those given over to the cripples. In another month or two, these initiates will transfer to the cripples in their turn. And so spins the wheel of life. Every day new people are herded into the camp, but the camp's population increases very gradually.

People die on the battlefields in horrible agony. But there – everyone is equal. There aid is rendered to the wounded. There the injured individual is respected even by his enemy. There you have a weapon; you can defend yourself. Your death and suffering have some kind of meaning: you're fighting for a purpose, for your homeland, for your freedom...

But here – nothing! No meaning!

No one will come to your aid. No one will comfort you, console you, offer parting words of love as you approach the mystery of death.

Isn't it better to be sentenced to death or hung than to die this way, caving in to rotting wounds kept open by terrible hunger?

In earlier times, in other countries, a final wish was granted to the one about to hang: a last meal, a quick cigarette, a letter to write, a shot of booze to toss down... But here – a kick in the butt – and that's all.

The other extermination camps, where a prisoner was brought in and immediately killed, were atrocious, too. This same killing took place under the skies of the Forest of the Gods; the only difference was that here a person was tortured to death. His health, his energy were sucked dry, he died by degrees from starvation...

Which type of camp better complements the achievements of our century's culture? God knows! Not an easy decision. After all, it's a matter of individual taste...

Slinking, the detachment of cripples is slinking, slinking...

For every convict, this is the convincing *memento mori*¹. Everyone's desire to live is equal. And everyone is equally aware: in one month, or two – you'll most likely end up in the cripples' detachment.

From here comes within the prisoners this bestial instinct to survive: to hang in there at any price. From here comes that hyena like brutality between the prisoners' relations. These things become clear much later on. A newcomer, having barely arrived here from the real world, understands very little.

A newcomer witnessing the detachment of cripples for the first time in his life comes close to losing his mind. It's not death that's horrible – what's horrible is this sight of desecrated man. And not only is man desecrated, even death is desecrated – defiled, befouled, adulterated.

A newcomer doesn't even notice how he begins to shake all over as his taut, ashen lips murmur:

“Oh Lord, oh my Lord!”

XV

“DIE ARBEIT MACHT DAS LEBEN SÜSS...”

Our first Sunday in camp was also officially our first day on the job.

“Lawyers, professors, priests, financiers, writers and all the rest of the Lithuanian rabble,” bellowed the wild Tyrolean, Toni Fabro, with smug satisfaction. “March into formation! Faster, you foul pigs, faster, you bastards!”

Several detachments of Polish political prisoners, those still under interrogation for membership in secret political organizations, were in formation preparing for work duty beside our own.

The capo or work leader presented to us was a German by the name of **Sauter**. He had arrived in camp a mere two weeks before us but he was a great specialist in his field, very rapidly gaining an eminent place for himself in camp.

According to his documents, this Sauter had been tried and punished seventeen times for child abuse in Germany. The camp authorities made him our chief during working hours.

We were assigned to the trolleys for hauling sand. At one end of the long tracks, a mound was to be flattened out; at the other end, a swampy hollow was to be filled in. The distance between the two ends was about one and a half kilometers. Six or seven people were appointed to one trolley.

We begin work. The tracks are laid on sand. Along the way are four curves in the track which the trolley must round. Sauter stations himself by a curve and plants a happy smile on his dimpled cheeks. The other curves and both ends are manned by Sauter's assistants. We fill the trolley with sand, drive it to the other end, dump the sand in the hollow, level it out and drive back to fill it up...

It's the end of March and frosts still come at night. But by day the sun is shining and radiant, soothing, stroking us with warmth.

Knocking about with the trolleys shouldn't be such a pain because, after all, trolleys can be pushed. But in fact it's not so easy.

While pushing the trolley, you have to hustle whether the trolley is empty or full. Your clogs sink in the loose sand and don't stay on your feet. A couple of galloping leaps and your feet are already bleeding from the damn clogs! Then while you're loading the trolley with sand, the hilfspapo drums on your ribs with his stick and harangues you for laziness. At every turn on the track, again a stick drills in your side until your trolley is turned. There's a burning desire to get past this devil and his stick, but the lousy trolley deliberately goes and jumps the track. Now lift it back up if you're able! An empty one can still be

brought back up, but a full one is a very poor joke indeed! While you're hoisting the trolley, Sauter himself often turns up right next to you with a fat bludgeon in his hands; most conscientiously he applies himself to busting up your back. He slams down the club and like a broken record repeats over and over:

"Die Arbeit macht das Leben süß! Die Arbeit macht..." Work makes life sweet!"

The curve where Sauter stands is so sharp, steep and uneven that the trolley always jumps the track here.

Sauter is smiling. Sauter is pleased. Sauter works out with the bludgeon, and showing that lovely smile of his, he repeats:

"Die Arbeit macht das Leben süß!"

Returning to the barrack after this kind of workday, with bloody, swollen feet, shattered shoulders, back, ribs and thighs, an overworked heart, a whirling head, you're hungry – and now you have to squeeze yourself like a sardine into this lice hole. You begin to understand why the detachment of cripples remains undiminished...

We the people without a job specialty in camp didn't have a permanent work post for several weeks. Every day they dragged us to different work detachments, using us for various chores. Everywhere they put us, we were the newcomers. Every capo had his own rules, his own manias, his own methods of beating. We didn't know anything; we didn't know anyone. We didn't even know how to work in camp or how to rest. Every day, every hour, sometimes parched, sometimes bloody, was time spent in hell for us.

The old convicts knew very well that the final products of camp labor were immaterial. All that mattered was to keep on the move, to tire, to torture yourself – so you'd kick the bucket sooner. It's crucial that you keep moving, especially when the

chiefs are watching. The old convicts were continuously moving around, milling about, but the results of their toil were negligible. And still their work was acceptable – they kept moving and milling!

We weren't aware of this wisdom. It seemed to us that if a job is given – it has to be done. We thought that if we did the job, the authorities would approve and ease up on us. So we slaved and toiled.

All your life you've been a conscientious worker; how do you now become a slob, an impostor!

You work conscientiously. In an hour you do more than an old convict does in a day. Breathless from exertion, you pause to catch your wind. Curses are immediately flying at your head, or worse, a stick or a brick. Typically it runs:

“You lazy, full-of-shit Lithuanian cur! You flea-bitten intellectual! *Verkommener Lump* – you rotten scum!” and on and on, and on and on.

The more conscientiously you labor, the larger the work load they give you, the more they demand from you and the more they beat you. The old convicts, hovering on the side, sullenly scowl at you, grind their teeth and keep pushing their share of the work at you:

“Here, you putrefied toad! Work, if you're so smart!”

Try not taking the work from him! He'll cuss you out no worse than the capo, damn you, and even swing a shovel at you.

How can you know who this old convict really is? And what happens if he, too, has the right to beat you? Everyone in camp apparently has the right to beat you, everyone who's not too lazy, especially if you're a newcomer.

The old convicts palm off their work load on you, swear, bluster, but their eyes shine with guile, as if they're saying: “Oh, what idiots you are!”

Look! Some other old convict can no longer control his sarcastic smile. He comes up, pats you on the shoulder and starts talking like a buddy:

“Don’t be such a dumbass! Don’t thrash like they’re butchering you! Keep pushing like this and you won’t last the week. Ignore the cussing. Everyone cusses here. You have to cuss or you won’t survive. Cussing is more important than bread. But that’s all meaningless. Look, watch how I work: I move, I stir – and that’s all. And nobody’s cussed me out today...”

He’s right! No one bothers him. He moves and stirs but he does not work. What he tinkers with in one day, what he plucks at for twelve hours, can be finished in one hour, in half an hour.

This is a very great wisdom: to learn to move and do nothing, not strain your energy, not sap your strength and yet not get beaten! When you grasp this wisdom, you can already manage to get by in camp; but until you do grasp it – your ribs will be well whittled or your kidneys will be knocked out of place.

Slowly, very slowly this knowledge came to me!

They threw us around in various jobs.

For example, we carried tarpaper rolls. A man who’s done physical labor all his life and who’s mastered the technique of ‘move and stir’, might find this job unchallenging. But a person who’s remained seated behind a desk for thirty years, absorbed in scholarly pursuits, a person who’s hungry, sleepy, tormented by muggers and lice, can hardly tolerate this job. You manage to swing this roll of tarpaper onto your back but a few steps later you’re already falling with the entire load. So now try standing up with it if you can! Arise when you’re being cursed like a dog, drummed with a shoe, pelted with sticks! Arise so you can fall down again after a few steps! And so this goes on the whole day, twelve hours.

It wasn't much better in the brick factory, digging and kneading clay, carrying and piling bricks; or in the woods, hauling, sawing and lifting logs onto wagons, or on the building site splitting and carting rocks in a wheelbarrow, toting bricks, gravel, cement and water.

One day early in April, the wild Tyrolian, Toni Fabro, starts yammering. He's wagging his tongue like a dog's tail:

"Professors, priests, lawyers, writers! Line up along the fence on the left! You're going to Gdansk!"

The wind whips down from the furious sea. It whistles, screams, howls, flinging wet snow, frozen rain and the devil knows what other dreck in our eyes.

To get to Gdansk, we have to ride in an open truck. We have no coats, only those ripped, unlined, dirty summer jackets and flapping pants that look like survivors of a canine tug-of-war.

Gdansk is forty-five kilometers away and we drive twenty kilometers or more past Gdansk, then ferry across both broad branches of the Vistula. The purpose of this trip is to bring back bricks – to load the truck and return. We don't eat all day, missing even the camp's poor dinner.

The passengers are soaked through, thrashed raw by the wind, chilled to the bone. Blue, stiff and frozen. Some still try chattering their teeth, but nothing happens – tooth no longer hits tooth. Others lie back with eyes closed, mouths agape, knocking around on bare bricks like rotten logs. They look so bad that in camp they wouldn't think twice about scrawling numbers on their bellies right away.

Yes, a great truth was trumpeted by the gifted murderer, Sauter:

"Die Arbeit macht das Leben süß!"

XVI

WACEK KOZLOWSKI

After about two weeks, we no longer resembled intellectuals in the least. With my height of 1.90 meters [6 ft. 3 in.], my weight plummeted from 96 to 67 kilograms [211 lbs. to 147 lbs.]. We shuffled about with split skulls, swollen shins, wounded thighs, backs beaten black-and-blue, ears buzzing from all the sluggings. Our faces had been lacerated, scarred. Legs oozed, ulcerous and bleeding. Nearly all of us ran a fever.

Now we were settled convicts, gnawed by lice and no less skilled in swearing than the old guard. At this time, they assigned us to permanent labor detachments for steady jobs.

Luck smiled on two of us early on: a bookkeeper and a cashier got into business offices. After ten days, another two were promoted. But luck did not necessarily last in camp. A month later, while recuperating in the hospital from spotted fever, one of these latter two men was beaten to death with a stool.

The rest of us remained blue-collar workers. Some landed in the brick factory, some on the rock pile, some with the wheelbarrows hauling dirt for the highway pavement; some dug ditches, some carried gravel and bricks on construction sites. In these and similar jobs, all were equals – professors, and writers, and priests, and doctors, and lawyers...

At this same time we were also rather ceremoniously transferred from Block Two to Block Six. The chief here was **Wacek Kozlowski**, the camp's star and inspiring light. His secretary was **Hans Saenger**, a Königsberg jewelry dealer. Apparently he'd quarreled with a Gestapo over a ring of some kind and ended in camp, adorned with the green triangle signifying that he was a *Berufsverbrecher* – a professional criminal, no less.

In Block Six sleeping quarters, we were given our own section, just like the confirmed convicts. The room was completely stuffed with beds. Each bed, two and a half feet wide, had three tiers. On each tier lay two people. Sometimes three had to fit, sometimes four, even five; usually, though, only two lay there.

In every bed was a pallet and a smaller pallet filled with wood shavings for a pillow. On every bed was also an unstable, ever shifting, unrestricted quantity of fleas and lice which never ceased to multiply. And there were two blankets! This was an incredibly big deal!

Finding ourselves in these bunks, we felt like honorable citizens of the camp, with rights equal to those who beat up others. We felt even more honored because as soon as we managed to lie down, without our pants of course, we were immediately summoned into the day room where Wacek Kozlowski already awaited us alongside the camp senior, Arno Lehman – the same one who had called us old camels and beat us with a stick that first night in camp.

Arno Lehman hands each of us a cigarette and preaches a sermon about the necessity of everyone living in harmony because in camp all prisoners are equal. By the way, he's heard that we brought a lot of money to camp, and now it's lying useless in the office. So he's inviting us to donate as much as we can for the convicts' orchestra – to purchase instruments.

An orchestra conductor appears in a flash – in fact he's a barber by profession – and he clearly and convincingly lays out for us the entire matter of how essential music is in our lives. Arno Lehman deals each of us another cigarette. We begin notarizing donations – some give 50 Reichsmarks, some give 100, some get skinned for as much as 200. Inspired by spontaneous generosity, Wacek Kozlowski delivers himself of a speech.

He's stern but righteous. Anyone abiding by the rules and obeying his orders will not be harmed. But anyone daring defiance and raising riots, will get his just desserts from Kozlowski, in person! Here Wacek shows us his fist, an item truly worthy of attention – especially since his nerves seem to be frazzled, worm-eaten to the core.

Later, having gotten to know him better, I taught him a Lithuanian song from Biržai which he really liked. He actually insinuated that I had put it together especially for him:

*Oh please my fist do not insult
Cause when I bash, you'll bear the brunt.
Of such sound service is my hand,
That one quick slash, a stiff you'll land.*

He loved the song immensely; it was just what he needed – his personal anthem.

Wacek was from the Polish coastline, a butcher by profession. Next to his rank and file number, he wore a red triangle, the insignia of a political prisoner; however, no one in camp knew what political involvements could have led him to Stutthof. The old convicts told stories that right here, in this camp, he'd done away with his very own brother. He'd bumped off several scores of prisoners, and no one had even bothered to count the bones he'd broken or the skulls he'd split.

Here was a specialist in beating, a connoisseur of execution.

He was a man of medium height, stocky and broad shouldered. Once his hair was dark brown, but now in his forties he was gray and balding. His voice was hoarse from drinking and yelling, a hissing, snaky sound. Yet his hand truly performed him a 'sound service'. It was a rare prisoner who didn't collapse after one of his bashings, and on bashing Kozlowski didn't stint. Neither was he shy with his shoe, smashing with equal relish your front or your back. But even more he loved the stick. Prisoners on their way to meal or returning, going to work or coming back, entering the barrack or exiting, he greeted and bid farewell to them all with slams of the stick. It was as if they were his slaves. Yet more exciting for him was to spring with his stick into a throng of prisoners and thrash in all directions. He resembled some chastener from the old Russian bylinas¹ raining blows on the heathens.

Sometimes, though, apathy seemed to engulf him. Energy evaporated and he quit waving his stick like the chastener of old. At such times he'd order convicts to lie in rows in the dry or muddy yard. Then he'd walk among them and flail the stick every which-way. Sometimes he lacked the mettle even for this comparatively easy task; then he'd stand over those on the ground and fling rocks and bricks at them. Whoever was hit with the rock got to keep it.

There were times when he transformed prisoners into lizards, commanding them to crawl on their bellies across the yard; sometimes he made them frogs (they had to leap), sometimes fakirs (they had to squat on one leg). In this respect, Wacek was inventive. He had a positively febrile imagination.

For more solemn occasions, Wacek used another special method of beating, one quite popular among murderers in camp. With a swift, sharp, unexpected blow on the head, he'd knock the convict to the ground, hop on his chest and jump up and down like a billy goat in front of a dam. The results were at least a few pulverized ribs.

Beginning with 1944, the camp authorities, apparently sensing future liabilities, occasionally compiled various documents proving that prisoners in camp didn't have it all that bad. Capos and block chiefs were given a paper to sign testifying to their awareness that beating prisoners was strictly forbidden! Capos and block chiefs signed all right, but continued to diligently whale away.

After one such endorsement, the famous capo **Lukasik**, a bully from the streets, snapped a few ribs of a Latvian and cracked his skull. The Latvian detachment was comprised of former Latvian S.S. men; they were in a German penal institution run by the S.S., and Lukasik had been assigned to teach them some discipline and put them back on the road of compliance with the German government.

Lukasik's recently reeducated Latvian was brought to the hospital. Quite innocently, instructor Lukasik himself dropped in at the hospital washroom. A few prisoner-orderlies got together and began reproaching Lukasik for not being ashamed of being such a murderer. Somehow, even Wacek Kozlowski showed up in there; he could smell the stench of a fight a mile away and

never passed up these opportunities. So now even Wacek grabbed poor Lukasik by the neck!

“Sonofabitch! Don’t you know that beating’s not allowed?” foams and gargles Wacek. “I’ll show you how you’re supposed to beat, you dogshit!”

Well, he showed him how to beat... After all, he was the incomparable master!

He thrashed that poor guy so hard, even the hospital walls trembled!

Lukasik walked contorted for two weeks after that, licking his wounds, and when his wounds were healed, he began beating the Latvian according to Wacek’s example...

Executioner Wacek was a connoisseur in the most complete sense of that word.

When the camp’s official executioners were overworked, Wacek gladly went to help or replace them. His job description didn’t require him to do this; it’s just that he enjoyed it all so much. The camp’s executioners had occasional ‘outward-bound sessions’ when they were invited to various rural regions to teach German citizens obedience by means of a public hanging. Wacek always volunteered and even brought his own tools. He was the one to load the camp gallows into the truck.

In the spring of 1944, the camp authorities were ordered to hang a Polish girl. The hanging was ordered by the Gestapo who presented her in camp. Women had not been hung in camp until then. In the face of such an assignment, even the official executioners wavered; the woman sentenced to hang was young and beautiful, an endearing creature.

Angered by the Gestapo verdict, Arno Lehman, the camp’s head executioner, proclaimed that as an honorable executioner, he’d never hung girls and refused to start now! The bum wouldn’t do it and the authorities didn’t force him.

The camp's second executioner and second senior was **Fritz Selonke**. He was one of the cleverest of the camp's murderers, smart and sneaky. A few days ago he'd scraped his arm somewhere, tied it to a board and strung the whole contraption under his neck:

"My hand hurts," he says. "I can't possibly perform a hanging! Why, I wouldn't be able to pull the rope!"

The third executioner, officially called the camp's top foreman – although in fact he never worked at anything – lay in bed hopelessly drunk. For three days and three nights, he'd been guzzling moonshine nonstop. Now he's guzzling and moaning that his stomach's killing him. He can't possibly hang the girl!

So all three executioners were on strike. No one wanted to hang the girl.

It's up for speculation how the authorities would have waded out of such a mess if Wacek hadn't been in this world.

The German executioners refused to hang the Polish girl but Wacek hung her. Voluntarily. Out of love for his art. He had fun.

Encouraged by Wacek's example, the official executioners did hang women later.

When the political atmosphere changed, the Poles themselves didn't intend to hang Wacek. They intended to take him alive, rip him into tiny pieces, and feed him to the export hogs. But Wacek was dreaming of returning to a future independent Poland as an honorable citizen. He was convinced that he was a great Polish patriot.

It's midnight of Easter 1943. Into the sleeping quarters where we're sighing and scratching, in waltzes Wacek with holiday greetings. He's decided that on the occasion of Easter, since we don't have enough air in the room, he's going to let more in. He orders the windows opened.

It's true, there's not enough air in the place. Without authorization from the block chief, windows can't be opened.

Now while the premises are ventilating, Wacek stands by the door singing patriotic Polish songs in a belligerent voice. He's good and drunk.

"Do you sons of bitches appreciate my kind heart?" he addresses himself to the scratching convicts. "You didn't have enough air. I opened the windows for you. I'm airing the room... I'm concerned about your health... I'm standing here for your sake only and you don't understand..."

"We understand, Wacek. We appreciate it! We appreciate it!" we shout to him from our beds. "Carry on!"

Wacek careens to one end of the room, finds a prisoner and drags him from bed. It's a young, good-looking boy from Lviv. Wacek brings him to the door wearing only his undershirt. Wacek feels sorry for him. Tearfully, Wacek presses him to his chest:

"You're so young and you've landed in camp, in such a hell! What'll be left of you, poor boy! But I'll take care of you! I'll help you. I'll save you! Here, I brought you some white bread. Here's some ham yet. And candy even..."

Lying there, we all envy this boy. Why, such luck! White bread and ham! Wow! What a fortune for such a lamebrain!

And the boy is eating! He's gobbling it down!

One prisoner, perhaps unable to restrain his jealousy, decides to take a walk and relieve himself. He must walk past Wacek with this lucky boy by his side.

"Punch him in the nose!" Wacek says to the boy. "Why is he loitering at night!"

But the boy disregards Wacek's words. Wacek gets angry:

"Didn't you hear me, shithead? I told you to punch him in the nose?!"

“Why should I hit him? He didn’t do anything to me!”

“That’s none of your business. I said punch him – so punch him!”

“But he’s gone now... I don’t know who it was...”

“Oh! So you’re going to act like this!” Wacek flies into a rage. “So this is how you listen to me? I gave you candy and this is how you thank me?! You’re swallowing my white bread but you won’t obey my orders?! So this is what you’re like? I’ll show you...”

Wacek is working himself into a rage. Now he feels sorry for himself. He begins clobbering the naughty little boy. And he clobbers him so hard the poor bawling boy can barely creep back to bed.

What’s true is true: Wacek’s nerves had rotted to the core. Taking up residence in Wacek’s despotic block, we were given over to his absolute will and discretion; to the Wacek who sang in Lithuanian:

*Oh please my fist do not insult,
Cause when I bash, you’ll bear the brunt...*

XVII

LITHUANIAN–POLISH RELATIONS¹

Originally the Stutthof Camp had been instituted to annihilate Poles. They did fly through the chimney in great numbers, but they weren't all annihilated. Some survived.

The Poles outnumbered all other groups in camp. They were the very oldest camp residents, having built the place with their own sweat and blood and paved it with their bones. They were mostly from the coastline, so they knew German well. The Poles formed a very powerful faction in the camp, and not only by sheer strength of number. They could do quite a lot for a prisoner.

By comparison, the Lithuanian position was lousy.

Before our arrival, the German S.S. spread the following rumor among the prisoners:

“Lithuania’s intelligentsia is coming to camp... Up till now they’ve been obedient to the Germans... Suddenly they’ve decided to no longer obey... The German government has resolved to teach them a lesson by sending them to this camp...”

Translated into normal camp talk, this meant: ‘Beat the crap out of the Lithuanians; give it to them good! How many you bump off is your own business. You won’t be punished for it.’

It’s not surprising that by our third day in camp one of us – our strongest man, a huge athlete – already lay in the street with a cracked skull.

He’d been going down the road carrying a roll of tarpaper. Suddenly, someone sprang upon him and pounded the nape of his neck with a fist. A man is simply passing through and some guy tries to brain him!

“You little chickenshit!” swore our man. He dropped the tarpaper, grabbed the fistfighter and hurled him into the fence so hard that he bellyfopped in the mud. “If you can’t live like a man, leap like a frog!”

The fistfighter flung against the fence jumped up. Two more came to his aid. One of them had a fat club.

“Clang!” went the big club on the man’s head, and he lay with blood pouring out in the middle of the road.

And then an amazing event took place. Several young men came out of nowhere, pulled the wounded man aside and set to dressing his wound. Meanwhile, a few others grabbed the three punchers – and when they got hold of them, they really got a hold! In no time, the three were lying in the road. After a little rest, each had a bucket of water dumped on his head. They began reviving, picked themselves up somehow and swayed away to tend their own business without so much as a thank-you.

Everything happened very fast. Minutes later, the only reminder of all this was a patched head. Luckily the wound wasn't bad; it left a fuzzy memory and a puddle on the road.

The three little assailants were Poles. The unknown saviors, total strangers to us, who so brutally paid out the attackers – also Poles.

This spat was typical of our relations with the Poles in camp. Poles protected us from Poles.

Numerus stultorum infinitus est – the number of fools is infinite. Unquestionably, the number of fools is always greater than necessary. Every nation has enough for itself and enough for export; likewise, every nation has its own derelicts, its own saints. The camp was saturated with fools of all nations. There were also some very honorable and intelligent people. But because the camp consisted mostly of Poles, Polish fools and Polish derelicts were very much in evidence.

After the spat, the Poles' relations with us altered considerably. Something new hung in the air. We felt an unseen helping hand. An invisible being seemed to care for us. At times we speculated that a kind of committee had formed to look over us. Much later, certain Poles admitted that there were, in our group, people they thought they might meet in the future when the circumstances would have changed utterly, and that in such a case it would be intolerable if fools had done away with some of us in camp. "We've already done enough foolish harm in the past. Now is the time to sober up, not to count how many times who wronged who, where and when. We have to help one another."

That same day following the spat, in the evening after work, we're standing around along the fences in coveys, trying to so-lace ourselves in our miserable situation. We're terribly thirsty from drudging all day long, but there's nothing to drink. We

don't even dare think about food. It's impossible to drink water from the well – it's contaminated with all sorts of bacilli. In the canteen, there's some sort of mineral water but it has to be paid for; and we're utter paupers. No one has a cent. Nothing, nothing at all! On our bodies are scummy rags – and even these aren't our own...

Suddenly, a broad shouldered guy with red cheeks strides over. He's about thirty or thirty-five years old. He tells us he's Kaminski, a Pole from the coast. "Lithuanians," he says, "don't be sad. You'll pull through this hell. The worst times are over. You just have to learn to survive in camp, too. It's nothing. You'll learn. Would you like a smoke? Of course, why wouldn't you! You don't have anything!"

Immediately he deals out a pinch of tobacco to some, a cigarette or two to others... He takes us down to the canteen and buys each of us a bottle of water!

Living in freedom, it's impossible even to imagine the magnitude of this gift! Abused, harrassed, assailed by all – this amiable and sincere man gave us rejuvenating words of sympathy and such a luscious treat! But this same Kaminski was the poorest of the poor! He was grinding through his third year of camp life. He had already lost his family, his home – the S.S. devoured everything he had.

Kaminski watched over us constantly as much as he could. In the long run, we were even able to help him in turn. We lived as brothers.

We had another important protector. After a while we noticed that one **Julius Schwartzbart** had taken on the job of monitoring Wacek Kozlowski, the unholy terror with the famous fist.

Schwartzbart was a son of the Zakopane Mountains, with a dreamy soul and a deep, feeling heart, common traits of the

mountain people. Having been a Polish officer, he landed first in a German prisoner of war camp, then in the concentration camp. Having undergone tremendous hardships, he still remained a Zakopane dreamer in his soul.

Schwartzbart was tall, lean, muscular, brown haired and about thirty years of age. Very loquacious and witty, he was a born artist. He was already the camp carpenters' capo and a good, indeed an excellent craftsman. His artistically carved and sculpted boxes, elegant oak furniture, and especially his tables and cupboards spread his fame. All this was privately commissioned and commanded by the authorities. Schwartzbart's renown spread far beyond the camp walls. Orders came from Berlin and other German centers.

Two years earlier, when Schwartzbart first came to the camp, he'd had a big run-in with Wacek Kozlowski. Wacek hit Julius in the face and Julius gave him back the same. Wacek, astonished at such temerity, attacked with renewed vigor. Julius knocked Wacek to the ground and smashed his ass in quite nicely.

From that time on, Schwartzbart had the greatest authority over Kozlowski. Wacek worshipped Julius. Wacek was also very scared of Julius.

As soon as we came under Kozlowski's authority, Julius called Wacek over to him. Julius's workshop was on the other side of the narrow yard and from his windows he could see what Wacek was doing with his slaves.

Julius summoned Wacek and put it to him briefly but clearly:

"Wacek, look. Don't touch these Lithuanians with your dirty hands! Don't you dare! Understand?"

"I know, I'm listening," mumbled Wacek, cutting his eyes to a corner.

“Don’t overload them with work. If you can – ladle some extra soup.” Thus Julius instructed Wacek, letting him out the door.

And really, we didn’t experience the full force of Wacek’s malice; he avoided beating us in the open for fear of Julius.

Sometimes Wacek’s cheeks would start to twitch; eyes blazing, throat hissing like five snakes, stick trembling in his hand, Wacek, raving mad, marches towards us where we’re standing along the fence in the yard; but then Schwartzbart’s face appears in the carpenters’ workshop window:

“Remember, Wacek,” Julius says quietly.

“I know, I know, you toad.” Wacek gnashes his teeth and begins battering other prisoners who weren’t expecting a beating from anywhere.

When the urge to hit is unbearable, does it matter who you hit?

Those Wacek caught by surprise received twice the dose meant for us – such is the destiny of energy diverted from its original path.

Even so, Wacek sometimes knocked us around when Julius couldn’t see him.

The camp chief’s aide once said half jokingly to Schwartzbart:

“The Lithuanians are here, why aren’t you fighting?”

“We’ve fought enough in the past, which is why we’re all sitting here in the first place,” Julius Schwartzbart snapped back.

Schwartzbart’s answer summed up the consensus among the Polish and the Lithuanian intelligentsia; and it continued to be the basis of our mutual relations. Among the Poles we found sincere friends, men on whom we utterly relied in times of misfortune. The help our Polish friends gave us was very real; they saved me from starvation.

Of course, the Poles in camp weren't all the same. The camp – such a hellish mix of people, ending up here for such different things, that according to them it is virtually impossible to make a wider generalization.

Two types of Poles dominated the camp. The seacoast dweller – from Gdynia, Gdansk, Grudziądz, Torun, Bydgoszcz, Kartuzy – and all the surrounding areas. Here must be added the Kashubians and Mazowszes. The second type – from Warsaw. Galicians and Easterners were miserably represented – there were one or two. Actually, after the 1944 Warsaw Rebellion, Warsaw residents came to camp by the thousands, but there wasn't enough time to know them.

We kept the closest relations with the seacoast dwellers. For a long time they were the largest number in camp, and they had suffered the most.

A seacoast dweller – sincere, very down to earth, with deep feelings and rationale. He didn't hide his disgrace towards the characteristics of some of the other Poles. Most of the scoldings were given out to the Eastern Polish mental representatives. From the Eastern sectors was the native Pilsudskis with his colonels and ministers, and Lithuanian noblemen who had turned Polish. Pilsudskis was not very popular in Western Poland. After the memorable Polish upheaval arranged by Pilsudskis, Poznan students carried a stuffed figure of the dictator, then laid out in a grave, until the police disbanded the demonstrators with fire extinguishers. The next day the students took the stuffed figure and ceremoniously hung it in a public place. The seacoast dweller didn't like the Pilsudskis nobleman type for the same reasons the Lithuanians didn't like him, sons of peasants.

“What will be, will be,” said the seacoast dwellers still in the summer of 1943, when the war perspectives were still quite foggy,

“but after the war your Lithuanian landless nobles will no longer Poland!”

Talking like this they had in mind Pilsudskis type ministers and generals. They held them responsible for all of Poland’s disasters, – for not knowing how to farm, for not knowing how to organize an intelligent administrative apparatus, for sabotaging land reform, for chasing after the emptiness of the noblemen’s traditions, for the inability to not understand the factors of foreign politics.

The seacoast dwellers weren’t benevolent towards the Warsaw Poles either. In the fall of 1944 when the Warsaw residents swam into camp by the hundreds, the old Polish prisoners met them without any particular sympathy. And the character of the Warsaw Poles, even with their rebellion, didn’t find much sympathy. They naturally supported them as much as they could, but that’s it. Actually, conflict was not far away.

The Warsaw residents, residents of the capital, looked at the other Poles, provincial residents, somewhat from above. And in camp they soon began to demand this and that kind of privilege compared to the other Poles. The seacoast dwellers angrily bristled about this:

“Warsaw idiots!” grumbled the seacoast dwellers. “If they haven’t learned how to live until now, they’ll learn here! Let them suffer at least a part of what we suffered. They’ll actively become smarter.”

An entirely different niche from among the Poles was taken up by the Kashubians or *kaszeba*, as they were nicknamed here in camp.

Kashubians – an entirely different Western Slav relative, having its own language, its own grammar. It is one of the oldest Western Slav relatives, and it’s possible, it remained the purest.

They live on the seacoast, to the west from Gdansk, on hilly ground, which is sometimes called “Kashubian Switzerland”. Their capital – Kartuzy.

The Kashubians – a farming nation, near the sea – fishermen. There aren’t many left, numbering around one hundred or two hundred thousand. Their closest relatives as far as language, are probably almost disappearing. And it looks like it will be difficult for the Kashubians to survive. They have no literature of their own. Schools – Polish. Their intelligensia already speaks Polish. In camp there were several Kashubian priests. One of them was a patriotic Kashubian.

“What!” he got all heated up. “Germans wanted to make them German, and now the Poles want to make them Polish. No, nothing will come of it.” In other words, they won’t give in! He alone, this priest, will create Kashubian literature!

Up until now he hadn’t started creating.

The Kashubian language has a similar relation with Polish as Polish with Czech. All in all – Western Slav languages are close to each other. On the whole, Polish society doesn’t want to admit their independent characteristics and laws. They look upon it as a Polish dialect, made up under the influence of the Germans.

The Kashubians, looked upon from Polish eyes, had another big sin.

A Pole, no matter who he was, wanting to stay a seacoast dweller during the German occupation, had to sign a document, that he feels he is a German, will join German society, is becoming *eingedeuscht* – Germanized. He had to sign what was called *Volksliste* – a Germanized paper.

Many Kashubians, wanting to stay on their land, became Germanized. Quite frequently this Germanization was a forced

issue. The Poles couldn't forgive the Kashubians for this Germanization.

A Kashubian in camp was scorned, almost a swear word.

There were many Kashubians in camp. We had the most heart-felt relations with them – sometimes even interceding in their arguments with the Poles.

During the deepest winter in 1945, while evacuating Stutthof Camp, we happened to have to travel through Kashubian land under the most difficult circumstances. The impoverished Kashubian people, complete strangers, showed us so much friendliness, so much sympathy, so much tenderness while giving us assistance, that in our hearts the names of the Kashubians remained etched with grateful love in our hearts forever.

Hopefully the historical fate of this dear Kashubian land is abundantly blessed through the ages.

XVIII

“PATIENT’S CONSTRUCTION”

After about three weeks of dragging myself through camp, I embarked on my career. I got into the prisoners’ hospital as junior clerk on a trial basis.

For some reason, the prisoners’ hospital was given an amusing name, one not used anywhere else in Germany: *Krankenbau*, or patient’s construction. This epithet followed the order of other appellations, like *Strassenbau* – highway construction; *Brunnenbau* – cistern construction; *Tief und Hochbau* – construction above and below the ground. So, patients’ construction was logical. The women’s hospital was called a hospital, but the men’s hospital was called a construction.

In March of 1943, this hospital had four of five rooms for prisoner patients, a small room for the office and administration, an apothecary, a kitchen, a washroom with a bath and

showers – the morgue was also in this room – and some other tiny enclosures.

The head of the hospital was the *Lagerarzt* – camp doctor **Heidel**, an S.S. Hauptsturmführer, a captain of the infantry.

Doctor Heidel was tall, thin, thirty or thirty-five years of age, with chestnut hair and a good build. His face was relatively intelligent looking, but partially scarred from the saber duels of his student days. He walked with his head hung slightly down. Always calm, always polite, he was the only S.S. in camp with a higher education. Not only did he refrain from fighting, he didn't even swear. In two years he didn't utter a single curse – unheard of behavior in an S.S. Yes, Doctor Heidel was a civilized man. He quietly covered up the camp murders.

The cripples died like flies in the fall. He signed the death certificates. The predominant diseases of the cripples were: AKS – *Allgemeine Körperschwäche* – a general weakening of the body technically known as cachexia; circulatory disorders; intestinal catarrh. Another common disease among the cripples, one rarely known in civilian life, was called phlegmon. The thighs or calves swell up, turn red, turn blue, split open... The muscles rot. In camp, sores have a difficult time healing. A minute sore will fester for weeks, for months. There's no sustenance to aid the healing process. Once phlegmon starts, it spreads throughout the entire body; a live man rots.

Well, these are all diseases, at least. But when a healthy man was killed in camp, Dr. Heidel would write AKS on the official death certificate – with the purest conscience. For some reason, he indicated a different disease only in the matter of hangings: pneumonia. Sometimes for these affairs he would later add: *Freitod*. That's to say, he ended it all in suicide.

Sometimes certain prisoners would be sent to camp whom the authorities found inappropriate to shoot or hang for some reason. These they sent to Heidel's establishment for an injection. As cause of death, Heidel would officially attest in writing: AKS.

In the fall of 1944, though, something came over Heidel and he got into an argument with the camp authorities. He refused to accept people who had to be poisoned. And he retorted in anger that he ran a hospital, not a slaughterhouse.

During March and April of 1943, the camp contained not quite 4000 prisoners, and forty to fifty died each day. However, by the end of April and in the beginning of May, close to 100 died per day. A peculiar form of cholera made its debut, featuring inflammation of the large intestine. It devoured many people. Next came typhoid fever, typhus, dysentery, pneumonia and several other unidentified diseases.

Dr. Heidel began to behave strangely. He enlarged his establishment. He added rooms and even founded a separate block for the cripples. They were already getting a rest period from work; the weakest weren't even forced to work at all.

In early summer of 1944, Heidel was granted a month's vacation. Another physician arrived to relieve him. Whether he was a bona fide physician, the devil only knew – but an S.S. he was, for certain.

He brought along a new method for curing cripples. He'd already tried it himself at other camp and it was a success.

He gave orders: "The stronger cripples are to get half the prison food ration; the weaker – a third; and the very weakest – nothing at all. On short rations, the cripples develop a vital will to live and they begin to heal. And, well, whoever's dying – he'll die. There's nothing to be done in that case. The quicker they die out, the more economical in the long run."

The cripples of our camp, it seems, didn't fully appreciate his technique: they began dying in unison like spring ducklings beset with leeches.

Heidel returned from vacation sooner than he had to. He chased out the reformist physician and immediately called off the new method of healing. Instead, he introduced exercises for the cripples. Whether it was warm or cold, the cripples exercised in the yard, teeth rattling.

In 1944, Heidel got an aide, a Doctor Lukas, a surgeon from the Army. How or why he cast from the Army into the S.S. he himself didn't know; this was his first sojourn in an S.S. controlled camp. The first few weeks, he dragged himself through camp like a half-wit, unable to get over his own astonishment at the amazing variety and volume of atrocities. Then with great diligence he dove into the job of surgeon: he scraped out prisoner's appendixes and phlegmons; straightened arms and legs... He began secretly snooping around with various prisoners – bricklayers, carpenters, locksmiths, painters and glaziers. He slunk around camp with them at night hauling all sorts of things. Throughout the night, lights shone, hammers tapped in the surgical hall...

In this manner, Dr. Lukas, alone with the prisoners, stealing materials out of government storerooms, working nights alongside the prisoners, arranged a superb operating room. Heidel suffered, suffered, grinding his teeth at this self-motivated project of Lukas's, until at last he rode him out of camp.

"Why does he butt in where no one asks him to!"

Heidel rarely butted into the hospital affairs himself. He wasn't interested. He was single and liked to go courting. The hospital's real boss for the longest time was S.S. *Hauptscharführer* (Master Sergeant) **Haupt**.

Haupt was already an elderly man, having endured about sixty-five years. At least five of his sons fought on the front. He was short and wide shouldered, with a mound of a belly. His loud sergeant's voice, which he never spared, gained him his notoriety. From half a kilometer away, everyone could tell where Haupt was. He wasn't a bothersome bully, but of course he occasionally slapped his palm across a nose so you wouldn't forget you were in a camp. It wasn't so much out of ill will or a wish to hurt anyone that he slashed you; he did it in a paternal manner, to teach you a lesson and to have some fun...

As an administrator, he was entirely fair with his hospital employees. When his prisoner-employees broke the law, he chastised them himself. If someone for example, guzzled too much of the hospital's alcohol and didn't leave any for him, or if someone developed an intimate relationship with an individual in the female sector of the camp, an activity strictly banned – in these cases Haupt would bleat across three courtyards. But he'd protect these culprits and defend them like a lion from prosecution by the higher authorities.

This little person, this Master Sergeant Haupt, had a kind heart. Every week he drove out to Gdansk to see his wife, usually bringing her, the poor thing, two good-sized packages; margarine, sausage, flour, groats, sugar – and all sorts of other things which, quite obviously, could not possibly be needed by the dying cripples...

It was also his duty to inject with a syringe those convicts the authorities didn't want to hang, like women for example. This job Haupt performed beautifully; indeed, he was considered a specialist. In Heidel's name he even signed death certificates – the real and the forged. Otherwise, he was an average man. What demolished Haup was – spiritus vini¹.

Always, if not even more often than that, there was a shortage of alcohol in the hospital. It was abused and overused everywhere. This might not have been so bad – it could have all been written off on the patient's account. But then Haupt, red-faced from alcohol, would begin his fond hobblings and stumblings in hot pursuit of debauchery. Even this needn't have been so bad – it could have been overlooked and ignored. But it was worse than bad when Haupt in all his rollicking fun would begin sidling up to the women – S.S. members as well as prisoners! The women, goosed by happy Haupt, squealed, shrieked as if they were being slaughtered... Others even wrote official complaints to the authorities.

Though it pained their hearts, the authorities were forced to incarcerate Haupt with bread and water: one time, a second time... a fifth time, a sixth... For the same vices, Haupt was later sent somewhere past Berlin to a sanatorium or some sobriety courses from which he never returned. Who knows, maybe he did quit drinking.

But Haupt ran the hospital only officially. Unofficially and for the longest time, the real dictator was a prisoner, the head capo – **Jan Weit**.

Weit was very brisk and energetic, dark complected, thirty years old. He was an old political prisoner, already Germanized by his four year stint in camp, and was soon to be released to freedom. And maybe he would have made it had not overbearing authorities and luring women doomed him.

Weit was able to talk Haupt into anything he wanted. Weit, in fact, used to determine the entire organization of the hospital, which Heidel then confirmed, through Haupt. Weit even chose the hospital employees – clerical personnel, orderlies, even doctors – though of course he knew nothing at all about healing.

A job in the hospital was immeasurably important for a prisoner – it was a guarantee of life. The work was easy and under a roof. Food was better than anywhere else and the rest periods were longer, too.

Later, though, Weit came to grief over forbidden affairs with female prisoners; he was sent to the village of Hopehill and its grim brick factory for hard labor. After Weit left, physicians of various nations turned up at the hospital – Poles, and Frenchmen, and Lithuanians, and Latvians.

When Haupt discovered that I knew several languages and could type, he called me into the hospital office to do clerical work, on a trial basis. Weit went mad as a bullog chasing a fly. He met me with a special greeting:

“You Lithuanians, bastards, seized Vilnius from us Poles! I’ll show you a seizure! I’ll show you Vilnius, you pig! You tramp, if you lied and don’t know how to work, you won’t leave here in one piece!” And he traced his masher’s fist around my nose so that my snoot bent down in amazement.

To tell the truth, the hospital didn’t have a good reputation in camp. The old prisoners claimed that prisoners were actually poisoned there. In fact by the time I went to work there, Haupt was still poisoning prisoners, but only under specific orders.

When the camp first opened, a patient who had been in camp less than three months had no right to ask the hospital for any kind of aid, no matter what might have happened to him. When I first arrived in Stutthof, hospital prisoners were openly beaten and killed without fuss and no secret was made of it. We were allowed to turn to the hospital only if our temperature was at least 39 C [102.2 F]. If we showed up with a lower temperature, we got a fist in the cheek, a shoe in the stomach and a chance to crawl away if we were able after being capsized. Later, the accepted

temperature for hospital admission was lowered to 38 C [100.4 F], and toward fall of 1944, even down to 37 C [98.6 F].

When Weit greeted me so portentously upon my arrival for the clerical job, I was a completely healthy man, according to camp regulations. My temperature was a mere 38.4 C [101.1 F] and my head buzzed only a trifle: some kind of spring breeze must have been stepping around in it. A gentle rose or cherry colored mist swirled before my eyes; sometimes it turned a little green, but it was nothing. Through this haze, I focused on faces pretty clearly, but the typewriter keys kept getting muddled, as if they were covered with moss. The worst thing was my hellish cold; if only the devil would swallow it!

Perhaps you can imagine what it's like to have a raging cold – a nose chapped from cold air, bruised and bloody from beatings, feeling as if it were filled with gunpowder – eyes full of tears; you sit by a typewriter with the keys no longer visible, attempting to do a job on whose success depends your life or death – and you don't have a handkerchief, or a prayer of getting one! That was me, as pitiful as a skinned cucumber tossed against a fence! I'd rather take a hundred lashes on the back than suffer such a nose!

Besides me, there were three men in the office: the capo, a very young and cocky Pole, no better than Weit; a Czech, one of the tallest individuals in the entire camp; and one more Pole, an old pedantic bureaucrat. The capo and the Czech, close friends of Weit, met me in a bellicose mood. Only the old Pole accepted me in a brotherly way, and he remained a good friend throughout our entire stay. But in the hospital, there was little he could do for me; the youngsters had him haltered and bridled, too.

The capo sat me down in a special spot. On one side a hot stove; on the other side the door to the outside; in the ceiling overhead, a window, always open for ventilation. The April winds

walked through me from top to bottom, from bottom to top, across and diagonally. I had this constant feeling that a gunpowder blast was about to blow in my nose. Frogs were croaking in the chest.

Having worked under these conditions for a week, one morning I managed to raise my temperature to 39.6 C [103.3 F]. I received the right to lie down in the hospital as a patient.

Mighty Weit had been waiting for this. Immediately he talked Haupt into believing I wasn't suited for work. Besides, they didn't know what I was sick with; maybe I'd kick off; he needed a worker right away!

I went to the hospital in a new role, as patient. In my place, a young, new Pole was soon seated – but not in the crosswinds.

My attempt to make a career in the hospital, to reach the position of registrar, had not succeeded, obviously because of my inability to master such an intricate job.

XIX

PHILOSOPHY OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

For some reason, Doctor Heidel was especially solicitous of me. He was rather impressed, it seems, with my university degrees and profession.

My angina and influenza abated, my temperature dropped to normal, but Heidel kept me on in the hospital in spite of the tremendous shortage of space for real patients. This was incredible luck for me – in fact unprecedented in the camp's history, so far as I was able to learn.

My friends back at the block labored and toiled, got swatted with sticks and sweated blood while I lay stretched out in bed. And the conditions! I'm alone in a bed with clean sheets; there's a little pillow; not even a trace of a flea or a louse; no one beats me, no one curses me – I just sleep and sleep! Even the food situation here is a bit of an improvement. Soups are better in

quality and greater in quantity. I meet the doctors and they occasionally roll one thing or another my way. The cook sometimes throws in extra tidbits, even without my waiting in line. A sick neighbor preparing for the Stygian shores no longer eats his ration; when I render him some small service, he gladly hands his share over to me. Gaining strength, I learn to straighten up the room, to wash the floors and halls, and for this I get the odd crust of bread. One way and another, I'm learning it's quite possible to make a living, and even get some rest! By prowling about in the corridors, I even wangle a sort of a promotion.

The hospital fills out information on the newcomers: their drinking habits, relatives, teeth... I too, am invited to join this group of transcribers, as a friendly assistant. Our little committee is presided over by the old convict **Gerwinski**, an orderly, or *Pfleger* in camp jargon.

Gerwinski was a man of enormous strength. Many of his own teeth had been knocked out long ago, when he was a boxer. Once upon a time he'd also been a sergeant. Now he was a model thug.

When the camp first opened, a separate block was formed to house German criminal prisoners: thieves, robbers, murderers. To control this kind of crowd was, naturally, quite a difficult chore. They disobey. They swear. They fight.

So to subjugate this mob, Gerwinski was appointed block chief. The authorities looked highly on his art: beating. He'd pulverized the bones of more than one prisoner. He sent more than one prisoner to the pearly gates ahead of schedule. His hand truly served a purpose. Now he tended the prisoner patients. And strangely enough he didn't nurse them too badly; he didn't steal and he didn't allow others to steal. What the patient was allotted to receive, the patient received. The patients he cared for recovered the quickest.

My relations with him were neighborly; even, at times, philosophical.

We sat in the hospital and wrote up the newcomers. Even here, he couldn't forget his favorite art form. Wherever he went he'd always clip a newcomer with the back of his hand, sending him crashing head over heels.

"What nationality?" he asks.

"Ukrainian," stammers the newcomer.

"Did you say Ukrainian?" Gerwinski glares at the arriver, squints, then slams a cheek with his paw.

"What's your nationality?" "Ukrainian..." "What's your nationality?" "Ukrainian..."

With each answer, the poor Ukrainian gets clobbered. His lip is split, blood streams onto his jacket...

He tries saying he's orthodox. That doesn't work.

"I'm asking nationality, not religion!"

The Ukrainian spits out a tooth.

"I'm from Little Russia..." The poor guy is trying from the other end.

"Well, if you're Russian then say you're Russian!" Gerwinski sits at the table to write. "Where was your Ukraine, you sonofabitch, before the war? There was no Ukraine! There wasn't and there won't be!"

Nationality and citizenship were often confused in the camp's official documents; the same was entered for one and the other. U.S.S.R. citizens were all called Russians. Ukrainians, Belorussians, Kirghizes, Tartars, Mordvins, Georgians – "Russian" was written for all of them. Ukrainians, mobilized into the SS, the government referred to as Ukrainians. Here even true Russians carried the name of Ukrainians. Meanwhile the Ukrainian prisoners were always called Russians. When a prisoner answers Ukrainian, it was written: Russian.

Gerwinski, of course, knew this very well. He could have written "Russian" without hitting the Ukrainian, but he hit him anyway.

"For mercy's sake, why do you smack him like that?" I say to Gerwinski after the beaten one has dashed for the door. "I mean, he answered correctly. You asked his nationality. He's a Ukrainian. He told the truth. Why beat him up?"

"That dog deserved even worse," mutters Gerwinski under his nose. "I didn't give him enough!"

"You've met him before?"

"Nope. This is the first time."

"Then how in the world could he have transgressed to the point of deserving such a drubbing? I mean, look, he was only brought to camp today..."

"Dear professor, do you happen to know what the Ukrainians did to us Polish soldiers when the war began?" My friend turned suddenly sober. "They shot at us from ambush! The devil only knows where they crawled out from, or where they hid when they shot at us. They cut us down from behind, the sneaks! They butchered us. Swine, I tell you – not Ukrainians! Theirs is a nation without history, without culture, without national traditions. They were, they are and they'll always be slaves. What national hero have they produced? Where? When? They're shiteating slaves, and that's all."

Gerwinski is blazing with rage; in his wrath he makes a fist and sidles closer to me.

What a devil. Is he now going to strike me, too?

"No, dear friend," I say to him in as mild a voice as I can muster. "This one didn't shoot, for sure. He's too dumb to fire a gun, this one! He probably can't tell the difference between the barrel and the breach."

“They’re all like that. That’s why I beat him, because he’s dumb.”

So there you are. He beats for dumbness! I grow braver and pump him further:

“But my dear friend, you even manage to sideswipe the Poles, and I’m pretty sure they didn’t fire on you from ambush!”

“I beat the Poles, too. I have to beat them. I can’t simply leave them alone!”

“As you like, my dear friend, but I don’t understand your behavior at all. You Poles are strange bunch. Your compatriots arrive in camp – they’re so scared, so sad. They don’t know what to do, how to act, where to go, finding themselves trapped in such a hell. They should be consoled, reassured, fraternally instructed... but you, the old prisoners, what do you do? You carelessly whack and wallop your brothers... You’re killing your own countrymen!”

The ideologist of corporal punishment had a big laugh over this. “A person arriving in camp doesn’t know the score. He’s got to learn it in a way that’s really going to sink in, and while he’s still got health, while he’s still got strength. He’s got to be toughened immediately; later it’ll be too late. If he gets a beating right off the bat, he’ll be more careful later. He’ll keep his eyes peeled, he’ll be on guard for his life. If you don’t beat them while they’re healthy, they’ll weaken and die while you watch. Later on they’re easy prey. You’ve got to put some meanness in them from the start. Listen, by beating them, I’m doing them a favor. I’m teaching them to live...”

“Nevertheless, this education of yours is incredibly dismal...”

“Look. You people, Lithuanian intellectuals, weren’t beaten from the start the way you should have been. I feel sorry for you. You didn’t get tough. And how many of you will be around in a

month or two? You'll be lucky if even five of you are left in three months..."

"Come on, don't scare me!"

"Do you have any idea how many of you were admitted to the hospital today? Eight. Do you hear me? Eight! You're the ninth. A year and a half ago, 193 of us were herded into this camp. Do you know how many of our crowd survived? Of course you don't. Well, I'm it. The only one; do you understand what that means? You'll begin to see when you start flying up the chimney one after the other..."

"Yes. Thank you, honorable teacher. Now couldn't you just fade away somewhere and let the devil take you?!"

"You don't like the truth? It's ugly, of course, it's callous – but necessary. A newcomer must wise up and toughen up from the outset... He must never forget where he is..."

"Listen, apostle of fisticuffs," I tell him, "there's this other thing that bothers me: that one prisoner beats and kills another prisoner. This is incomprehensible and frightening to me. What would happen if, some fine day, the prisoners stopped killing each other? If they started helping each other instead, behaving like colleagues, like friends? Life would be easier by half!"

Gerwinski guffawed, delighted. "You're still so naive, professor! You've studied books, not life! This isn't the people's choice, it's the way the system's set up. The system wasn't designed by us. The system was designed by the German S.S. At first we all had thoughts like yours. Prisoner didn't beat prisoner then; only the S.S. did the beating. And did they beat! They beat until they couldn't beat any more. We, on the other hand, beat with discretion. We thrash a fellow, then knock it off. They beat us indiscriminately."

“Look, everyone wants to live... To stay alive, you have to step over a few dead bodies. If all the people here were the same – let’s say if true political prisoners were the only ones here – some sort of peaceful coexistence and unity might be possible. But that’s not how things are here. The population is all mixed up. Political prisoners come from all over. You’ve got criminals of every stripe: thieves, robbers, murderers, sadists... Not to mention all the other assorted, insane trash! Try uniting them; try getting through to them!”

“But the main thing is that people are crazy with hunger! You probably saw already what the cripples do? They rummage through the garbage cans; gnaw old bones; eat rotten shit; lick rusty nails – muddy raw potato peels are their supreme treat. A man would walk through fire for a crust of bread here; he’d bathe in the toilet bowl; he’d kill his best pal without a second thought. Just last fall I rattled the bones of one tramp for tearing the liver out of a barely dead corpse, and he already had the thing in his mouth. I shook the hell out of him... But whether he was guilty is another question. Do you see what it means when a man stoops to this level?! This year people aren’t eating each other anymore, but a couple years back it happened all the time. I was a block chief myself, then. When a prisoner died in the night I had to stand guard so they wouldn’t gobble him up. The liver and the heart were the first to go, ripped right out... You poor book-worm. Can you imagine what a man has to go through to turn into a cannibal? Was he born eating human flesh? No! He was born just like any man, with parents, a homeland... Look what the camp’s made of him! You think I’m exaggerating? No way! I’m playing it down. Ask any of the other old convicts. They’ll tell you the same. You’re a man, yet here you turn into a beast.

Worse than a beast. And you have to do it. Either you defend and attack like a beast, or else you die. Others devour you. Here, like this, 'Bam!' – no more man. I knocked half a tooth off that stupid Ukrainian. What's that? It's so trivial that I shouldn't waste my breath over it. You're getting angry, I can see. You're blathering on in your mind about humanism, about sympathy, about consolation... You're still a babe, even if your hair is gray! When you fly up the chimney, when you're smoke, maybe then you'll know I'm telling the truth."

This philosophy of his turned me cold. The hell with him! I didn't dare argue any more.

Truly, what are my books worth when twentieth century man, in the center of civilized Europe, suddenly turns cannibal?

In the middle of summer, 1944, the commandant came to camp with the camp chief, Dr. Heidel, and some other bigshots. They summoned all the prisoner-sailors, who were without exception Germans. They were also thieves; in this group only the rare individual was a decent man. They'd been driven into camp shaking, scruffy and scrawny, but in no time at all they sprang back to life. It didn't matter to what kind of work they were assigned, they always found something to steal. They were masters, incomparable specialists.

So the sailors were beckoned by the commandant. They drew up in formation. The two executioners were called over and they began beating the hide off the sailors. As the flogger wallops the sailor in the tail, the sailor must count the lashes aloud and then formally report to the commandant the number of lashes he has received.

The first party of sailors, fifty men in all, got fifteen switches just for being sailors. The second fifty got ten switches because

they landed in camp. The third fifty got five switches, just so they wouldn't forget that they were living in a camp.

The commandant thrashed his German sailors, and walked away as if he had just smoked a cigar.

Among the sailors was **Bremer**, an Austrian marine engineer, a very intelligent and honorable man. He'd ended up in camp for his tendencies towards an anarchic world view and for behaving according to these inclinations onboard a Navy battleship. He was always in the best of moods. Even if life was hard on him, he always managed to laugh at everything. He would say that it was a good thing that they put him in camp because after the war he'd be a *gessellschaftsfahig* – he'd be in good social standing. What German would be able to show his face after the war, if he hadn't been in a camp?

Young Bremer had left behind a wife and a son. He vehemently opposed the Nazis, but his wife had joined the Party. To spite him even more, the wife sent their son away to study at a Nazi boarding school. Finally, she decided to remarry – a Nazi of course – and demanded a divorce from him. While sitting in camp for two years, Bremer contended the matter with his wife, withholding the divorce papers from her.

These personal and painful circumstances he narrated with masterful good humor, as only the residents of old Vienna know how to tell a story.

"Well, Bremer," I asked him after the sailors' consecration ceremony, "how many did you get in honor of the Third Reich? Five or fifteen?"

"Eh, you foreigners!" he laughed. "You have no understanding of the German soul, and you'll never understand it. A beating appears to you like some horrible activity, one that degrades

man – but for us Germans, beating is the most natural phenomenon. We're steeped in it, it's in our bodies and blood. It's an absolutely essential element in our disciplinary system! Just try finding a high school in Germany – in Hitler's Germany if you like, or in Kaiser's Germany if you prefer – where the students were never beaten. You won't find one. From very ancient times, Leipzig was the center for pedagogical literature, and the newest pedagogical ideas are spawned here, too – corporal punishment of students may be cursed in these books, but we manufacture these ideas for export only. In Leipzig, there was not a single school in which children weren't beaten. You bridle at these incidents, but we ignore them. It's about the same as a flea's bite. It's a bit unpleasant. It itches some. But that's all. It's high time for you to understand the foundations of German civilization.”

To tell if Bremer was serious this time or if he was laughing as usual would be difficult; but either way he was telling the truth.

XX

IN THE CHIMNEY'S SHADOW

While I was in the hospital, patients started dropping in like ants into a pot of honey. Epidemics raged through camp: three types of typhus fever and a very dangerous intestinal disorder, which didn't have a very good name in camp since it outdid even the typhus in killing off convicts.

Here's how it is in the hospital: the patients don't fit. They're packed in two or even three to a bed, randomly distributed: a consumptive with a typhus patient, a pneumonic with a dysenteric. Later, when the disease could be identified, the patients were sorted out. The dysenterics were hauled to a separate room and packed two or three to a bed. The stench from that room undulated in thick layers throughout the hospital. It was difficult to walk past that room. To be dead was better than to be sick in there. Those who ended up in that room made a hasty exit from this world.

For the typhus patients, a separate barrack was designated. A sort of battle with the epidemics had begun.

The epidemics became a hot issue. A quarantine was declared; new prisoners were accepted into camp but no one was released. Well, this in itself was not sufficient reason to fight the epidemics – the supply of prisoners was not going to dry up. But another, much more disturbing development galvanized the authorities to take action.

Rumors of horrible diseases rampaging in the camp spread through the neighborhood, all the way up to Gdansk. Germans fear desperately to die without reason – they're terrified of epidemics. The German residents of the area began yelling at the top of their lungs that the camp would infect them with horrible diseases...

And who from camp drops in on the civilian population? It's certainly not the prisoners. The S.S. drops in: some to engage in commerce, others to get drunk, some to pander, others just to enjoy themselves. But now civilians and war widows and grass widows started shouting that the camp's S.S. was contaminating them with all sorts of bacilli. Here was something for the authorities to worry about: they put a quarantine on all the S.S. boys, too.

Now the S.S. can't bring sugar and margarine to their little wives any longer, nor can they get their moonshine. No more nights debauching with grass widows in the village!

So whether the authorities wanted to or not, they had to fight these epidemics. Do you think the S.S. heroes would sit cooped up in camp? Why, there's even a chance they'll start to die, too! In fact, three of them performed most honorably in this regard: they croaked.

But before the S.S. panicked, during the beginning of the epidemics, bacilli were allowed to peacefully coexist and cross-breed with one another.

In my bed lay a patient with typhoid fever. I got him transferred by giving away my daily portion of food to the orderly.

The other Lithuanian intellectuals who landed in the hospital found an easier way out: they began dying one after the other. The first of these died lying one tier under me. The hospital had two-tier beds; as I got better, I moved to the second tier.

Puodžius, a learned surveyor, formerly an officer, a tall, strong, forty-seven year old man, was the first to go. Actually, he'd started growing weak a while back. During morning inspections, we'd stand side by side and faint together as if preplanned. He landed in the hospital when his temperature was over 39 C [102.2 F]. It turned out that he had pneumonia. Only on the third day of his hospital visit was he examined by physicians. They gave him aspirin and ordered a compress which was delivered the following day when the patient had already begun to lose consciousness.

With a fever of this intensity, a man becomes incredibly thirsty. But in the hospital, there was no way to help in this case. The unboiled water was undrinkable and boiled water was unavailable. For three nights this poor guy tossed around begging for a drop of water. He hallucinated that he'd been stuffed into the crematorium oven, that he was already flying through the chimney. With his last strength, he tried to defend himself from this fate. It was no longer possible to quiet him down.

He begged for someone to call one of his friends from the barrack – he knew his life was ending. He begged in Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, German, describing the barrack, the room and the bed. Even this request could not be carried out. No one dared cross the yard at night. In the tower looming over the yard was a machine gun which fired without warning at anyone out walking after curfew. Puodžius spent his last night arguing with

the commandant. The commandant, of course, was not around, but the patient imagined him to be right there. He lectured the commandant on the splendors of camp life. He was running short of breath, able to pronounce only one syllable at a time:

“Com-man-dant, sir, *ich bit-te um die Ge-rech-tig-keit* – I’m asking for justice,” Puodžius barely, barely managed to moan. He moaned and was extinguished.

Extinguished in bed, so a place was vacated. The orderlies, the Pflegers, immediately ran up, inspected the teeth, slipped off the shirt and dragged away the warm corpse to the warehouse to be loaded onto the nearest cart heading for the crematorium. Another patient lay down in his place.

Three died that day in our tiny room. One was an oldish German who had ended up in camp for purchasing half a kilogram of butter in Gdansk’s black market without proper coupons. He landed in camp, got sick and died. He laid down his head for half a kilogram of butter.

A Pole died that day, too. He was still a very young, likeable boy, intelligent and cultured. He used to walk around the room. We had friendly chats. He sat down on his bed. He chewed a piece of dry bread. He lay down and fell asleep. He didn’t even have time to realize he was dying.

The second of our group to die, and in this same room, was the lawyer, **Kerpè**.

For about a week, he had walked hunched over. Hauling gravel with a yoke, he lost his appetite and developed a terrible thirst. Because water from the well’s tap was undrinkable, he traded his portion of bread for mineral water – other prisoners gave him this water.

Kerpè would drink this expensive water and jeer:

“See? There are some good people in camp. Not each and every one of them is a mugger.”

Later it became clear that this water was not bought in the canteen, but ladled from the well. They took the bread and poisoned the man.

He chatted in the hospital, not preparing to die at all. Maybe he thought he would have to eventually, only not so soon.

“Too bad!” Kerpé pronounced, turned over on his other side and finished his fate.

For the rest of us, death didn’t come that easily. Nine died within five or six weeks, and more than twenty weren’t sure of what to do: to die or to maintain their ties with our sweet earth.

As it happened, only seven of us died naturally in camp, and two more were killed. One was **Masaitis**, a young man, a talented natural scientist, the principal of a high school in Marijampolė. He came to the hospital already seriously ill with cholera. Maybe he would have gotten well, maybe not. Who knows? In the hospital washroom, the hospital barber lined up the new patients under the showers. He lined them up, swore, poked them. Masaitis did something which the barber didn’t like. He didn’t get under the right shower, or something. The barber slashed at his neck with a stick. Masaitis fainted. He never revived. Next morning, he was dead.

Bauba, a high school principal from Kaunas, was a strong, healthy, friendly man. From the start, life went smoothly for him in camp. He got an office job in government headquarters, was housed in a better building and got improved food. He came down with typhoid fever. He withstood it. He was convalescing nicely in the cripples’ block when Taranski, the food distributor, beat him to death with a stool. This Taranski himself died

from typhoid fever a few weeks later, having survived the camp four years.

The hospital, so crammed with the dying, was eerie. Finally Heidel ordered me to scram and I left.

As I was being released, Weit's right hand and lackey, the Pfleger **Waliszewski**, threatened to mash my nose, searched my shirts, frisked me to see if I'd stolen anything, and at that moment he found and filched my most prized possession, my 'gold currency' – eight cigarettes. These had been a gift from a colleague, a horse thief...

Waliszewski dressed me in the most detestable rags he had, called me a pig and a sonofabitch, and let me go.

Weit led the entire detachment, as usual, to the labor bureau as if to say, "Look, I healed them. You can hitch them to a wagon."

The labor bureau offered to let me continue the hospital clerical chores, but Weit wouldn't hear of it. An invader of Vilnius, like me, he didn't need.

Having been found out as lazy and worthless, I fled the hospital's office and got to start my camp career from the beginning again. With the rights of a newcomer, once more I ended up in the forest column – lugging logs.

Any way you look at it, the hospital was preferable to the logs! Loglugging went on in very mixed company; the Lithuanian intelligentsia had already been dispersed to various detachments. About twenty of us would grip one log, give a tug – but the bastard won't budge an inch. Well, our stamina was such that if you flicked someone on the forehead, he'd fall over...

In the time it took to heft this damned log onto our shoulders, stagger away, sway and swear with it over half a kilometer, this world had become awfully boring. It became so boring that there was an imminent urge to vomit.

I haul these logs one day, another day, a third... What the devil will happen? If several more days drag out like this, I'll end up dead like the others...

I glance to the right, I glance to the left, but how can I escape from these logs?

XXI

ROUND THE TREE STUMP ALL DAY LONG

Our first Easter in camp, the Easter of 1943, arrived while we were still wrestling with the logs.

The Saturday before Easter, we work only until noon. By the afternoon, our dear Wacek Kozłowski gets the entire block in formation in the yard. The April sun shines so gorgeously, warms so pleasantly. Even a brief respite in these beloved sunbeams, in these lovely rays, would be wonderful.

Wacek gives a command:

“Zdejmowac koszule! Ale prędziej! – Strip off your shirts! Hurry up!”

We stare at him. What now? Is he, our very own Satan, going to relieve us of our pants for Easter? Anything can happen with him, but so far nothing intolerable has occurred. All is calm. He’s simply ordered us to sit on the ground.

“Crush the lice, you toad-heads. Crush the lice!” yells Wacek, waving a broken off stick.

Oh, so that’s it! May our Wacek live just long enough to hang!

As for these yellow pied beasties, these tiny creations of God, we turn their Holy Saturday into a complete massacre.

“Pop-pop-pop, pop-pop-pop,” that’s how they sound across the yard, like machine-gun fire. Thousands upon thousands of the poor things, slaughtered.

On the first day of Easter we don’t work at all. Wacek invites us, the Lithuanians, into the ‘day room’. Is he perhaps preparing a kind-hearted treat for us on this holiday occasion?

We’re met at the door by Wacek and a few other hooligans.

“Let’s see your feet. Are they clean? And your ears – do you know how to wash them?” This ‘sanitation commission’ checks our feet and ears.

Because our feet and ears are half decent, Wacek announces that on the occasion of the first day of Easter, we may sit on the benches in the room, if we so desire. But those individuals whose feet and ears are not first rate have to run the gauntlet: for an Easter blessing they get it in the mouth and across the ribs. They’re also shoved into the washroom and immersed in cold water for a good soak. They don’t return to the ‘day room’...

In the meantime, some pathetic convict from Gdansk sidles up and presents us with a single hardboiled egg – may the name of this Pole be blessed throughout the ages!

And now, just like real human beings, we’re celebrating Easter! We’re sitting under a roof, on a bench! And we have one egg!

The eldest takes the egg with hands trembling from excitement, divides it, giving each a tiny fragment, and tearfully blesses every one of us.

A symbol of symbols. No doubt about it, a symbol is sometimes mightier than the maddest reality!

That day we no longer wanted dinner. We were replete from that tiny piece of egg – and how full we were!

It's possible that the secretly and silently swallowed tears satiated us; or maybe it was the harbored memories – of native lands, parents, brothers, sisters, families. What filled each man in that moment, who can know?

On the second day of Easter, we worked only until noon. In the afternoon, we were again put in formation in the yard. The camp's first senior, the head executioner, Arno Lehman, approached to check our buttons: to see that each one was in its proper location; to discover if someone might by any chance be missing a button somewhere.

Nothing was done to those lucky enough to have all their buttons in place. But he who was missing even a single button was herded forthwith to the washroom where, ceremoniously, on the occasion of Easter, he received ten scalding whacks on the tail.

One buttonless fellow made the mistake of trying to explain:

“The jacket was like this when I got it. Where am I going to find a button? I could steal one from someone else, maybe – but then where would I get a needle and thread? How am I supposed to sew in on?”

These fellows who publicly announced their ignorance received five extra lashes, to celebrate Easter.

Lucky for me, my buttons were okay. I was just about to attempt to warm my teeth in the sunshine, when someone sneaked up and jabbed a fist a few times in the holes in my jacket.

“What the hell is this?” asks Wacek, jutting his twisted jaw in my face.

“Holes,” I tell him, already trembling. “What else could they be? That’s how this jacket was when I got it from the warehouse.”

“You bastard, you worm,” mutters Wacek, and slashes his palm across my right ear, then my left. “Why didn’t you sew them up, you worm?”

“I don’t have patches, or needles, or thread... I don’t know where to get them!”

“Worm!” sputters Wacek, adding a few more slaps.

Thus ended my first Easter in camp.

After Easter, with great difficulty, I managed to change my work assignment. I slipped out of the log hauling detachment and went to uproot stumps. What a life this turned out to be!

I choose a stump well away from the gaze of the authorities. I stir around it, scratch the dirt and moss away from the roots, so when the time comes the stump can be removed. I stir here one day, I stir a second day... On the evening of my third day the leader of stump removal drops by, an S.S. officer with an enormous belly and stinking pipe.

“And you *blöde Sauhund*, you bloody bastard, is this how you pay us for your daily bread? I’ll show you, you scummy mutant!”

He chases me over to another stump which has apparently been toyed with by more than one body before me. The stump itself still sits in its hole but the dirt around it has been removed to the depth of several shovelful.

“Okay, uproot it,” commands Big Belly with the stinking pipe.

The work around this stump needn't be intolerable. You crawl into the hole and rest yourself against the stump – no one can tell from afar if you're stirring or not stirring. The only problem is that the hole around the stump is filled with water, stagnant and rusty-looking, in fact the color of the Nazi Party uniform. My legs are already swollen and over-grown with sores. To stir in water for twelve hours, in the chilly month of April, with legs like mine, seems to me somehow entirely dull. Horribly dull. Then to make things worse, the wind turns traitor, blowing from the sea like the devil! It blasts through you as if you wore nothing, no jacket, no muscle, even – it fondles your naked bones, then slashes at them with a whip. And the wind brings a cloud or two to sprinkle from above and spray from the side...

You stomp and stomp around the stump in the Nazi-brown water and clamber back up on the bank, but there's nothing to do on the bank and there's the stump, still in the water! You don't even have time to scratch your leg properly before Big Belly with the eternally stinking pipe is back waving his stick at you... There's no alternative except to plop back in the water like a frog off a log. And that's how the twelve hour working day creeps past.

I drudge around that stump, I fiddle, I toil, but in any case I do not uproot it. I leave this stirring opportunity to someone else.

On my fourth day of poking at this stump with a shovel, one of the many forest detachment's capos approaches me. He's a little man, completely bald, with a green triangle on his chest – a professional criminal, who's banged around in camps for about eight years. He looks me over, cocks his head.

"Hm... What's your profession?" he asks me.

"Hm..." I don't know what to say. "Once I was a university professor, a doctor of philosophy from Munich's Ludwig

Maximilian University... I was a poet; I wrote verse and drama... Now, you see, I'm uprooting a stump."

"So, is that what you are, old man? Well, wait!" he mumbles and walks away.

'What the devil!' I think to myself. 'What more could this blockhead want from me?!

After a while, Blockhead returns and directs me:

"Hey you, old man, come with me!"

Well, now I'm really a goner. He's going to get me in hot water!

He marches me to the fence where these little portable hedges resembling carpets are being woven from fir boughs, to protect the orchards from snow or rabbits.

"Here," he says to me, "before noon, have these branches on the other side of the fence, and in the afternoon, you'll be putting them back. Tomorrow, you'll do the same. Only watch it – keep stirring when I'm next to you... Especially be careful when you spy an S.S...."

What a good-hearted thief! What joy: to sit in the sun and put the branches so neatly across the fence! If we'd had a bit of white bread – it would truly have been Easter!

Unfortunately my man of the good deeds was very unlucky himself. Some time later he tried hanging himself in the block. It didn't work – his friends pulled him from the noose. He also tried to slash his wrist. This also didn't turn out: his friends took away the knife and bandaged his hand. Whether he wanted to or not, he had to heal. Finally, he tried going insane. These efforts were a little more successful, but they still didn't yield satisfactory results. He was kept in the hospital for a while, driven back to sanity, then shoved into the forest – to continue his capo duties. He was an incredibly good man, but so hapless!

Regrettably, I didn't get to work with the little boughs by the fence for very long. My legs became profligate – they simply wouldn't carry my body any longer, and there was nothing I could do! I couldn't even quite manage to waddle over to the forest. Though the authorities urged me, and poked me with sticks, my legs didn't pay any heed. They didn't bother to beat my legs – and if they had, what would my legs care? Bound with rags and puffed up, my legs lived an independent life.

For the intolerable conduct of my legs, I was crossed off the forest detachment's ledger and assigned to one of the cripples' detachments.

Congratulations! Now I'm a cripple!

XXII

IN THE CRIPPLES' DETACHMENT

Our cripples' detachment wasn't the most crippled one – we still walked to work, but stayed within the camp's boundaries.

We worked under a roof. Some of us slashed sundry rags into long narrow strips, using razor blades attached to a board; others tied or glued these strips together; a third group wound these glued strips into balls; a fourth group wove belts out of this fabric. This collective enterprise was called *Gurtweberei* – belt weavers workshop.

The work here wasn't bad. It wasn't a hard job, rather one to whistle at. But the company was very boring. Not one prisoner resembled a normal man. Even the workshop's capo was weird. The prisoners called him *Fräulein Capo* – Miss Capo. As a free man, he had sung and danced in an operetta and was considered a sort of a man. In camp, he swore as a man might swear, but in

a thin effeminate voice. And indeed he had landed in camp for his notorious homosexual activities – he wore a pink triangle.

My workshop prisoner-friends competed continuously in the art of rotting. One's hands were rotting, one's legs, one's face was scabrous, one's chest was full of holes, one's temperature frequently shot up... And their raggedness, their raggedness!

Terribly unimpressive was the smell of festering sores! And the quantity of lice in our detachment was incomprehensible – entire seas of them! They swarmed not only on our backs, calves and laps, but even on benches and tables – overfed like brownish cockroaches.

Our detachment presented the camp with its largest percentage of typhus cases. Many joined us already infected. Even our poor Miss Capo returned his little soul to the Lord thanks to this typhus.

Workers here had certain privileges. First of all, there's a roof overhead: neither does the rain drip down your neck, nor does the sea wind gnaw your bones. Second, you work sitting down: you can ignore your disobedient and puffed up legs – they're no longer needed. You may even rave with your neighboring cripple, for example, about the affairs of Vilnius. You might crawl under a table, let's say to look for tangled rags, and puff a smoke or two, until a capo's assistant kicks you and hammers you out from under the table. Here we even had two short work breaks when we were released to take a walk to take care of private matters. From the time we hobbled away until we returned, a good half hour passed.

Once during a break, while slogging along with my cripple friends, I found a cigarette butt in the yard. But what a butt – almost half a cigarette! Immediately, my neighbor and I lit that half and inhaled interchangeably, holding it in our fists, so the

authorities wouldn't see us; these are working hours and smoking during working hours is strictly forbidden for prisoners. Smoking is idleness, after all!

My turn came to take a drag, when suddenly from nowhere appeared the camp's second senior and most vicious executioner, Selonke. He jumped on me:

"Come on, let's see what you have in your hand!"

I opened my fist, and what: the little cigarette butt is just turning to ash.

"You beggar, what's the matter with you? You think this is a resort, or what?"

His first blow to my cheek staggered me; I reeled, but stayed on my feet; the second landed, and I caved in. This toad Selonke had a very deft left which rarely left anyone standing. After this little encounter, my ears buzzed like a wasps' nest for three months.

During the afternoon break, the cripples were even given camp coffee to drink: German, blackish brown stuff. At any rate, it was warm. When you swallowed it, the bowels felt warm, too. "Gurgle-gurgle-gurgle" was the gentle music heard coming from the bowels. And what was most important – the craving for food was temporarily subdued.

The problem was that you had to have your own drinking utensil. Those who had a cup drank coffee, licked their lips, patted their bellies; those who didn't have a cup envied those who did.

In Wacek's block there was an adolescent, about seventeen or eighteen years old, who handed bowls out to the prisoners at dinner and took them away from those who finished eating. This was all he did in camp. In a sense, he was a man of authority. Compared to me, this adolescent was like some kulak¹ with a

hundred acres standing before a hired hand – even if the boy’s jaw was bandaged, apparently chipped by Wacek.

I approach this adolescent and ask for a bowl, explaining that in old age there’s a terrible urge to slurp some coffee... I have no idea what tone of voice to use, or with which words to address him, so as not to anger him for any reason. I repeat my request once, twice, vowing in the name of assorted saints to return the bowl. He won’t deign to hear me: sitting behind the table, he shoves his thumb up his nose and carefully gropes in there.

“Most Lordly Sir,” I beg him in the meekest voice I can muster, removing my cap. “Perhaps, Lordly Sir, you could condescend?..”

Without uttering a word, he pulls out this rusty, dented bowl from under the table and fondles it under his nose. Finally he says:

“Here. Just watch it, pig, and don’t steal it!”

The next day he won’t even lend me this bowl:

“Eh, there’s a lot of beggars like you loitering about. I can’t lend bowls to all of you... Get out!” He swings a broom at me.

Lucky for me, one of the cripples died, my neighbor from work at the weaving workshop. He had this tin can, a bit rusty, but it even had a handle affixed to the top. I knew where he kept it at the workshop – he had loaned it to me a few times. When he no longer returned to work, I pulled it out from its secret place under the rags – now it was mine. The little cripple left no other heir!

Now I could spit on all of Wacek’s guttersnipes and goatherders. Now I could drink my coffee without their help and listen to such sweet, such gentle music: “Gurgle-gurgle-gurgle...”

Oh, what in means to have your own tin can!

I was already reconciled to the fate of a cripple and I was prepared to travel to the bosom of Abraham in one way or another, when the fate of the Lithuanian intelligentsia in the Stutthof Camp suddenly began changing in an unheard of fashion.

The camp leaders had obviously outdone themselves – their tempo for maiming and starving people had become too rapid. It seems that for these overexertions they got hell from the higher authorities, who were now perhaps apprehensive about annihilating us so quickly, given the changes that might be impending in the political spectrum.

So one evening, every member of the Lithuanian intelligentsia who has remained alive and can still somehow drag himself along is called forth by last name and ordered into formation. A whole group of S.S. men approaches us – not the rank and file S.S. who walk around with rifles, but the ones with revolvers – higher officials, chiefs of the various camp enterprises. They interrogate us regarding who works where, and sequester those who work in heavy labor into a separate formation. And then the S. S. officials proceed to divide us up among themselves! Those of us they like, they appropriate; some take one, some take two. They take us along to work in the establishments they manage. One S.S. has even chased out his old employees to take on some of us.

Four of us fared really well – we ended up in the red building that housed camp headquarters.

We four were first led to the bathhouse for a nice warm shower – our first real washing in camp. They gave us new clean underwear, socks, even shoes, and good clean outfits exactly like civilian clothing except for the red crosses² on the back and on the trouser leg. We were housed in a separate block along with the so-called prominent prisoners: barbers, waiters, tailors and shoemakers, who took direct care of the S.S. men. Here were also

a few office clerks, as well as warehouse workers employed at headquarters.

Compared to Wacek's block, life here is truly paradise. The people are few, the beds not crowded. We sleep one to a mattress. There are clean pillows and sheets – four blankets per person. Just wrap yourself up and stay warm!

Here no one shouts, shrieks or scuffles! Even food is more abundant – the entire prisoner's allotted portion is given out; sometimes you even get extra. But most important, there are absolutely no lice here – not a trace of one! These prominent prisoners were deliberately kept separate so they wouldn't scatter lice into the S.S. clothing or around headquarters.

Finding myself in this block, I could consider myself saved. What will be will be – but now I'd free myself from the cripples' stratum.

Only four of us ended up here. The rest remained with that same Wacek and the splendid lifestyle he arranged for them. Some even happened to get hard labor in the orchards. Officially, this work was considered easy, but they had to carry barrels of water, tote quantities of dirt and manure. And they all had such little health left!

I got to work in one of the camp's foremost departments, officially called *Häftlingsschreibstube* – the prisoners' office. This was part of headquarters; in fact, the most important part. Here they kept the prisoners' personal data and much other consequential material. Various dossiers and certain classified information was available here.

Now I could look over the camp as from a high hill. I could assimilate and discern everything, besides acquainting myself with influential camp people from among the prisoners. It was even possible to meet many of the leading S.S. Organization's

members, who began to rely on me. One of my duties was to assign them jobs, guard duty and vacations. Of course, my assignments had to be confirmed by the camp chief, but he always ratified my decisions; wherever I appointed some S.S. to a sentry post, that's where he guarded.

This was where all the camp's public and confidential news was concentrated. Here the political strands of the various prisoner factions wove themselves together, insofar as they could. This office was especially important because the labor bureau, which weighed so heavily in the lives of the prisoners, was under the same roof.

XXIII

IN THIS DOOR AND OUT THAT DOOR

I was happy with my new block – the tailors, shoemakers, barbers and the other camp aristocrats – for only a short time. Four of five weeks slid by and the camp officials again summoned the Lithuanian intelligentsia to reconvene by the fence.

Heidel, the camp doctor, arrives with his assistant; the sanitation clerk appears; other functionaries turn up, too. They begin to examine us. Lo and behold, they discover that one's feet are swollen; one's heart flutters like the tail of a lamb; one has a bad case of phlegmon; one is blooming with boils; one's entire body is covered with sores contracted from the devil knows where; one's bowels are undergoing some kind of catastrophe; one is as hot as a sauna bath... In short, not one of us is found to be the picture of health.

The assorted officials record all examination data in registers, shake their heads and leave. We're then led to a separate block and housed together.

The room is small, with the same three-tiered bunks, but at least everyone has his own lair, sleeping alone with two blankets – and absolutely none of the Lord's own pale beasties! We're the only residents in the entire room. Not only are there no foreign prisoners, there aren't even any officials. No chiefs! **Zimmermann**, our block chief and an accomplished professional killer, lives in another room with other prisoners. He rarely interferes with our affairs.

This Zimmermann was a celebrated man. He was tall and broad, and possessed great physical strength. For sundry thefts and killings he had tossed around in various camps for many years. In our camp, he was very influential, considered one of the finest and most cultured of the block chiefs. Maybe he wasn't a bad chief, who the hell knows. As a bandit, he was certainly exemplary.

He did, however, have one not-so-commendable habit. During morning and evening inspections, all the prisoners would line up in formation. Some are standing straight, but others tilt, unable to stand well at all. Look, some cripple is bending to the side – ruining the impressive spectacle of inspection. Zimmermann runs up to him and tries standing him up this way and that, punching him from one side to the other, but the cripple just won't stand; it's as if he's made of dough. So Zimmermann drags this insubordinate softie of a cripple to the wall, grabs him by the chest and "Bang!" dashes his head against the wall. The cripple lays quietly against the wall. He won't rise again. He's finished.

Zimmermann was a specialist at this kind of head banging. He owned the patent. And normally he practiced only on cripples. Isn't it all the same to a cripple how and when he dies? Zimmermann rarely risked killing a healthy or partially healthy person: perhaps two or three a year, but no more. Otherwise, he wasn't a bad sort of thug. He only busted up a few men from our group. Not all of us. And not too hard – not a single one got his brains splattered on a wall.

The worst thing was that he forced us to sing in German during inspection, and sometimes even while marching, one of the very dumbest German marching canticles:

*Heute wollen wir probieren
Einen neuen Marsch rangieren,
O, du schönes Sauerland!*¹

What devils forced him to worship the Rhinelanders' Sauerland – North Rhine-Westphalia – in this stinking hole of Stutthof! I doubt if he knew himself!

When Zimmermann calls the tune, we chant. We have to. Whether we have voices or not – still we have to bleat. Whether we know the words or not – we have to howl anyhow. Zimmermann watches to see if your mouth is open or closed... To keep your mouth continuously open isn't good either: Zimmermann immediately crushes that snout. Mouths must keep moving all the time. It's absolutely crucial that your mouth move. Pretend you're a caroler!

We didn't stay long under Zimmermann's thumb, only about two or three weeks. Something was going on beyond the camp walls which we had no way of comprehending then.

Whether from Berlin or Lithuania or somewhere else entirely, the repercussions of unknown events were reaching camp, changing our fates.

Suddenly, we're again in formation against the fence. The camp's chief approaches.

"I don't know why you've landed in camp," he says to us, "but it seems you're different from the others. A document has been received stating that from this day forth, I have to keep you as honorary prisoners – *Ehrenhäftlinge*. You'll all be housed separately now. Starting this very moment, I, the camp chief, will be your direct superior. Orders of the camp senior will not apply to you – he can only pass on my decisions. You don't have to wear your hair convict-style any more. Every week you'll be able to write and receive letters." (Until this time, we'd written and received short letters every other week, like everyone else). "But the letters can't include one word about camp life or politics. Above all you may not specify which camp you are in – write simply 'Lager Stutthof' so it won't be decipherable what kind of camp this is."

The camp chief enlarged upon our new status. "From now on it is strictly forbidden for you to speak with other prisoners. If you're observed associating with them, you'll be returned to the general blocks. Work from now on is no longer mandatory, though of course anyone who wishes to may volunteer to work. You no longer need to wear the number with the triangle. You may, if you wish, wear your own jackets if you sew a yellow brassard on the sleeve. The striped prison pants are still compulsory, however. Camp discipline still applies to you, too. You are honorary prisoners, yes – but still prisoners (*Ehrenhäftlinge dock häflinge*)."

Hearing such an unlikely, even uncanny proclamation we became completely giddy. What in the world could have happened to so drastically change the camp chief? What made him suddenly so polite? Were we truly saved now? We really weren't going to die?

Now we were convinced we'd surely be released from this hellhole, and soon. So we became terribly irate when the older prisoners skeptically shook their heads at our happiness:

"Don't trust the S.S. They won't let you go anywhere! You'll see!"

Unfortunately, the skeptics told the truth.

In the meantime, though, our lives did improve. Following the camp chief's startling announcement, the authorities gave us brand new striped camp outfits and some decent underwear. Those who wished could even wear their own clothes. We were housed in a newly renovated barrack featuring bunks with only two tiers, not three, and these were wide ones, just like in the hospital. They gave us each a pillow with a cover; they even gave each of us a clean sheet and three blankets! Our dining room was separate from the others, and in it they hung a radio loudspeaker! Incredible!

They gave us no strange block chief, either – we elected one of our own. Our colleague the medical professor, who had the best reputation among the camp's patients, lived with us – and he was told that he was now responsible for our lives. He was obliged to see that no more of us died!

By this time, a few things had become clear. Our friends who had been rushed into death had saved our lives. Their mortality rate had apparently created anxiety among elements in the German government, who decided that we shouldn't be starved to death any more.

Our new barrack was in a peculiar location.

Ordinarily, it was strictly forbidden for a prisoner to slink around the women's barracks – indeed, tremendous punishments awaited anyone caught doing this. The women's barracks were fenced off from the men's by high barbed wire. But now we were housed right next to the women. They lived on one side of the street and we lived on the other. There wasn't even the hint of a fence between us – nothing at all to separate us!

“Just watch it! If you get near the women – look out!” warned the camp chief. “If I catch you, you'll be a twisted wreck for life!”

We heeded with utmost reverence this order of the camp chief. It wasn't always easy, though.

The women walk on one side of the street, and we – on the other. During working hours, it's tolerable. But on warm summer evenings, on Sundays – Sunday is an entire day! The women wander about, and we – walk. If we get near the women's side – watch out! We're like apostles with halos on our heads.

The other prisoners envy us tremendously for our vantage point. The Bible students call us Biblical asses, as if we'd already given into temptation, but it's not true, we haven't. The maidens on the other side of the street smile and wink enticingly at us, they reveal themselves in alluring ways, but we're cold and impassive as brick walls...

Finally the women run out of patience. They get mad and begin spreading the word that Lithuanian men aren't worth a damn, that they're frigid as frogs in the month of October. We proudly retort that we're very faithful to our wives.

“Oh, tell us all about it, gentlemen!” the women would scornfully snort. “We know there's plenty of single guys among you.”

Well, our great chastity wasn't really much to brag about; all of us were so overtired and hungry that we spent entire days flat

on our backs in bed. It would have taken something very sweet indeed to lure such weary and worn men to a lively pursuit of carnal delights!

One day the camp chief brought us a thick ream of paper and ordered us to fill it out.

“Das ist zur Entlassung! This for you release,” he told us, with a disappointed smile.

These were personal questionnaires and forms requesting work in Germany. We had to designate the kind of work we were familiar with and what kind we'd like to do – as well as our salary expectations!

Without even consulting each other, but as if it were a pre-meditated move, we all answered to this effect: that we expect no salary and request no work in Germany. We want to return to our old jobs, to our homeland from which you illegally and dishonorably uprooted us; and besides, we still have to restore the good health that has been taken from us in camp..

Three weeks later, the camp chief returned to us. He cursed us, screamed and spat through his teeth:

“Don't count on a quick discharge!”

All of the prisoners – including ourselves – were transferred to new barrackes we ourselves had erected. The old barracks were turned over to the hospital and workshops. In this new camp we were again moved into a separate barrack. But we were no longer forbidden to congregate with other prisoners.

Now it was clear to all: we were stuck here for a long time – until the end of the war, and possibly until the end of our lives.

XXIV

THE CAMP'S COMMANDANT

The camp's highest authority was vested in the hands of the commandant. He controlled both main sectors of the camp: the prisoners and the S.S. guards.

From the beginning of 1943, the commandant was S.S. Colonel **Hoppe**. Not especially tall, he had broad shoulders and dark hair. He was around thirty-five years old. His regular, youthful, yet somewhat boorish face was adorned with a short black mustache. He always wore high boots and a rubber raincoat and walked like a bulldog.

Camp work ran in Hoppe's family. His father-in-law was commandant at Dachau. Through his father-in-law's connections with S.S. chiefs, Hoppe had been liberated from the Army, where he'd served briefly as a flight lieutenant. In a short time he

made a tremendous career for himself in the S.S.: a camp commandant! Not just another nobody!

Like all people of inadequate education and low intelligence who are given a position that's beyond them, Commandant Hoppe was primarily concerned with promoting his grandeur and maintaining his dignity. God forbid that someone should think of him as equal to other sinners! Judging from Hoppe's view of his own glory, he could have been the emperor of Japan.

He lived in a splendid villa on a hill within the camp's boundaries. The villa was built by the prisoners and equipped with all kinds of luxurious creature comforts which most millionaires could only dream of, even in times of peace.

The women prisoners who worked in his home, as the children's nursemaids, for example, told us that he acted like a completely normal person at home – even in his dealings with them. He was the typical head of a German household, in relation to his wife and kids. His wife was a totally smothered chicken, as often happens in a Prussian family; she had very little understanding about what went on in the camp and what a cutthroat regime her husband represented. She sensed something nebulously, but didn't dare to think clearly about it.

In the summer of 1944, when her husband wasn't home, the commandant's wife would give the women prisoners anything she could lay her hands on. Then deeply sighing, she'd say:

“You, you! You will all soon be free, but Lord, oh Lord, what will happen to us...”

The rest of her words were drowned in a flood of tears.

Commandant Hoppe couldn't be viewed as an exceptional executioner. Among the prisoners, his name wasn't even outrageously bad.

Before Hoppe, the commandant was **Paul**, later transferred to head Camp Neuengamme. According to older prisoners, Commandant Paul was some kind of hybrid between a jackal and a hyena, surpassing all the other S.S. men in sadism and zest for execution. With the arrival of Commandant Hoppe, everything began changing for the better, and the prisoners credited this improvement to Hoppe.

Hoppe had few direct dealings with the prisoners. Only in exceptional cases would he utter a word or two to them; talking to prisoners was beneath his dignity. Rarely did he even curse the prisoners. Occasionally he would say something curt but picturesque:

“Beat his hide until water boils in his ass!”

But that was all. He said nothing more. No, he wasn't very talkative.

Rarely did he show himself in the region of the residential barracks, and then only for solemn events: public hangings or formal floggings performed to fulfill a punishment ordered by Berlin – or, when he was in a zealous mood, to inflict one even in advance of orders. From time to time he came to watch the prisoners' dress parade in the morning, when the prisoners hobbled off to work. The commandant would diligently watch all the prisoners tramp past, metamorphosed into samovars.

Sporadically he did become angry with the prisoners. This happened when prisoners stole his personal potatoes or tomatoes from under the windows of his villa.

When he caught some impudent poacher, he herded him like a calf into our office. Sticking his head through the office window, he'd swear:

“What the devil... *Scheisse!* Shit! There's no one here...”

He could never find a prisoner in the office suitable for beating the hide off a potato thief – he could see that we clerks were entirely inadequate for this kind of work. And so he herded his potato thief around camp until he found the right man to cane the thief's behind.

He never beat prisoners himself, however; it was as if he wasn't a real German. But then to tell the truth, he didn't frighten the prisoners all that much. The various S.S. boys were more scared of him than we were.

To a prisoner, what's a commandant? A German with buttons, nothing more. But to an S.S. kid, the commandant is a demigod – all powerful. A note or word from the commandant and the S.S. hero flies out of camp. Where in the world would he find a better post? If the commandant got a notion in his head and dropped somebody a line, the S.S. soldier could end up at the front. What can a self-respecting S.S. do there? Who can he beat? What will he steal? His own hide could get beaten there – not a pleasant prospect.

It's possible that the commandant took such little interest in the prisoners' business because he was so often occupied with other things.

The concentration camp was like the private property of the S.S. Organization. Along the road hung a sign which said it clearly: S.S. Camp.

Another organization was also in the care of the S.S. This was the German Armament Works, called DAW, short for *Deutsche Ausrüstungs Werke*. While the S.S. was a nationalized police organization, the DAW was technically a private enterprise – but they worked hand-in-glove. The S.S. set up and managed concentration camps, and the DAW did the same for factories and

workshops. Labor was provided by the prisoners caught and tortured by the S.S.; the profits from their work were taken by the DAW.

The activities of the S.S. and DAW were coordinated in myriad ways.

Every concentration camp in Germany had a full complement of DAW workshops. Prisoner-laborers, of course, were never scarce.

The DAW chairman in the Stutthof Camp was the camp commandant himself. Of course, the man had worries – how the prisoner-laborers lived was by far the least of them. He was at the head of a very big business. Stutthof Camp had other enterprises that operated in its name but which in fact were largely separate. In the office of the construction division alone, worked twenty to thirty prisoners – engineers, technicians, draftsmen – yet they executed only a small portion of the work done in that office.

Various private firms owned by the S.S. were awarded the most important jobs. Each contract made with these firms passed through the commandant's hands.

The bookkeeping for these contracts was mysterious. For example, say the camp gives a private S.S. firm the work of building roads inside the camp and among its various outlying enterprises. The camp provides the firm with a work force – prisoners. The firm pays the camp for the use of the prisoners: half a mark or a mark per workday. The firm also gives a little something to the capo of the labor detachment, so he'll organize everything for the profit of the firm, without regard to the prisoners. A capo who's received such a gift with the promise of more to come, exerts himself mightily in bludgeoning his captive labor force.

Under the terms of the typical arrangement, the firm provides work machinery – however, the camp pays for it. Payment

to the firm is made neither according to work completed, nor according to the hours the machines are used – but according to how many days these machines hang around in camp. For example, in the autumn of 1943, the firm dragged in several barely twitching dinosaurs, which were supposed to be road levelers. Frost descended and work halted. The dinosaurs stuck around in camp through rain and snow, while the camp administration conscientiously paid for these machines, for each and every day spent in camp! The company continued to receive its money after not even a footprint remained of the machines, the prisoners having performed a complete renovation – that is, they dismantled them and smuggled the parts out of camp, trading these for moonshine...

The commandant often walked past these worm-eaten machines. Probably he saw them every day. Of course he knew that they were slowly disappearing, yet he continued his scrupulous payments to the firm!

How precisely organized was the pilfering from the camp's treasury!

This work was carried out by the ideal people: honored S.S. men. That's how it was at the top of the organization.

Our commandant had good reasons for ignoring the small matter of the prisoners!

XXV

COMMANDER OF THE CAMP'S PRISONERS

The commander of the camp's prisoners was officially called "*Schutzlagerführer des Konzentrationslager Stutthof*". He was **Traugott Mayer**, from the village of Pfafendorf, near Augsburg, I believe. Mayer was a pure Bavarian, speaking the Bavarian dialect through his nose so that his aides, from the Gdansk area, understood what he was saying to them only with the greatest difficulty. His S.S. rank was approximate to a captain's in the infantry.

As fate would have it, I became a clerk in his office, under his direct jurisdiction.

This office was composed of two sections. The one in the commandant's headquarters was for covert and S.S. work affairs; the other, near the women's barracks, dealt with routine

prisoners' concerns. The chief of the entire office was S.S. Sergeant **Bublitz** – a dairyman, by profession.

I mingled in both sections of the office – from top to bottom – depending on my assignment of the moment. Often I witnessed a scene like this:

Mayer storms into our office. Bublitz jumps up. He stands at attention, clicks his heels, juts out his chin, hugs his hands to his thighs, blinks compulsively, smacks his lips, shakes in his shoes – we're bursting with laughter! Mayer is obviously steamed. He waves his hand and mutters under his nose in Bavarian. At last he says clearly in German:

"Scheisse!"

Bublitz, standing straight, squawks like a parrot:

"Jawohl! Jawohl Captain Sir..."

When Mayer leaves, Bublitz assails me:

"What did he say? What did he order me to do?"

Bublitz could understand nothing in Bavarian.

"Nothing good," I tell Bublitz. "He said that you are a *Scheisse*, that is, a shit..."

"No, no... I understood that myself." Bublitz wipes away his sweat. "But what else? What did he order me to do?"

"Well, he didn't order you to do anything. He said he'd do it himself... He's going to tell your wife about yesterday's trip to town, when you went to see the grass widow... A complaint has been received about you..."

"Oh! *Scheisse!*" Bublitz grabs his head and tears out of the room. He rushes straight to the grass widow to dispose of something over there...

Mayer was tall, lean, dark haired, always neatly shaven. In normal life, he could have been truly handsome. Meagerly edu-

cated, but with the smarts of a shrewd Bavarian peasant, Mayer was one of the cleverest of the camp's S.S. He could have had a really good head on his shoulders if he hadn't been born with the soul of a bandit.

Mayer was an S.S. down to the marrow. Just below his eye, next to his nose, he'd had "S.S." tattooed in tiny letters – indicating that he wasn't planning to shed his skin under any circumstances.

He moved just like a stork; first he'd stand on one leg, then on the other. In fact he was known as Bocian Bawarski, Bavarian Stork.

With the commandant so often preoccupied, Mayer was the real ruler of the prisoners.

He knew how to swear magnificently. Although his lexicon wasn't enormously rich, it was enhanced by its pungency.

Mayer often roamed through the prisoners' residential compound. He took joy in jabbing the prisoners with a stick, kicking them, boxing their ears, especially if he was a bit soused when he happened to plod into camp anytime of day or night. The devil knows where he got bombed, but at night he'd stagger in and creep through the barracks. He'd curse one prisoner, kick another, thrash a third... Having knocked around awhile, he'd return to his workroom at headquarters and sprawl out on the sofa, fully clothed and shod, without so much as a pillow for his head...

Next morning, his wife would call our office – she lived in a summer cottage near the brick factory three kilometers away:

"Have you seen my husband? Traugott has vanished without a word..."

Bublitz and I discuss what we should tell this little woman. We can't tell her that our mighty chief, drunk as a hog, is lolling right here behind the wall – the devil take him!

Composing himself as much as he's able, Bublitz wheezes into the phone:

"No, we didn't see him... He left for Hopehill on business. Yes, yes, to Gdansk... Even past Gdansk, in fact..."

"Oh Jesus, Jesus!" The little woman's sighs could be heard until at last she hung up.

Arising from his lousy lair, Mayer again stalks and stumbles through the camp, until he finds someone to pester. Now he starts his exercises.

"Bash!" He smashes a prisoner's ear. "Bam!" And the prisoner has fallen. But once you've fallen, you can't just lay there! You must rise at once and stand like a samovar in front of the chief, removing your cap, of course. And so this monotonous operation stretches on and on: "Bash-bam, bash-bam, bash-bam, bash..."

For the longest time I couldn't figure out why people fell down so fast from a blow from the drunken chief. It seemed something deep, even profound, lay at the bottom of this matter.

Drunk, Mayer got terribly insulted if a prisoner didn't fall when he was hit. His bully-ego was deeply injured. At times like this he'd get really angry and begin boxing ears with all his might – until you fell down anyway. The easiest way out of this was the following: the second he touches you – fall, then get up right away; falling the second time, get up a little slower. With each fall, stretch out the time you take getting up. After about the tenth blow, you can start crawling, shaking in your shoes – as if you've had it and can't arise anymore. Then Mayer will explain to you that you're a blöde Sauhund; he'll mount his motorcycle and charge off to his little woman to suffer the hang-over. Once his motorcycle sneezes, you can safely get up and go your own way.

Mayer wrote testimonials to Berlin, to the center of S.S. camps, about the prisoners and their behavior – who in Mayer’s opinion had already reformed, who had deteriorated even further, who stood in need of greater pressure. His reviews were important, of course, but only in one direction; though there was little he could do to help a prisoner, he was quite capable of harm. He recommended many prisoners for release from camp, but Berlin ignored these suggestions; when he made negative reports, then and only then did they pay attention.

Death penalties were carried out in camp, some publicly, some secretly. Sometimes up to a score of prisoners had to be hung.

The hanging procedure was tedious. The camp had a single gallows tree; only one or two prisoners fit at a time. It took a long time to hang them, cut them down, loop a new rope for the next batch... The prisoners last in line got bored awaiting their turn. And the authorities got bored, too.

So another procedure was instituted. Two or three prisoners were hung and the rest got bullets in the backs of their heads. For this latter procedure, a cubicle, similar to a phone booth, was installed in a closed room. The cubicle had an oblong slot in its back panel.

A prisoner is brought to the room and met by an S.S. dressed in a white lab coat. He feels the prisoner’s pulse, appears to be listening to his heart, leads him to the booth – supposedly to check his height and weight. The prisoner leans back against the oblong slot – through which a bullet enters the back of his head. Traugott Mayer simply adored this kind of shooting job. It was his privilege, his sport.

Among the German S.S., this method of killing people was regarded as very noble. And why not? Enemies of the Third Reich

were being annihilated! When Mayer himself was sick with a hangover or wasn't able to perform this honorable task for some other reason, the lower S.S. battled among themselves to be allowed to do this chore! Not everyone had such luck – not everyone was allowed; Mayer hogged most of the opportunities. Only one class of prisoners he refused to shoot, and that was Jewish women; it would have been too demeaning for him. He handed such tasks over to the lower ranks.

Mayer's soul was wide and deep as the sea: all kinds of garbage fit into it. For example, a fir was decorated in camp for Christmas of 1944. This huge tree was dragged in and covered with electric lights of all colors. On the first day of Christmas, Mayer found himself obliged to publically hang a couple of convicts. He ordered gallows erected beside the flickering fir. A bell sounded, summoning the convicts. All stood in neat formation as the two convicts were neatly hung beside the tree with the multicolored lights. It set the mood for Christmas week: here the tree sparkles, here the lights shine, here alongside it the hanged men dangle.

Mayer's taste was exemplary!

In the fall of 1944, a touchier situation developed. On a certain evening, around thirty Poles were to be hung or shot. The thirty Poles condemned to death were gathered late in the evening, lined up separately along the fence, hands tied behind their backs. Naturally, no one informed them why this was being done. Naturally, they all knew very well what was going to happen to them. How they felt standing there along that fence, everyone can imagine for himself.

Pressing close to each other in a group, the Poles untied each other's hands – the simplest string was used to bind them. Once they were led beyond the camp gate, on the way to the gallows,

they began to run in all directions. The guards started firing in volleys with automatics and machine guns. They shot more than just these runaways: they also shot three prisoners lying in bed. The barrack walls were made of thin boards, and who knows where bullets will land in the dark...

All the escapers weren't immediately shot dead. Many were only wounded. Mayer himself finished those off, visiting each in the spot where he lay.

Numerous camp officials assisted in the search for the wounded – the camp senior, block chiefs, capos. For this work, Mayer presented them with a barrel of beer. The workers, on their own initiative, stole six liters of varnish from the DAW workshop, which they turned into hooch. They pilfered the prisoners' packages of sausage, ham, cheese. The first officially sanctioned camp party – the bandit's ball – was in full swing.

For a weak-nerved man or one not used to such adventures, a bandits' ball – no matter where it's held – is a rather horrifying event. But such a party under concentration camp conditions, where the revelers are not mere run-of-the-mill robbers but master bandits, classic thugs – well, that is a ball and a half! To see such a party is worth all the effort of getting into a concentration camp. Nowhere else in the world, not for any amount of money can you see such a hell-raising!

After the ball, Mayer called together all the prisoners and lectured them:

“Those idiots ran – and they were shot down, everyone. Why did they have to run? Don't you run; you won't get anywhere; we'll shoot you all. In camp, nothing bad will happen. Of course, if it happens that we have to hang you, I'll gladly hang you, but that's not so bad. Otherwise, nothing bad will happen to you. I don't recommend running to anyone...”

Of course, if he hangs you – what's so bad about that? So many people have already been hung – and what ill befell them?

Everyone has to die some day! Sooner or later – what's the difference?

This *sancta simplicitas*¹ of Mayer's has to be forgiven: he was piously convinced that prisoners are not people.

XXVI

REPORT LEADER

Following the camp chief, the second most important figure, especially for the prisoners, was the leader of the report unit – *Rapportführer*. As direct aide to the camp chief, his duties were to supervise internal affairs of the prisoners' camp, to monitor and punish the prisoners who committed various crimes within camp boundaries, to check the prisoners' daily roster and, of course, to make sure that no one escaped. He also had to report the camp's census and day's events to the chief or the commandant, if either one deigned to attend inspection.

Arno Chemnitz, a hotel porter in civilian life, was leader of our report unit. He was a tall and shriveled up man of about thirty who looked closer to forty-five. His shoulders were always a trifle drawn, as if he were about to grow a hump on his back.

The man had aged too fast. Various and abundant sins oppressed his conscience – if in fact he had one, that is.

Chemnitz was a particularly morose and stubborn bandit, a very scantily educated lad. When still an adolescent, he'd joined the Nazi Organization, partook in sundry massacres and earned the rank of a high non-com in camp. He was S.S. Hauptscharführer – in army terms, something like a master sergeant.

He was always dreadfully glum and never talkative, although there were moments when he'd come to life and a smile flashed across his face. This happened when he got together with his wards, the prisoners-bandits in camp. He'd talk with them about hunting, about dogs, about happy broads... With people of other professions, though, he had nothing to discuss.

There were times when he'd come into our office, seat himself in a corner and – silence. Silent for an hour, for two hours, doing nothing.

If at least this abomination would swear, it wouldn't be so eerie, but he wouldn't even do that! Silence – and that's all. In that silence it was impossible to even think about working. You'd ask him something – he'd mutter under his nose, immediately rise and leave. Who knew if he didn't want to talk to us or if he simply didn't know how to answer? Pestering him with questions was the only way to get him out of the office, so he wouldn't scowl all day long, so we could roll a butt now and then.

With this job, I was on my own. Whether I assigned this S.S. sergeant for guard duty or released that one for vacation, Chemnitz always confirmed my plans and schedules. In this way, I managed the work of the S.S. sergeants – the same sergeants who could do away with me, have me hanged at any moment.

Once in the spring of 1944, Chemnitz called a certain Pole into the office.

“So, you read English books?”

“Yes, Sir *Rapportführer*, I do.”

Silence. Chemnitz drums his fingers on the table. After three minutes:

“So, you think the English will win the war? And that’s what you tell everybody?”

“Yes, Sir *Rapportführer*, I do tell everyone. I’m thoroughly convinced that the Germans have already lost the war.”

Silence. Chemnitz drums his fingers on the table. The Anglophilic Pole stands at attention in front of him. Three minutes go by. Five minutes go by. Eight minutes go by... Suddenly Chemnitz leaps up like a cat under a whip and blasts the Pole across the cheek with his fist.

“*Weeeg!* Get out!” Chemnitz squeaks at the swaying Anglophile.

The Anglophile stumbles through the door. Chemnitz sits down again and silence. Again ten minutes, fifteen minutes slink by. Chemnitz hisses through his teeth:

“The pig!” and quickly stands up and exits.

With this, the investigation of the Pole’s political proselytizing was ended. No further harm came to that Anglophile for his convictions.

Overall, we were allowed to speak freely in camp. A prisoner had nothing to lose; nothing worse than landing in camp could happen to him. The authorities were convinced the prisoners wouldn’t leave camp alive anyway, so who cared what they said?

But Chemnitz’s interrogations of prisoners didn’t always end so simply.

When Chemnitz was interrogating, a prisoner had to admit his guilt. Chemnitz beat him until he confessed. It didn’t matter whether he was guilty or not, he’d still get fifty blows with the bludgeon, a hundred blows, two hundred...

Aside from a bludgeon or a whip of wires covered with rubber, Chemnitz had no other means of inquest. A straight forward confession of guilt was much more convenient for the one being questioned. Confess and Chemnitz quit beating.

But then Mayer would write a report to Berlin. After about three months, a notice from Berlin arrived with an officially specified punishment: five, seven, ten, fifteen, sometimes twenty-five lashes. In such cases, the punishment was formally executed.

The commandant arrives, Dr. Heidel arrives, other high officials arrive. You're beautifully stretched over a sawhorse. One of the camp's executioners straddles your head, politely squeezing with his thighs so you won't move it unnecessarily. Another executioner, having removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, neatly whips your butt – rather sportsmanlike, with deep reverberations: "Swish-swish-swish..." You could be wearing several pairs of heavy pants – nobody checks them before the operation. Afterwards, though, you have to remove your pants and reveal to the dignified commandant and the entire commission of notables that part of the body which according to the laws in France is not punished with switches – and then you can pull your pants back up.

Everything's over, nice as you please. Except that the advance punishment received during the interrogation from Chemnitz – sometimes with the supervision of Mayer – is not, of course, included in the count. This may be the only type of advance that never has had to be repaid. But advances of this type weren't worth all that much to the prisoner; they made it cheaper to confess at once, whether you were guilty or not.

Oh yes, there was one way to save yourself from both the advance and from confessing your guilt. The prisoner used this method on especially important occasions. The technique –

diarrhea. Just guzzle half a liter of castor oil or some other hellish rot.

The interrogation has barely barely begun and look, Mayer is already holding his nose.

“Tfu, you devil!” Mayer yells. “Get him out of this room!”

A disgusted Mayer throws the defendant out. Naturally, that’s all the latter wanted. The interrogation ends here and the advance is so small it’s hardly worth mentioning.

Sometimes Chemnitz’s line of inquiry varied; he’d demand that the defendant betray his accomplices. That’s okay, if there are in fact accomplices. But what do you do if there are none? He’ll beat you anyway until you betray someone! So the defendant gives him any last name, the name of some enemy or competitor. The defendant’s alleged partner is immediately summoned. This one, of course, snivels that this degenerate dog has unjustly accused him.

“So, you say he unjustly informed on you?” Chemnitz smiles. “Yes, yes, Sir *Rapportführer!*” “This asshole slandered me!” “If that’s true, here, take this whip and lick his hide for such an asinine lie.”

The slandered one takes the whip and wholeheartedly scourges the squealer. “You snake, this’ll teach you.”

The squealer in turn gets irate and squeals even more sincerely. He’s thinking that his buddy could have had a heart – the bastard didn’t have to flail him so hard!

Now Chemnitz turns to the squealer. “So, you say he’s as guilty as you, and he has the nerve to beat you? Here, take the whip – swat him back.”

The squealer slashes his alleged accomplice, no less wholeheartedly.

The prisoners trade off flailing each other a few more times, getting hotter and angrier all the while. They’re thrashing each

other like all hell's broken loose! Chemnitz is chuckling, delighted with this little play he's improvised.

In the end, a report is written: both prisoners are guilty. The players exit beating and cursing each other.

Getting prisoners to fight one another delighted Chemnitz, and he did it quite often.

Chemnitz also often substituted for Mayer in the business of putting bullets into skulls. And he personally assisted the executioners at the gallows, especially when there was a German to be hung.

His routine duties included checking the roster of prisoners mornings and evenings. When the bell sounded, the prisoners lined up in decorous formation, stood at attention and took their caps off while the block chiefs reported the census to Chemnitz, who in turn reported to the higher authorities.

Appell or roll-call went quickly in the morning, but the evening ones – the devil take them! Sometimes they lasted hideously long. People return from work, dead tired, barely able to stand, cold, starving – and Chemnitz orders them to stand by the hour, warbling German slave songs about the glories of camp life!

Chemnitz appointed all the camp “trustees” – block chiefs, clerks, capos and others. Mostly he picked criminals – thieves, robbers and professional killers were the creatures close to his heart. We had Chemnitz to thank that the camps internal affairs were in the hands of murderous rogues.

Chemnitz detested our Lithuanian block – he hated intellectuals altogether. He often cursed us with the most abominable oaths, threatening to hang us or shoot us or play some dirty S.S. trick on us. Sometimes he shot off his revolver under our window – but to actually touch us, he didn't dare. We were Mayer's wards, not his.

Of all the intellectuals in camp, he trusted only two Poles who worked in the office – and unfortunately, so unfortunately, he also trusted me! At least he said so, more than once. Why he chose me is hard to say, unless it was because I, like he, was always silent; he probably viewed me, too, as a morose bandit... He attended to many of the Stutthof village widows and grass widows, yet he did have a family – a wife and kids somewhere in Thuringen near Weimar. He sent various packages from camp, often driving out to visit with even more substantial gifts. For him, camp supplies were inexhaustable.

It's possible that at home he wasn't a bad daddy.

XXVII

“CAMP TRUSTEES”

All prisoners were appointed to specific residential barracks called blocks. Each block housed from 600 to 2000 prisoners or more, though officially there was room for only 360 per block – if every prisoner got a bed to sleep in.

At the head of the block stood the *Blockführer* or block leader, usually a low-ranking S. S. He was absolute boss of the block; his word was sacrosanct. You could address him only in the samovar position: cap off and standing at attention. He could condemn and punish you as he pleased, but this authority was seldom exercised – only when he wanted to have some fun or mug someone. Day-to-day command of the block was in the hands of his underling, the block chief, called *pan blokowy* in Polish. His aide, the block secretary, was known as *pan Schreiber*. The block chief and the block secretary were chosen from among the prisoners;

they had tremendous power. They could do whatever they liked to a rank and file prisoner. They could take anything he owned, appropriate the lion's share of his parcels from home – or the whole thing, if they felt like it. They could saddle a prisoner with the most backbreaking, horrible jobs or put him on constant guard duty. Of course, they could also take care of a prisoner, get him out of hard or unpleasant tasks – or they could beat him to their heart's content. They could even kill him, with no repercussions. So now the Third Reich is minus another enemy – that's that. Only the biggest ass would file a grievance against a block chief or secretary. According to the unwritten camp constitution, the guilty party is the one who complained. Always.

Even if some thief or bully gets a reprimand or even a few days of incarceration, he'll be back soon at his post, with Chemnitz still on his side – and from then on the plaintiff is lost. He'll be killed, maimed, or put in such living conditions that he'll become a cripple out of sheer boredom. And then of his own free will, he'll die.

No! Only the biggest ass would complain. Nobody in camp respected a remonstrator. With the exception of one or two silly newcomers, nobody ever complained.

Anyway, to oppose the intrepid operations of a block chief or secretary was simply not allowed. This would have amounted to resistance to authority – and every authority, it goes without saying, has a tremendous aversion to such behavior. In a case of outright opposition, the block chief would normally kill the insurrectionist – and that's all there was to it. He then reports to his superiors that the prisoner attacked and that he, the block chief, simply liquidated the insurgent in self defense. Truth is always on the side of the block chief, who can call on a teeming

horde of witnesses who will vouch for him under any circumstances.

It's not hard to understand why any prisoner, even as he's being beaten and drenched with stinking dishwater, still tries to stay on good terms with the chief and secretary of the block. The prisoner might be starving to death – he'd still hand over the choicest morsels sent from home.

Despite all, it might have been possible to get along with the block chief and the block secretary, but the trouble was they weren't alone. The block was jam-packed with all sorts of authority figures; they teemed like leeches in a pond.

Below the block chief and secretary were the so-called room functionaries, who managed the sleeping barracks, for example. They had to be treated carefully because they, too, could swallow a man whole. And then there were the bread slicers, jam spreaders, soup ladlers, bowl washers, barbers who harrowed your cheeks and noggin – thunder only knows how many magisterial figures there were in all. And we had to live so peacefully, so pleasantly with all of them!

One fine day in 1943, a prisoner gets a parcel from home. The better part of his package is officially filched by the block leader and the block chief and secretary, divvied up according to their discretion. After all, the block leader is a person, too, and he has to live! He has a spouse, and kids, often a grass widow or two on the side, and this bunch has to be supplied with food. Where's it supposed to come from? The remainder of the block's authorities must also be bribed and given something... The prisoner is better off liquidating his parcel the same day it arrives. Even if there were something left over, there's no place to store the remains. You can't take them to work – it's forbidden. Everything would be swiped there for sure. If you leave it in bed

under the pillow, someone will steal it – and besides, it's prohibited to keep things under the pillow! Where else will you put it? It's more sensible to give it to the authorities of your own accord than to leave it for an unknown thief! Perhaps the authorities may take your generosity into consideration some day...

The block chief was obliged to rip-off the prisoners because, besides his personal business, he also had many block affairs to tend to, requiring payoffs to a lot of people. The building itself had to be repaired, broken glass replaced and so on – there were tables and benches to be installed, indeed all kinds of refurbishments, refinements and embellishments to make... Material for all this had to be stolen from the S.S. or DAW warehouses; those stealing it had to be paid; the craftsmen who did the work on their own time, away from their official jobs, had to be paid as well.

Finally, the block chiefs had to contribute a king's ransom to the camp senior. Even this might have been bearable if there were only one, but sometimes the camp had two seniors!

This *Lagerälteste*, or camp senior, was another figure with far-reaching powers.

A prisoner nominated by Chemnitz and appointed by Mayer, the senior was the official hangman. His most august duty was to destroy enemies of the Reich.

He was also the number one spy in camp, controlling a wide network of informants whose findings he reported to the authorities.

Not least important, he was the main administrator of daily affairs in camp. As such, he set the tone. He nominated all block chiefs, secretaries, capos, and sub-officials, with Chemnitz accepting or rejecting his choices; sometimes he even won out against Chemnitz's objections.

From nine in the evening until five in the morning, he was the undisputed boss in camp; not even S.S. members had the right to enter without the commandant's specific permission; the only exceptions were the guard, Mayer and Chemnitz. The senior could actually keep an S.S. out of camp. He could also conduct searches, investigate, interrogate, lambast and liquidate.

Towards the fall of 1944, it somehow came about that one or two people hung themselves each week in the washroom of the senior's block. Everyone knew that the senior had helped them accomplish this duty, but for this he never had a moment of trouble. He reveled in his privileges, which included his own German shepherd – a gift from Chemnitz – and his own bicycle, stolen from the administrative warehouse, with Chemnitz's blessings.

The senior didn't eat ordinary prison food. The block chiefs had to supply him with their own, and lots of it – because the senior had many expenses, and he in turn took good care of the block chiefs.

For example, say Chemnitz wants to ingratiate himself with the commandant by presenting him a gift for some holiday. Chemnitz calls for the camp senior:

“Look, a wagon has to be made in accordance with this drawing. I want top quality material and craftsmanship. Will I have it?”

“Jawohl!” answers the senior. “Of course you'll have it.”

The senior has to find the materials. If they're not available in the S.S. or DAW warehouses, he has to make sure they're ordered. Once materials are located, he has to organize the heist from the warehouses. Then he has to make sure that the construction in the workshops proceeds in secrecy so the S.S. supervisors don't notice. Finally, he has to arrange the clandestine delivery of the finished wagon.

The senior took care of all this beautifully.

Once he organized a wagon in this fashion; another time, a fantastic sleigh. What a marvelous organization he had to maintain! But all of this, naturally, came at a price. The price was extraordinarily high, primarily because the S.S. soldiers were very strange. They all stole without exception and everyone knew it – but for some reason they tried very hard to conceal their thefts from one another. They informed on each other to Berlin, scrapping and scuffling like dogs around a bone...

So now the wagon and the sleigh are completed, but this still isn't all. Chemnitz wants to present the commandant with a harnessed wagon. There are no horses in camp, however. They just don't make them here. They have to be purchased on the outside, and they cost a goodly sum. Chemnitz, a poor sergeant, receiving as he does such meager wages – he can't possibly buy horses with his own money. So the camp senior has to organize various valuables in camp – in an amount sufficient to ensure the procurement of a couple of horses in wartime!

And somehow he does it. The commandant receives the gift of a harnessed wagon. He climbs in with his little woman and drives off, totally unconcerned with how this lowly sergeant can get such things in wartime.

Of course Chemnitz wasn't the only one who demanded gifts. The commandant and Mayer and other S.S. men with superior officers and families of their own also needed gifts. And the camp senior had to supply them all!

The senior had a sea of troubles. To the camp rulers, he was the indispensable man. It goes without saying that the leaders had to give him something in return. They turned their heads the other way when, while stealing for their benefit, he did not neglect himself.

The camp senior lived magnificently! He dressed magnificently! He drank and reveled with gusto, all the time; he swatted noses, booted asses and conscientiously gibbeted enemies of the Reich.

Not just anyone could perform such complicated tasks. The camp seniors were crackerjacks of a high caliber, a very special sort of breed.

XXVIII

CAMP SENIOR ARNO LEHMAN

In the beginning of 1943, the camp was small, yet there were two camp seniors: Arno Lehman and Fritz Selonke.

Not only was the camp small, it was also poor. Not only was there not enough for two seniors to do, there also wasn't enough to steal.

It's incredibly boring for two such sturdy and healthy men to loaf idly around camp, but there's nothing to do! A man could go stir crazy. The only spice in life is when there's someone to be hung. When there's no one to hang – just sit and chew your fingernails. And wouldn't you know it, there's hardly anyone to hang: the prisoners slip down to the cripples' stratum and die off in no time, without the seniors' assistance.

These two enlivened their own miserable state by grilling the prisoners. Lehman specialized in making inspections and Selonke in smashing noses.

Lehman would check to see if some ragged cripple who's barely dragging his heels has all the buttons on his shabby camp jacket – if he's carrying some tatter in his pocket instead of a handkerchief – of course his handkerchiefs were taken away at the start – or if he's got some rag to bind his wounds or a crust of bread hidden under his pillow...

If you feel like beating, you'll always find a stick; if you want to inspect, you'll always find some disorder.

And that's how it was, Lehman inspecting, Selonke boxing ears.

It goes without saying that this job was simply inadequate for two such men. One thing was clear to everyone: the camp wasn't big enough for two seniors. The question remained – which one would come out on top and which would end up face down in the snow...

And so began the wrestling match between the two seniors, which dragged on for more than half a year!

The match started with diplomatic cunning, with intrigue, deceit, chicanery, treachery, provocation, machination...

The battle was for life or death – exactly like that between a bull and a ram. The bull, enraged at his neighboring ram, bellows, grunts, drools on the ground, rips the pasture with his horns, paws the soil as if to scare the ram and invite him to a duel. Raising his head, the ram stares at the bull – playing the fool.

“Baa-aa-aa!” says the ram, and without waiting for an appropriate response, suddenly charges and “Bam!” with his horns into the top of the bull's snout. The bull is stunned, amazed. With bloodshot eyes he glares at the wily ram making ready for another attack:

“Mooooo!” the bull nods his head. He won't fight anymore with such a rascal!

The bull turns, determined to break out of the battlefield. But the ram charges “Bam!” into the bull’s rear with his horns.

The bull is quivering with anger, he had no means to express his disgust to the ram... The bull runs to hide from the ram in the midst of a herd of cows.

Lehman fared in his battle with Selonke exactly like the bull.

Arno Lehman was tall, solid, broad faced with sturdy cheekbones and a somewhat balding pate. He was forty years old and a truck driver in civilian life. He’d had something like three wives and a quantity of kids – he’d never counted them because, in his opinion, that was women’s work. He hadn’t been involved in too many court cases. I believe he’d only slayed two or three citizens of the Reich – not out of malice, it just happened almost accidentally, you might say. The courts, of course, couldn’t understand this and stuck the poor guy in a lousy jail. Later he landed in camp, once again not out of any wickedness on his part but rather more likely through some misunderstanding. He’d gone into someone’s apartment to steal a thing or two and lo and behold he found himself under fire; naturally he returned fire and moved an ax that just happened to be lying close at hand from one place to another. He didn’t exactly kill anyone, it just so happened that... Oh, it’s tedious to recount such trifles!

His greatest source of pride was his thunderous throat. Only a rare champion bull could have competed with him in a voice contest. Lehman’s curses could be heard throughout camp, so that even S.S. guards sitting in the towers atop the barbed wire fence would sneeze at the stink of his swearing.

Lehman tremendously enjoyed the title of camp senior and the honors that flowed from it!

For his birthday, all the camp’s prisoners had to prepare a dress parade in his honor. This was perhaps the most grotesque parade in world history.

Into formation fall a few thousand convict-slaves, the healthy, the lame and the crippled, shoved, cursed, and flogged with sticks by the block chiefs... And this hapless rabble has to perform a dress parade, warbling convict carols in honor of Lehman. As they pass the pedestal on which he is perched, they must remove their caps and yell "Hooray!"

Having hosted this event, Lehman was happy, indeed overjoyed. Lehman's wide chin shone with contentment. Lehman was even dumber than he looked.

Lehman was a German patriot: in his activities, he leaned on the German party, of which eighty to ninety percent were criminals and homosexuals.

He was tied to his family in an especially German way. Children he loved tremendously – or more precisely, he loved children's mothers, before they had any children. Taking advantage of a senior's privileges, he caught the scent of the women's block chief, *pani blokowa*, and carried on with her domestically.

This *pani blokowa* was another winner! Mrs. Sophie was a Polish political prisoner; she'd landed in camp for holding meetings in her home. She left her family behind. About fifty, heavy, fat and wrinkled, with a very wide bottom and slender fingers, she resembled a cow after birthing her ninth calf, with glasses.

Mrs. Sophie very courageously defended the women in her block from reproaches and punishments of the authorities, leaping like a cat into their eyes; but on the other hand, she beat the little noses of her girls herself and performed this no worse than the men's block chiefs.

And this Polish woman got along domestically with a German bandit, with the camp's executioner! Indeed they got on so well that their passion was his downfall.

Some sort of Satanic mischief-maker dangled an evil temptation before Lehman, and Lehman fell for it. He sent the camp

authorities an official request for permission to live openly with Mrs. Sophie. This was essential, he wrote, for his health and personal well-being. He added that if his family should grow larger, he would take it on himself to support the new members.

On receipt of this surprising letter from Lehman, Mayer had to hold on to his stomach – he laughed until he couldn't laugh any more. Without further investigation, he concluded that Lehman had suddenly gone nuts.

From that day, Lehman's gallant name began to sink. Mrs. Sophie, wiping tears on her apron, convinced Lehman that it was all the fault of the cursed snake, *Selonke*.

Lehman had taken to affecting a necktie, and now the authorities ordered him to remove it. They made him cut his stylish long locks convict-style. Then they locked him in a bunker.

Sweet Lord! The camp senior, before whom we used to bow our heads so low, before whom we abjectly paraded – had landed in the bunker! My, my, what goes on in this world! Mrs. Sophie poured out tears of sorrow. Her colorful apron got completely soaked.

Next the authorities ran a check on Lehman's wealth, which by now amounted to several suitcases of treasure – several dozen wonderful shirts, pants, and socks of silk; six pairs of splendid shoes; several coats, suits and pairs of leather gloves; Swiss watches, and many other valuables; not even taking into account the stuff he'd already managed to smuggle out of camp!

It was clear to everyone: the camp's high executioner was being deposed. One question remained: when and how would he end his youthful days?

His earthly span ended in a somewhat unexpected fashion.

Several times he and a few other German murderer-prisoners were sent to Gdansk to scrape for scattered English and American

bombs which had failed to explode on impact. It was hoped that he would explode himself, but the snake failed to comply. He disappointed the expectant authorities.

Suddenly, they released him from camp. But what sort of release was this?

He was sent to another camp, Buchenwald in Thüringen, near Weimar, to a unique kind of school. Here honored German murderers from various camps were sent to be vigorously molded and transformed into a special S.S. murderers' detachment before being sent to the front, into the most dangerous spots. There, of course, they were supposed to die, and they did, if they didn't manage to escape en route.

Mrs. Sophie cried buckets over this. It was pitiful to look at this little woman with glasses, tortured by such a love late in life. That snake, Selonke, she still maintained, had done all this to her.

A few weeks had slinked by after Lehman's exit, when Mrs. Sophie got her revenge on that snake, Selonke, in the cruelest way imaginable – she managed to get together with the snake, Selonke, and to live with him in the same fashion she had formerly lived with Lehman. Sheer domestic bliss, yet again. Truly, this was a terrible punishment; to make love to such a crone as Mrs. Sophie would have had to have been an insane affair.

XXIX

THAT SNAKE FRITZ SELONKE

Fritz Selonke was a German from Gdansk. He was between thirty-five and forty years of age, medium height, a very well put-together guy known for great physical prowess. By trade he was a butcher. By vocation he was a Fassadenkletterer – a human fly. At a moment's notice, he could scramble to some third or fourth floor of a building, without setting foot on the stairs. His specialty, however, was robbing banks.

According to his own account, his smallest heist had brought him 8000 marks and his largest 90,000. Selonke had always worked alone but he landed in camp when some gals to whom he'd been unfaithful turned him in.

When Lehman left to lay down his head for the Third Reich, Selonke became the sole camp senior. Although the camp grew

larger by the day, swelling like a Prussian with a barrel of beer, Selonke managed all alone, with no helpers.

Sly, stoutish, and rarely sober, he skulked through camp with a German shepherd and a whip of braided wire. He looked like the commandant of an Argentinian studhorse farm. In fact he often staggered like a satiated stallion, a stud half-sick from feasting on so many broken cherries. But at other times he seemed to mince on tiptoes as if he were a mere pickpocket – which he wasn't. He was a top-notch killer. It was just his style of walking to swivel sneakily along... And then he'd close in fast and "Swish! with a switch across your back, and then you'd know with whom you were dealing.

He was clever, cunning, and mendacious in the extreme. But if and when he uttered a "*Gauenwort*" – thief's oath – his word was sacred! He'd never break it. You could trust his Gaunerwort in any situation.

He was immensely ambitious and pugnacious. Toward the fall of 1944, he organized a boxing match among the prisoners. Men who wanted to go a few rounds among themselves showed up, and Selonke himself fought some bouts. About the technique of boxing he knew nothing – he relied entirely on his strength, and the respect owing to him as camp senior. Among the prisoners, however, were some ex-boxers, amateurs and even professionals, and a couple of these went ahead and smashed Selonke's nose for him.

Selonke's feelings were terribly hurt; how could it be that a mere prisoner should batter the very nose of the illustrious camp senior?! At the end of the bouts, Selonke grabbed his switch and on some official pretext started swatting the insolent athletes. Next time they'd know with whom they were dealing! A

figure of authority is a figure of authority, no matter what the situation.

In March of 1944 misfortune struck even the intrepid Selonke. He was transported to Buchenwald with thirty other German murderers, to that same cursed S.S. school from which one travelled straight to the front – the same school which had already devoured Arno Lehman.

With Selonke's departure, yet another camp senior was appointed: **Hans Saenger**. This time there appeared to have been some misunderstanding. The appointment gave rise to a sense of foreboding; the prisoners stood agape. Had one of the commandant's dogs croaked, or something? Had grief so addled him that he made Saenger senior?

Saenger was a jeweler from Königsberg. He'd sold watches, gold, and diamonds once; he was a completely peaceful human being. For quite a while he'd been block secretary under Wacek Kozlowski, and later he was even made block chief. But no prisoner had any complaints about him. Even as he assumed the title of camp senior, he refused to become the executioner – and this condition of his was accepted! Wacek Kozlowski volunteered for the position.

When Saenger became senior the camp changed in a day. No sounds of fighting came from the yard. There were no more wounded, no one yelling. Everyone lived almost normally as if not a single killer remained in camp. Everything went smoothly, harmoniously.

Arno Chemnitz couldn't stand this state of affairs for long. Three weeks later he appointed a second senior, the wild Tyrolian, Toni Fabro, the one who looked like a gypsy's child.

Once Toni Fabro became camp senior, he really unwound. A hysteric, a cynic, a liar and lunatic, he decided that if he worked

like a dog for the authorities, he just might be liberated from camp. He did his work doggishly indeed, making himself the most disgusting spy; Fabro stalked everywhere, tailing, sniffing, tracking like a hound.

In the meantime, though, Selonke himself returned from Buchenwald. It turned out that his past had been too gloriously eventful, his villainies too various and vile even for the murderers detachment. They refused to accept him into the school. Once Chemnitz got wind of his dear buddy's plight, he brought him back to Stutthof.

Selonke returned a changed man. About Buchenwald he told horrible stories. He and I were good friends at this time. Occasionally he even gave me a cigarette. He didn't just let me take one from his heavy silver cigarette case. No. He took a cigarette out of the case himself and threw it on the ground for me. I'd immediately jump up, retrieve the cigarette and provide a light for his smoke. Our friendship had already reached this level of intimacy! Then he'd tell me outrageous things about Buchenwald.

"All of Buchenwald's authorities are political prisoners, those with the red triangels, unlike here where everything is in the hands of the criminals with green triangles. And all the red ones are always thoroughly rotten. They make life hell for the greens. Say some greenie swiped something from a red one just for kicks, or punched a red one's nose. This greenie immediately gets a notice: 'If you repeat this stunt once more, you'll be punished.' Of course he repeats the stunt, and gets a second notice: 'You have three days in which to die. If you can't manage to die for yourself, help will be provided.' And the greenies die like flies. All because of the goddamn reds! Buchenwald is rough as hell for us greenies... And there's no unity among the prisoners. It's green for the green and red for the red. Now, Stutthof is something

else. Here we've got prisoner unity, owing to the righteous rule of the green!"

En route, he had seen the Americans bomb Berlin at midday.

"*Gaunerwort!*" Selonke swore. "The Germans have already lost the war; the Americans are bombing sure as death."

Selonke came back very scraggy and scrawny. He was depressed by his conviction that the Germans had already lost the war: as a man of authority, he might be held accountable later... And he did have something to worry about!

When Selonke returned, there were already two seniors in camp: Saenger and Fabro. It was naturally assumed that one of these two had to be bumped off promptly. Selonke needed a post, after all!

Hans Saenger met his fate first. He was quietly strolling when Chemnitz suddenly attacked. Chemnitz stripped him of his coat and shoes, accusing Saenger of illegally obtaining his wardrobe. Of course all the other block chiefs, capos and most of the other camp aristocrats got their clothes like Saenger did, and no ill befell them – but never mind. Saenger's belongings were then inspected and a gold ring was found. Saenger tried to convince everyone he had never seen this ring in his life, but who would believe him! The ring was found – and that was that!

Poor Saenger was immediately dressed in stinking rags and bundled off to Hopehill. This affiliate of Stutthof was a slimy brick factory to which prisoners were sent after committing especially grave crimes. Saenger soon turned into a cripple there, while Selonke regained his post as top senior.

Now the wild Tyrolian Toni Fabro also got a taste of how fickle fate can be. Like Lehman, he was a victim of love.

Perhaps it was envious Beelzebub himself who loosed the arrows of passion that pierced Fabro's heart; in any case, impetuous

Toni fell in love with a lass. She was a prisoner, of course, and a Pole, young, not bad looking, with round apple-cheeks. Unfortunately she already had another beau in mind, a Polish lad who worked in the hospital; he'd rallied back to health, he was young and vibrant.

Toni Fabro decided to teach his competitor a lesson. In the hospital he called the Polish lad into the corridor and slugged him; by the time the boy came to, Toni Fabro had vanished. But hotheaded Toni didn't go very far. His conscience was bothering him: he hadn't belted this licentious lad enough! Why, the boy would simply wipe his cheek with a rag and run off to his sweetheart again. How could Fabro let him off so easily? This was no way for a man to treat his rival in love, especially when that man was camp senior. The Polish lad must be whacked, yes, but whacked so hard he'd forget about making love in lieu of remembering how to walk!

Now gnawed by his conscience, now spurred by his love, Toni returns to the hospital and again calls the lad into the hall. Only this time the lad is not so cooperative. He slams the door on Toni's nose and harrows Toni's face with his nails. Toni is now streaming blood, snorting with thwarted passion, but a few more lads jump out and join the fray, slugging him, smashing him with broomsticks and billets. They cudgel and pummel the senior to his knees, then toss him out into the yard, broken and drenched in blood.

The scandal was unprecedented, and in the eyes of the authorities very dangerous. The battle had made a devastating din; worse, it took place in the hospital; worst of all, a figure of authority had suffered a terrific drubbing. And the cause of all this was that most strictly forbidden and harshly punished offense: amorous relations with women!

Ingenious Toni Fabro, hobbling with a poulticed, bandaged snout, found a way out of his precarious predicament. In no time rumors had spread among the German prisoners that he, Toni Fabro, had been attacked by Polish chauvinists who had tried to butcher him just because he was a German. He'd just barely evaded the Polish knife...

The German greenies' rage at this Polish treachery was hot. They sharpened their knives and got together in bands, swearing that when they carved up the Poles there would be no holding back! So the Poles also produced various shanks they'd hidden away in nooks and crannies; they weren't planning to offer their throats to these murderers.

Now passions are boiling and bubbling throughout camp; curses, threats and provocations pour forth. It seems a new German-Polish war is unavoidable. Our Lithuanian block barricades its doors. You never know: someone might come at you with a knife – then try to prove you're neither German nor Polish.

Selonke took Toni Fabro under his wing, and placed him in his block's washroom, just in case. This washroom resembled a lockup. In fact, every week someone hung himself in this washroom...

The German party, too impatient to wait for a formal declaration of war, shattered the bones of a Pole chosen at random. He hadn't had anything to do with all this; in fact his name, Pranaitis, wasn't Polish but Lithuanian. He was picking around at his tree stump in the forest when a patriotic German clubbed him on the head. More greenies ran up and shattered his limbs. An hour later this Lithuanian Pole was already a cool corpse.

It may be that the German party, having so bravely conquered Pranaitis, felt sufficiently avenged for Toni Fabro's scarred snout. Or perhaps some other political factors made themselves

felt. In any case, the bellicose mood suddenly simmered down. Selonke now got himself involved in the issue, conducted an inquest – and started supporting the Polish faction!

“There is no question here of nationality. It was that triple ass, that wild Tyrolian Toni Fabro who cooked up this whole mess!”

It became evident that Fabro’s days in authority were numbered. He sat in a bunker for a while, then he was transported out of Stutthof. No one so much as shook his hand at departure.

Selonke was back in fighting form, as before his excursion to Buchenwald – once again the one and only camp senior.

Thus began a new and happy era in his life. His power grew ever greater in camp. He became rich, a near-millionaire... but that’s another story.

About Selonke’s rehabilitation, there is only this to add. When he left for Buchenwald, Mrs. Sophie cried just as bitterly as she had when Lehman was shipped off. She cried, cried some more – and then she stopped crying. What else could she do? Anyway, a short time later she caught herself a pair of more interesting fellows, a couple of regular Romeos.

On his return from Buchenwald, Selonke hooked up with some younger lassies – it seems Mrs. Sophie actually twirled them his way... In this regard Selonke the ram was abundantly supplied. He did not, however, pester the authorities with formal requests, as had the foolish bull Lehman.

Selonke reveled in the good gifts of life until the waning days of camp, when the prisoners ripped him apart, limb from limb.

XXX

OFFICE ILLUMINATI

Both divisions of His Honor S.S. Mayer's office were supervised by S.S. Sergeant **Bublitz**. It had been difficult, very difficult for him to claw his way up to this exalted rank; for a long time he was a mere *Rottenführer*, a lowly corporal. He would come in the office and complain: "*Die andere sind befördert, und ich – saufe*. Others get raises, while I – get drunk."

In fact he didn't deserve even a sergeant's rank. Though head of the camp's most important office, he didn't even know how to write decent German. He often had to consult Lithuanian and Polish prisoners on the proper spelling of German words. Such prisoners also edited heavily his more significant announcements. It's a mystery how with his level of literacy he ever managed to sell milk in his wife's little shop in Gdansk before the war.

Of course in camp it was easier for him than in his wife's stall. Here he did almost no work – the prisoners did everything for him. This left him free to make a good living with various entrepreneurial ventures.

In camp he kept a master watchmaker under his personal protection. To stay on the good side of the authorities, he'd sometimes accept watches for repair from the S.S., but mostly he attended to war widows and grass widows. Watches were sent to him from Gdansk, from Berlin, from places even further away ... the abundance of watches in Germany must have been overwhelming at this time if they had to be sent for repair to such a stinking hole as Stutthof. In payment, widows and grass widows would give him goods and produce, or services in kind... He had a wonderful abundance of loot! In his own words, he himself often didn't know what he was mending – *Uhren* or *Hurren*, watches or whores...

The term stealing had a special meaning in camp. A thief was one who stole a crust of bread, a turnip, a few small potatoes, a stinking rutabaga. But whoever pinched a watch, a suit of English cloth, a sewing machine or motor – he was not a thief: he was an organizer. Stealing was emphatically forbidden in camp, but organization was tolerated. An organizer was a person of initiative. An organizer didn't harm the poor – the poor had nothing worth organizing. The organizer organized everything from the authorities, from the S.S. and DAW warehouses.

Of course, the camp's poor did suffer somewhat from the organizers. When a couple of sacks of sugar, margarine, groats or bread were organized from the kitchen larders, a proportionate amount was cut from the prisoners' rations for a few days or weeks – that's all there was to it. But this wasn't done out of bad

faith. It wasn't planned that this particular prisoner would be organized out of a bite of bread – it simply worked out that way. But to organize with the specific intent of depriving some poor prisoner – this didn't happen in camp. It was only possible to steal from the poor.

Bublitz was one of the most notorious organizers in camp. At all times he had one and sometimes two prisoner-messengers constantly on call, living under privileged conditions, ready to do his bidding. For Bublitz, the business was extraordinarily simple. Bublitz would tell his special prisoner-lackey that he needed such and such a thing or this or that much foodstuffs – and the prisoner had to bring it. Bublitz couldn't have cared less where it came from. The prisoner, naturally, has no money – he can't exactly buy the stuff. He has to steal it. If he can't steal the requested item, he has to steal something else and then trade for it. Again, this entire complex of transactions was not considered stealing – it was organization.

Bicycles, leather goods, shoes, gold pens, coats, suits, underwear, watches and rings are all useful products, in wartime.

One blot on Bublitz's otherwise pleasant existence was his deathly fear of – his wife. She was fat and mean, a Gestapo chief in an apron. Her legs were stubby and thick, and her little wrinkled face looked like it had been yanked from a dog's throat. And she didn't know how to speak like a person – she screamed, exclusively. She made Bublitz pay through the nose for his services to the widows and grass widows.

Caught up in his own affairs, Bublitz had no interest in the prisoners and therefore did no harm to them. Not only did he refrain from beating prisoners, he ignored their transgressions and didn't squeal. For an S.S.– and an office chief, yet – this was saying a lot.

When someone played a trick on him, Bublitz occasionally let loose with a genuine S.S. bellow and yelled half-jokingly:

“So, you want that old S.S. spirit to revive in me?” Lord save us! Who would wish for such an abomination!

It’s possible that once he’d been a considerable bandit, worthy of S.S. fame. In the past he’d worked at other camps and maybe there he’d raged like a ram with a gashed tail. But by the time he got to Stutthof, he was already a goat without horns. He only cared about chasing skirts... And to me he was entirely kind.

When I found myself working for him, I was a cripple, no question about it: emaciated as a church rat, with swollen feet, a rattling heart, quivering thighs. Bublitz didn’t force me to work much. Better yet, he provided me with extra meals from the S.S. kitchen’s leftovers. He even organized a small messtin for me so I could retrieve these meals.

S.S. meals, compared to ours, were chefs d’oeuvre. Leftovers from here – sometimes there was a vat full – were given to almost all the prisoners who worked in the red building. They were doled out with full knowledge of the authorities, but secretly, nonetheless. You couldn’t eat in the kitchen. Some prisoners ate where they worked, but this was hard for me to do. All sorts of other officials, like Chemnitz and Mayer, often came to find Bublitz in the office. And when they popped in, I had to shove the messtin under the table. Happily, I found a more comfortable spot for dining – the washroom. Here it was quiet, with tiled floors, white walls, an airy elegance all about. Washing the messtin was a bit of a problem, but I found a way to do that, too. I invented a method, a patented technique. For the sake of fastidiousness, I won’t describe it.

Unfortunately, this idyllic situation of mine soon had to end. A famous capo was caught in my dining room performing acts

appropriate to a wedding night. Following this incident, prisoners were beaten out of here for stopping in even with purely innocent intentions, like having a smoke during working hours...

Bublitz and I got along quite well, but we failed to achieve perfect harmony when discussing the Bavarian character. Having spent several beautiful years in Bavaria while studying in Munich, I was in love with Bavaria. While Bublitz indefatigably cursed the Bavarians, I untiringly defended them.

"Imagine," he says to me, "what trash these Bavarians are!"

Bublitz had worked in that famous camp Dachau from 1940 to 1941. Dachau being far from Gdansk, Bublitz was far from his wife at that time.

"Of course," he says, "a young man sometimes desires to, let's say, take a certain kind of walk with the girls... But," Bublitz splutters, "as soon as the Bavarians notice that some young girl is walking with a guy in an S.S. uniform, the parents of the girl immediately chase her out of the house, and even the relatives disown her... How mean! Why don't those snakes say anything to their gals when they're gallivanting with fellows in regular army uniforms?! But when they're with the S.S., they make such a stink! Beasts, is what I call them!"

"Sergeant," I say, "you were guilty yourself: you go to the girls and drag your uniform along..."

"Well then, how come the Prussian girls don't act like that? To Prussian girls, it's all the same."

"Well," I say, "for that matter, the Bavarians don't speak of Prussian girls too highly. They say: 'Invite a Prussian girl to sit down, and right away she lays down...'"

"Oh, and the Bavarian girls are different?" Bublitz is getting hot. "Look. In Munich, the capital of Bavaria, on Königsplatz, next to the museum of sculpture and the art gallery, stands this

obelisk. It's said that when a twenty year old Bavarian virgin walks past this obelisk, it begins to sway... But you know what? To this day it's never yet swayed!"

"How can it sway," I say, "when Prussian girls with S.S. soldiers keep strolling by it!"

Bublitz might splutter and storm, but he let me get away with such remarks.

The chief of our office, the clerical department, was capo **August Zagorski**, a Pole. The prisoners called him the iron chancellor.

Zagorski was thirty-five, with brown hair and the rangy build of an athlete. He had regular, good-looking features, deep, clear eyes and the large forehead of an intelligent person. Before the war, he'd been the Polish postmaster-treasurer in Gdansk, where he hailed from. In 1939 he landed in camp simply because he was a Pole and lived in Gdansk; he was one of the very first of the camp's pioneers. Only his iron health, tenacity and will kept him alive. In 1941 his relatives managed to procure a release for him from camp. For three months he lived in freedom with his father on a small farm – and again they shut him up in camp. Again he endured various tormenting tasks until he became capo of the office.

He was a very just, honest and wise man. He would have made a wonderful leader for a democratic parliament's opposition party. For his orderliness and integrity, the authorities valued him highly – for a long time they kept him in one of the most important and influential camp positions. While he held this post, he was able to render aid to many – and he imparted it abundantly, saving many lives.

His assistant was **Bruno Rękajski**, from Grudziądz – another highly moral, honorable man. Before the war, he'd been on the

Polish general staff as an officer of the second division in Poznan. Following the Polish defeat, the Germans arrested him and brought a suit against him accusing him of working against the interests of the Third Reich. The local courts cleared him. The decision was confirmed by Berlin's highest court on the grounds that he had been lawfully working as a military officer in a country which Germany acknowledged and with which it had maintained friendly relations! He'd been working for the welfare of his country – so German courts could not prosecute him: such was the gist of a document given to him by the prison administration. The jail doors swung open – but just outside the gates, Gestapo agents were waiting for him.

As he stepped across the prison's threshold they arrested him, took away his copy of the court's decision and shoved him in the Stutthof camp. There he toiled for four years.

Intelligent, with a kind heart and lively temperament, this forty year old man had aged considerably from the travails of camp life.

Zagorski and Rękański were the most influential members of the camp's Polish society. Their word was decisive in Polish politics. When I came to the office, they accepted me with open arms. Comforting me as best they could, they did not overload me with work. They taught me the prisoner philosophy of work: don't hurry; work is not a wolf, it won't run away.

But my health had already run off... So they sheltered me, fed and strengthened me, and helped my sores to heal. Their luminous image will not fade in my heart as long as it continues to beat.

These two lived through a tragedy in camp, one so painful that it left them without even the desire to leave Stutthof until the end of the war.

At the time of their arrests, both men were married. Both their wives remained free. The two wives, wishing to remain free and to help their husbands as much as possible, went through the process of becoming Germanized. But the husbands remained Poles – which meant that even if they had been released, they wouldn't have been allowed to return to their wives. It was forbidden for Poles to have relations with German women, which their wives now officially were, even if they were considered to be only third-rate Germans. For sleeping with their wives the men would have been sent straight back to camp! But to be in freedom and shun their own families would have been an equally intolerable torment.

Iron August tried in all seriousness to convince me that the safest place to wait out the war was right here in camp. Things wouldn't get any worse here, he said; camp conditions were actually improving. If you've remained alive till now, you were bound not to perish. The Allies wouldn't bomb you here, nor would the Germans mobilize you into the S.S.; they wouldn't even bother to force you to sign dishonorable documents.

I worked with these two men to the end, even after I became a so-called 'honorary convict' and work was no longer mandatory. To sit in camp with no work would have been incredibly dull; and the status of honorary convict was a very delicate matter. At any moment you could be returned to the communal block and once again sent out with the forest column. Sticking to my office job, I reasoned, I had a better chance of keeping it if unforeseen circumstances should arise.

Anyway, the people here were so kind. And from the office you could see quite far: the entire camp, all the major players, the arrangement of the whole – you had all the necessary material...

XXXI

POLITICAL CONVICTS

All the camp's prisoners were classified according to type of "crime" committed, and wore appropriately colored triangles on the chest and on the trouser leg. But none of this made a great deal of difference in terms of job assignments and punishments meted out. Only the German criminals had various privileges.

Political prisoners or *Schutzhaftpolitisch* were the most numerous. Politicals wore a red triangle. All were condemned to remain in camp at least until the end of the war, if they should live so long. The politicals were from a number of different countries, and their alleged crimes varied enormously. Some of them had been activists, but there were many who had never had a thing to do with politics.

Among the Germans, there were one or two leftover live comunists and socialdemocrats, some centrist politicians and other

miscellaneous characters. Perhaps the most striking was **Vey**, one of the ten original Nazi Party members, Hitler's onetime intimate and former editor of the Nazi newspaper, **Angriff**¹. He'd been rambling through various camps for years. About fifty, broad shouldered and solidly built, he'd borne up well under the rigors of camp life. He was a wonderful orator, with a thunderous yet clear voice, a sharp wit and a sharper tongue. His demagogic gifts were still evident even in his reduced circumstances.

His clash with Hitler had turned on the Reich's relations with the Vatican. Vey raged wildly against the Pope and against all Christians; they were, in his words, "worshippers of a Jewish God". He also had a theory about the war: "The whole thing was spawned by Jesuit intrigues. The Jesuits work hand-in-glove with the Free-masons – they're all part of the same Jewish conspiracy..."

Even as he knocked about from camp to camp, Vey remained a fanatical racist, bursting with pride in the Aryan race, which he persisted in calling Nordic. And he valued me highly because I was, in his eyes at least, an exemplar of the Northern race.

Another colorful German was **Nietsche**, a sanitation lieutenant with an unsavory past. He'd been a landscape architect in civilian life; in the war, he'd suffered a mutilated thigh; in camp he'd become an invalid. He bragged that he'd landed in Stutthof for sleeping with Polish girls in Kaunas where his leg was being treated. But it appears that the Polish girls weren't so much the problem as cocaine... At least that's what it said in the court documents, which I got a look at.

Nietsche propounded a peculiar doctrine that there was no way the Germans could lose the war: "It's irrelevant even if the Germans forfeit the war in the battlefields – that means nothing. Let the Russians occupy all of Germany. Like all of Europe, Germany will turn communist, but Germany will still be the center

of Europe. The Germans have a very talented and affluent intelligentsia, and they'll gain great influence in Moscow, so that in fact – Germany will still rule Europe.”

Nietzsche wasn't the only one to cherish this notion. It was quite popular with many Germans. Even an old member of the German Communist Party expounded to me on the topic.

Another sort of prisoner was the former adjutant of General Schleicher, Lieutenant **Rössler**, whose peregrinations in the past ten years had taken him through many camps. He was perhaps the most intelligent German in Stutthof, and he kept to himself, away from other Germans. He waged a persistent battle against the German bandit party. Because the camp administration supported the thugs, Rössler's efforts came to nothing, though he held a very responsible post; he was the labor bureau's capo. A prisoner's appointment to one job or another was a matter of life and death; with Rössler rested many, many fates. He was a man of some learning in the humane letters, having committed to memory half of Schiller's works, from which he often quoted aloud. He was also the author of the Stutthof Camp's prisoner hymn, so servile, so contemptible, so incredibly stupid, which prisoners had so often to sing after roll call.

There weren't many German political prisoners in Stutthof, and there were even fewer admirable or interesting ones.

The main mass of political prisoners was composed of Poles and Russians. Prisoners of other nations – with the exception of Jews and Gypsies – were classified as politicals almost without exception. The actual reasons for their imprisonment, however, were very diverse.

Membership in secret political organizations, resistance to the German Occupational Government, supporting partisan groups, spreading clandestine publications, even listening to foreign radio

programs – all of these are at least somewhat comprehensible rationales for imprisonment.

Others, though, were more baffling. Often the reason for incarceration was indicated in the court records as *Staatsbeträchtliche* or *Staatsfeindliche Äusserungen* – comments made against the state – when the comments were made only in private letters. Another catch-all was *politisch nicht einwanfrei*, or ‘politically not above reproach’. Sometimes on the mere suspicion of not being politically above reproach a citizen was packed off to camp at least for the duration of the war, which often amounted to a death sentence. One particularly strange charge was *unerlaubtes musizieren* – unlawful music playing. What music this fellow played, where, how – thunder only knows, but no matter, he still hauled himself about camp, became a cripple and died along the fence. Some music! Another unlucky guy was brought in for *unerlaubtes Aufenthalt auf dem Bahnhof* – being in a railroad station without a permit. This fan of locomotive leavetakings also died in camp.

Poles were put into camps for refusing the opportunity to make themselves officially Germans. On their documents was noted – *Volksliste abgelehnt* – turned down the offer to Germanize. Such impudence likewise rated a de facto death sentence. Still another sizable number, Germans, Poles and Russians among them, fell victim to racial politics.

Germans landed in camp for having relations with Polish or Russian women; the Polish and Russian prisoners were arrested for consorting with German women. Sometimes such situations became quite complex.

One former Pole in camp, an electrician by trade, had elected while still free to become Germanized. At the time he’d had a Polish fiancée; for continuing this relationship after he’d received the great boon of Germanization, he ended up in camp. Two

years passed. One day out of the blue he received an announcement from the Gestapo: he is free, he can go home and marry his betrothed. She is now Germanized, so relations with her are no longer punishable.

This electrician swore until the walls shook. Why the hell had he sweated out two years in camp? And now he's supposed to marry his old fiancée when in camp he's had time to find someone new – someone younger and lovelier! As he left he cursed so violently it curdled your guts to hear it...

Then there was this other German, an East Prussian baron – a shabby degenerate of sixty or so. He'd come to grief over an entanglement with a Polish maid.

"So, baron," I say to him, "how did you fall into vice in your old age?"

"The devil, what old age?!" he demands. "I'm still completely capable, while my wife has been ill for two years. What could I have done?"

"Of course," I say, "I understand. Mrs. Baronness is the guilty party for deciding to get sick at the wrong time..."

Deeply sighing, he changes the subject.

"And how are the German colonists faring in your Lithuania?"

"Oh," I say, "not too badly, middling. Some of them have already been hung, and branches for the others are now being selected... As far as you're concerned, the limb of a birch would be too precious. You'll be hung on a fence."

From that day forth, the baron failed to greet me. Soon after our talk he spent three days in a bunker on an accusation of theft, which he suspected was due to an intrigue on my part...

Charges of polluting the German race were filed most commonly against foreign laborers, but Nazi laws didn't contend equally with all nationalities. For love affairs with German women,

only Russians and Poles were sent to camp; nothing was done to offenders from other nations. Even Jews, so despised by the Nazis, weren't all dealt with in the same ways. While Eastern European Jews were being killed outright for having relations with German women, German Jews were merely sentenced to camp. For a time, at least, French and Dutch Jews caught in this predicament were left alive and not sent to camp.

Russian and Polish laborers usually landed in Stutthof in the following manner: they'd be transported to work on farms; the men from these farms had been drafted, so only the women remained at home; the devil paved the road to temptation. It must be admitted, though, that German women were quite faithful to their lovers. They didn't forget their partners in sin even when the men were sent to camp. At the risk of being shipped off themselves, they'd send packages to their lovers.

There was also a German Catholic priest who had been caught baptizing a Jewish child. All in all, many prisoners had been sent to camp for trying to help Jews.

Some of the Russians at Stutthof had been transferred from POW camps. They were accused of having fomented communist propaganda, and our camp was their punishment.

Others were in for more comical crimes. A pair of German newlyweds from Gdansk, the Brevs family, had settled in Stutthof because the wife, a worn out looking woman of fifty or so, had such a soft heart; she took in too many Polish lovers. Her poor husband landed in camp for not restraining his highstrung wife!

One Russian woman, trained as an engineer, was sent to camp because she couldn't milk a cow. Such things often happened. German farmers would use foreign slave labor when it suited them to do so, but in winter when they no longer wished to feed the workers they'd pick on some triviality and pack them off to

camp. There they would be solemnly put on the books as political prisoners.

Strangely enough, the vice-consul of Fascist Italy in Gdansk also wound up in camp! In the summer of 1943, before leaving for vacation, he had rented his villa to a Gestapo officer. Upon the consul's return, however, the Gestapo refused to vacate the premises. The Italian took the officer to court and won – but it was a hollow victory, for he landed in Stutthof Camp for his pains. The Gestapo officer kept the villa.

When the Germans started retreating from Russian territory, they drove civilian captives into Germany. Many were dumped at concentration camps. In the documents, the reason for arrest was given as – evacuation!

Even women with small children, some still suckling the breast, ended up in camp. An infant was considered a full-fledged prisoner, rating a number and a triangle. Of course! But what kind of triangle is right and proper? The little thing isn't a thief yet, nor even a Jehovah's Witness. So the baby gets a red triangle – evidently it's a political felon!

Pregnant women, though, weren't usually admitted into the camp.

Mayer frequently fulminated, "I'm running a concentration camp here, not a kindergarten!"

He usually returned pregnant women to the Gestapo, but some got in. Any citizen born in camp also received a red triangle, making him an enemy of the Reich from birth.

The political criminals in camp were nothing if not diverse. There was a large contingent of Frenchmen and Latvians who had once served the German S.S. and even arrived wearing S.S. uniforms. Two of the Latvians were bigshots, Gestapo S.D.² officers no less, graduates of special Gestapo courses. They'd been

sent to Stutthof for drunken debaucheries, but they were classified as political!

Those who failed to pay taxes were politicals, and so were the moonshine distillers, without exception. The camp had a number of moonshine masters, many from the Gardinas [Grodno] district. Eventually a few breweries were secretly organized in camp. Among its best customers were the horse thieves, smugglers and speculators in camp, all members in good standing of the fraternity of political prisoners. Others of this brotherhood included those who had complained to higher authorities about misappropriation of public funds. A big hotel owner, **Oscar Bebnau** of Iława [Deutsch Eylau], was another political. Because he was a Nazi Party member, he didn't stay long, barely six months, for stealing a wagonload of meat. He sat in our office, doing no work, tirelessly organizing more things to eat. He ate like a dragon and was fat as an elephant.

Prostitutes were at first classified as shiftless elements – *Arbeitsschau*. They protested this. They weren't avoiding work at all, they were working hard – and how! Later these pretty Polish brunettes from Vilnius were reclassified as political gals.

Willi Freiwald was perhaps the most unusual political. By profession he was a milker of cows; by vocation, a Don Juan; by choice, a tramp and a street musician. Somewhere near Cologne he'd sung a ditty about the Nazi homeland to some cows he was then milking, in order to inspire them to greater milk production. Somebody took it in the wrong spirit, it seems, and Willi landed in camp – a political musician.

One day a crazed and contorted citizen was hauled into camp. His papers seemed to hint at some undefined but perhaps scandalous relation with a heifer.

“Hmm!” Sergeant König shakes his head, flipping through the papers. “What are we going to do with you here? We don’t have any heifers in camp... Would you maybe like a cat?”

This lecher was made a political prisoner. Anyone could win admission to that club!

XXXII

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

To be a *Bibelforscher* – Jehovah's Witness – was itself a crime and reason for arrest. But the Witnesses themselves took pride in this; on the questionnaires, in the space for religion, they defiantly wrote: Jehovah's Witness. In camp they wore purple triangles.

Theirs was a Protestant denomination, active mostly in East Prussia and Poland. Most of the Witnesses in camp were German, but there were a couple of Poles among them. Altogether there weren't many, no more than a few dozen men and women, but they were all wonderfully well-preserved specimens. One was more interesting than the next, especially to a psychopathologist.

The Jehovah's Witnesses didn't acknowledge any spiritual hierarchy; they had no priests or bishops as such. Every one of

them was his own preacher. Each was equal to every one – in theory, anyway. In fact a few among them performed priestly duties, and one seemed to be the equivalent of a bishop or something even more pompous. All of them were incorrigibly garrulous; garrulity, it seemed, was one of the essential duties of the faithful. But the mouths on their leaders – there was no escaping them. Before I got to know them well, I innocently struck up a conversation. Once you let them get started, it was nearly impossible to shake them off! My head roared and reeled – for nights on end, the Witnesses haunted me. I racked my brains for something that would make them break off the conversation, and at last I found it. In the heat of a theological argument I'd say:

“Well, all right, I agree.” I always agreed with the opinion of every ass. “You're absolutely right... But there's one thing that bothers me. In hell, what language do the devils speak to each other and to their prisoners and to the Jehovah's Witnesses?”

This question the Jehovah's Witnesses despised. They scowled and spat, convinced that I was an utter dolt. I'd never make a decent convert and was clearly unfit for Jehovah's kingdom. After I popped my question, they would leave me in peace for a good length of time.

Jehovah's Witnesses were very down on the Pope and the Catholics in general. Indeed, they had already reserved for the Catholics the most indecent place in hell. Besides all this, they were pacifists. They refused to join the army, especially when that entailed going to war. This latter peculiarity of their doctrine was what had so irked Hitler's regime and led to their being stuffed into camps.

The spiritual leader of Stutthof's Witnesses, their unofficial bishop, was **Mehnke**, a short, squat, graying man from the East Prussian border of Lithuania. In camp he became famous as one

of our most talented organizers and liars. He lived in splendor, though he was often shifted from one job to another. Wherever he was, he always managed to provide himself with food and even wealth. And who's to say it wasn't Jehovah who watched over him in his exploits, and his exploitation?

Whether he believed in his own sermons or not – and thunder only knows the answer to that – he doggedly proclaimed to one and all:

“Immediately after the war, the Lord's kingdom will reign on earth. Jehovah himself will rule. That's what's written in the Bible. Well, maybe not exactly in so many words, but something very similar. Our Biblical research has revealed it...”

“Well then,” I would say, “if that's the case, you, Mehnke, will certainly be his Lordship Jehovah's prime minister.”

“Haha!” the satisfied Mehnke would snicker. “No... how could I... there's better ones...”

He snickered but on his forehead was etched: ‘On the other hand, it wouldn't be bad to be his holiness's prime minister! And where would Jehovah find a better one?’

“But I'm sorry, Mehnke,” I'd say to him, “I'm a confirmed republican and I'll rouse a revolution in any kingdom you rule...”

“Thunder will strike you down and your tongue will shrivel up for such talk.” Mehnke would get ruffled and haughtily elevating his chin he'd exit from the office.

Such libertines as I were no fit company for him.

Another eminent Witness was **Rabinöse**, a shriveled and swarthy citizen of Lodz with a very lively temperament. He himself couldn't say whether he was a Pole or a German; from the looks of him, he might have been born somewhere on the fringes of Israel. He cared little for the postwar world order. He was more captivated by the other privileges granted Jehovah's Witnesses,

especially their unrestrained relations with women – with their own women as well as with others. These relations were in fact completely unconstrained. Naturally, nothing that went on could possibly be construed as wrong. Everything moved along just as it said in the Bible...

“Well now,” I say to Rabinöse, “do you even read the Bible with the women in the bushes?”

“Ha!” laughs Rabinöse. He doesn’t answer my question. Maybe he does read the Bible in the bushes. Who can know these things for sure?

Saturdays, our Jehovah’s Witnesses gathered at the shoemaker’s. He too was a Witness, and perhaps he was a good Bible student, but shoes he did not cobble well at all. He was old already, wrinkled and frowning, with a fractured face. Only his smile was very warm.

This shoemaker made no new shoes; he and his work detachment patched up ragged old ones and tattered clogs taken from huge piles that dated from who knows what era. Every day the laborers in his detachment hauled over a few cartloads of shoes for repair. We lived near these mounds of derelict shoes; we would trade a slab of bacon for a sackful of them. They made a decent fuel, and we burned them for warmth, to cook our meals, and to stew our moonshine swill. From our daily sack of kindling, a few good pairs were gleaned, including some brand new galoshes which we handed out to shoeless Lithuanian prisoners. Thanks to the kindness of the cobbler Witness, we didn’t have to bother with firewood all summer. Though our stove burned continuously from morning to night, only one or two pots fit on top of it at once.

Our proximity to this Jehovah’s Witness was in this respect very convenient. But it was a bit maddening when bedbugs

crawled out of the old clogs and made themselves at home. They were ravenous, the devil take them!

On Saturdays after inspection, the Witnesses gathered at the shoemaker's place to read the Bible and fry pancakes. The ingredients for these they'd organized from the kitchen – the Bible, according to their precepts, made no objection to this. Though they offered me the Bible quite often, they never made mention of the pancakes.

The ruler of the women's barracks was also a Witness, Frau **Belenke**. She was tall, with a solid, athletic body; it seemed she'd once been a good-looking woman; she was very energetic and horribly gabby. Her husband was also a Jehovah's Witness – and he'd better be, with such a wife! He was not in Stutthof, however, but in Dachau, where it was no doubt more peaceful for him. Though he was by all reports an obedient husband, if a somewhat cowardly one, nothing good had come of the kids; Mrs. Belenke had failed to force even one into the Jehovah's Witnesses.

“Those delinquents wouldn't listen to me and now they've given in to Satan's lure,” she would sorrowfully complain, vowing she'd never have another kid.

More than once, under orders from Berlin, Mayer invited Mrs. Belenke to converse about religious questions. This was one of his duties as a political educator.

“Look. You left your kids alone at home,” he'd tell her. “Children need to be looked after. Without supervision, they'll turn into murderers. Just sign here that you renounce all this Jehovah's Witness nonsense and I'll let you go home today.”

That was all she needed to hear. She'd jump up and with terrific vigor set out to prove that National Socialism was the most imbecilic thing in the world.

“What right do you executioners have,” she yelled, threatening Mayer with her manly fist, “to lock up people in camps and torture them?! You murderers, all of you Nazis, should go up the crematorium chimneys yourselves! I’m telling you, a day will come when you’ll be sitting in my place. That day isn’t far off! I’m not signing any of your lousy papers! I’ll wait for the day when you executioners all hang – I’ll leave this place then without signing a thing!”

Mayer, numbed by her screaming, yelled back:

“Get out of this room, you old witch!”

Mrs. Belenke wasn’t easily frightened. She screamed even louder. Mayer’s position was positively lamentable: he couldn’t really fight with this hag... And even if they did fight – who knows how it would end: softie Mayer, beside Belenke’s strong build, looked like a pathetic worm!

Mrs. Belenke screams ever louder, threatening a yet crueler revenge of Jehovah.

Mayer pales and turns blue. He covers his ears and starts to shriek like a ram being slaughtered:

“Get out! Get out! Get out!”

Mayer can’t even swear any more. He no longer knows how He’s choking, he can’t make a sound. Mayer flees headlong from his own office.

Left alone in Mayer’s office, Mrs. Belenke heaves a sigh.

“Tfu, such trash!”

She collects herself and goes off to her job – manning the electric water pumps – with her conscience clear, her soul at ease, knowing she’s done right by Jehovah.

XXXIII

FROM PASTOR TO GYPSY

Clergymen wore red triangles, like all political prisoners, and they were treated like any political prisoner, driven to work and regularly beaten, until the summer of 1944. After that, labor was no longer mandatory for them. Some continued in their jobs; some preferred slinking around camp and talking politics instead. They were even allowed to perform religious rituals, though they had to be discreet about it. Before, it would have been ridiculous to even think of trying such a thing.

Things had changed quite a bit since Christmas of 1942. Then the authorities had announced, "Those wishing to hear Christmas Mass, line up in the yard at eight this evening." Nearly all of the camp's Catholics turned up. They stood in the cold until eight the next morning, and that was their Christmas Mass.

By 1944, nine priests were left in camp: two Lithuanians, one German, the rest Poles and Kashubians.

Because the Jehovah's Witnesses didn't have a priesthood as such, Mayer refused to acknowledge Mehnke or Rabinöse as clergy; even after the decree of 1944, they remained rank and file prisoners. Sometimes the thought did cross their minds that it might be wise to revise the dogma slightly and recognize the precedence of the clergy...

Another class of prisoner was *asoziale*, or asocial element. A more expressive term sometimes used was *Arbeitsschau* – work dodger, or loafer. Among these were the prostitutes, until they won their struggle for reclassification. But the most notorious of the asocials was one **Edgar Miller**, an Estonian German pharmacist. In the Estonian Army he'd attained the rank of lieutenant, or perhaps even captain; if you believed his bragging, he was personal secretary to Estonia's most famous General, Laidoner. Or he worked in his office, at least. It was true that Miller was fluent in the Estonian, Latvian and Russian languages.

Miller had landed in camp for incorrigible drunkenness. Even in camp he was rarely sober. Since as a lush he was very jolly, he was pretty well-liked.

For a long time Miller was the hospital's pharmacist. Once he guzzled the pharmacy's entire supply of alcohol, behaved scandalously in the typical manner and collapsed at the main gate of camp. Mayer and Chemnitz found him lying there; they jounced and joggled him but he wouldn't revive. They dragged him to the well and sprayed him with water – still they couldn't do anything with him! Miller was splayed out, face down, blowing bubbles in a puddle with his nose – and what could you do!

Mayer and Chemnitz wouldn't give up. They sat him in the puddle and propped him up with stacks of bricks on both sides –

still no good. Miller swore to all sorts of unheard-of demons and again lay down in his puddle. Mayer dragged him out by the foot so he wouldn't drown and left him against the fence overnight. Miller was lucky that autumn was warm. Next morning the sergeant on duty, Peters, herded Miller to the bathhouse, leaned him against the wall, grabbed a firehose and aimed a blast of cold water at the asocial element.

"*Hilfe!* Help!" Miller bawls with all his might, but the torrent has him pinned to the wall. By now he's up to his knees in water. A person in perfect health could stand such a barrage for half an hour, at most, but how much could a poor drunkard like Miller take? Miller is roaring like a billy-goat, but S.S. Sergeant Peters roars back:

"You grubby pig! You drank all the alcohol and didn't leave me a drop! What did you think, that I didn't want some?"

After this misadventure, Miller, of course was kicked out of the S.S. apothecary. But he still managed to get positions in camp where he could organize various things which he smuggled outside the camp, traded for alcohol and – stayed drunk. He would stroll and then stagger through camp, screeching drinking songs in full throat – and what could you do to such a bloat? Most of the time the authorities ignored him; punished or not, he kept right on drinking.

A somewhat more precisely defined category was *Erziehung* – disciplinary arrest. Unlike anyone else in camp, these people received a definite sentence, from three weeks to six months. They were laborers for the most part, brought in on an employer's complaint: that they were lazy, or cursed their bosses, or punched them in the nose – or stole a crust of bread, or were late to work or left the job without permission or made an escape attempt. Often a farmer simply wanted to be rid of the laborer so he

wouldn't have to feed him or pay him. When planting or harvest time came around the farmer would retrieve his laborer again; any such worker released from camp had to return to his original employer.

Such laborers received different classifications and punishments according to where they were from. Everyone sent by the Bydgoszcz Gestapo was considered a disciplinary case, but the Gestapo from Gdansk and Königsberg did things differently; Poles were labelled disciplinary prisoners, but Lithuanians and Russians were designated "political".

Disciplinary prisoners wore no triangle, but they did have a number on the breast and trouser leg.

Such prisoners were sometimes so severely "disciplined" that they hurried off to the bosom of Abraham. For women, as usual, life in camp was less harsh. After serving their terms, the disciplined ones were given back their belongings and released. Some later returned for more discipline; some of the women returned two, three, four times. The ladies so very fond of camp had a white stripe sewn above their numbers on the occasion of each reinstatement; they strolled around like the honored recipients of many orders of merit.

Another batch of prisoners landed in camp for no other reason than that the Gdansk jails were already stuffed to the rafters. The number of people in need of incarceration was apparently inexhaustible! The Gdansk Gestapo brought the surplus to camp, where they were labelled *Polizeihäftlinge*, police prisoners. Even in camp they remained under the Gdansk Gestapo's command. Like the disciplinaries they wore no triangle; their numbers were sewn on the left sleeve instead of the chest.

Most of them were Poles, both Germanized and not. The Gestapo interrogated them heavily. They'd be brought to camp

so thoroughly interrogated that they couldn't stand on their own two feet. Some came with rotting flesh – gangrene. Others died as soon as they reached the camp. The Gdansk Gestapo even had the nerve to deliver **totally** interrogated prisoners – dead on arrival. So many of these defunct suspects were delivered that even Heidel, the head of the hospital, lost patience – though not until midsummer 1944, when change was already in the air. Heidel sent a report to Berlin explaining the high rate of mortality in camp: the Gestapo was dragging in corpses that should have been credited to their own account. Heidel documented this thoroughly, with eyewitness testimony and photographs, no less. The Gestapo quit hauling their stiffies into camp. It was a rare police prisoner who was ever declared not guilty and released. The majority were switched to the political category, which meant they stayed in camp until the end of the war. Some were interrogated for two years or more. Some managed to die, voluntarily as it were; others, in accordance with official custom, were handsomely hung with all pomp and circumstance. Prisoners from various countries who had participated in the Spanish Civil War¹ were designated *Rotspanier*, or red Spaniards; not one, however, was actually from Spain. There weren't many of them in Stutthof.

Convict graduates of the German armed forces were known as *Aus der Wehrmacht*. In Stutthof these were German sailors, almost exclusively. Nearly all of these had landed in camp for theft, but they still wore the red triangle, as political felons.

Towards the fall of 1944, prisoners of war or *Kriegsgefangene* began to arrive in Stutthof. These had first been incarcerated in separate POW camps; for various transgressions there, they were transferred to concentration camps. At Stutthof they wore red triangles and were treated no differently than other convicts.

An ingenious variant was used with the Polish POWs. These were asked if they would like to return home, and those who said yes were released, all papers in order. On their way home, however, the Gestapo rounded them up and hauled them to camp; now they were no longer POWs, but run-of-the-mill civilian-criminals. In this way, international agreements were maintained and the Poles were released as crematorium smoke.

The first of our prisoners of war were thirty Polish women, members of the Warsaw Uprising. They arrived in full military uniform. One of them was very pregnant, and soon successfully gave birth to a soldier; all of them, including the babies, wore the red triangle.

All the homosexuals in camp, known as one-seventy-five's (for the statute banning them), were Germans, without exception. They wore pink triangles; after living in camp for a time, some prisoners from other categories had to trade in their red or green triangles for the pink. The most eminent pink was the conductor of the little camp orchestra, organized in 1944. Unfortunately this character was so grotesque it was impossible to enjoy his music.

A very influential contingent in camp was made up of the professional criminals, *Berufsverbrecher*. They wore a green triangle, point facing down, and like the pinks they were all Germans. Each of these individuals had been hauled into court no less than five times previous to their admittance to camp. Stutthof had several hundred of them. In a camp of thousands that might not sound like much, but these were very violent lads, of vast experience. They comprised a sort of honor guard for Chemnitz. He trusted them implicitly to support him at crucial moments, and they never disappointed him. In return he let them do what they liked in camp. Their special status in camp went to their

heads; they were all convinced that with the end of the war, they'd go scot-free. Usually they were referred to as *Bevau*, or *BV*. Another set of prisoners wore their green triangles point up, not point down, but this small distinction made a big difference. These people had been sentenced to heavy convict labor not merely to the end of the war, but for life. Strangely, these *Polizeisicherungsverwahrte* – “criminally monitored cases” or PSVs – were not nearly so fierce as the professional felons, the BVs. There were only a few score of them, mostly elderly and enfeebled Germans, many apparently victims of tragic circumstance. Among them were a Pole and a single Lithuanian – a shoemaker from Seirijai, a very kindhearted man. The devil knows how he got himself into such a predicament. Though the administration viewed these PSVs as the worst transgressors in camp, they were with one or two exceptions incomparably more decent than most of the BVs.

Among the greenies, a few truly interesting men turned up. One was the master thief **Willi Braun**, a good friend of mine who worked in the kitchen; he organized tobacco for me at times when tobacco was nowhere to be found. He'd worked at his trade long and hard. Back in 1919, he'd been with Bermond's Army, soldiering in the Šiauliai area. He described in vivid detail how they plundered the place and traded the booty for rubles.

“Now don't you believe,” he told me, “that the other brave warriors of Bermond were any different. They were all like me. All thieves!”

His troubles began in 1924 or so when he swiped some motorcycles from the English, who occupied Cologne then. They caught him and handed him over to the German police; he wandered through German camps for twelve years, passing through the worst of them – Mauthausen, Gusen!

When he recounted his experiences in those camps, even we citizens of Stutthof got the shivers. Civilians who have never seen a camp would never believe his words, although he related the honest truth. It was astonishing to me that after many years of the most hellish ordeals, he'd lost neither his sense of humor nor his Rhinelander's native wit. He dreamed constantly of returning to freedom after the war:

"I'll still steal for another good ten years," he'd confide to me. "After staying in camps all these years, I'm not stupid enough to go work at some job!"

Willi Braun looked with contempt on such thieves and murderers as Selonke. "Eh, these juveniles!" he'd say. "They only ruin the good names of us decent thieves! Beating people, whoever heard of such a thing! Our work should be neat, done with elegance and taste!"

Once Willi Braun was sitting in our office sucking on a cigarette when Chemnitz dropped in.

"So, Willi," Chemnitz says. "Smoking during working hours?" "Yes, smoking, Mr. Raportführer."

"You do know, Willi, that I can beat your hide for this?" "Mr. Raportführer, Sir, I also know that you will not do so." "What? What?" Chemnitz is amazed. "And how do you come by this information?"

"Sir, how could you go against your employer?" "Hold it, Willi. Are you drunk or just nuts?" "It's true I am a little hungover – but quite honestly, Mr. Raportführer, Sir, I do consider myself your employer. We thieves provide the police with their daily bread. Not so? If we didn't exist, Sir, you'd have to go to the front – and you can't tell how things might turn out there! But so long as there are thieves, the police can rest assured that they'll have a job and bread on the table, something

to chase, something to guard... Now wouldn't you agree with me, Mr. Raportführer, Sir?"

"Oh, so you're still stealing, then?" Chemnitz attempts to change the subject.

"Oh yes, I steal, Mr. Raportführer. Of course I steal!" "Well, look out. When I catch you it won't be pleasant!" "It's not for a colt like you to catch an old wolf like me!" Willi shoots back with pride.

And he told the gospel truth. He was a master-thief, a real artist. He liked his chosen craft. He was in love with his work.

Towards the fall of 1944, Willi got a promotion – he was transferred to the town of Gdansk with one of the work detachments. There he supervised an entire kitchen. Willi's old position, as guard of the Stutthof kitchen's food larder, was given to another greenie, a character named **Speyer**.

Speyer was a broken-down old con, a horribly rapacious and selfish thief. He knew his trade well, but he plied it unkindly. He stole loads of meat, sausages and margarine from the larder, but he wouldn't give a scrap to anyone else. It occasionally happened that a hungry convict would steal a slice of bread or several potatoes; Speyer would pursue him around camp with a stick until he'd bloodied the poor guy's head. Here was a greedy and brutal sort of thief; Willi Braun's thievery was poetry compared to his.

At Stutthof, as throughout the Reich, to be a Jew was to be guilty of a crime. If you're born a Jew – go to camp; what's there to talk about! On the document under *Haftart* (type of arrest) it was written: *Jude*. Under Nationality the entries varied: Deutsche, Französö, Russe, Pole, Litauer, etc. But the crime was always the same.

Jews wore the six pointed star on chest and back. Gypsies were likewise arrested and put in camp for being Gypsies; their crime was entered as *Zigeuner* (Gypsy). They wore a red triangle. Unlike the Jews, however, they were treated like other political prisoners.

Some Gypsy families had been transported from Lithuania. One Gypsy boy of seventeen, Stankevičius, would come over to our block for bread and smokes, once a week. A portion of these he'd devour on the spot, but the remainder he put in his pocket. He told us he had to take it to his mother who was in the women's barracks, sitting behind the barbed wire fence.

"And what about your wife? You're not taking her anything?" Though young he'd been married several years, and his wife was also in camp.

"And what's a wife to me? When she's gone, I can always get another. But a mother – where can I get one of those?"

Towards the end of 1944, an entirely new classification system was inaugurated.

All Russians and Poles without exception were reclassified as "foreign civilian laborers", or *Ausländischezivilarbeiter*. Citizens of other nations remained political prisoners. Naturally, this shift did nothing to improve life for the Russians and Poles; the change occurred only on the books. A "double-bookkeeping" arrangement was now in effect.

Such a "reform" could have only one purpose – an attempt to put the best possible face on what had been done to inmates of the camp, since it now appeared that the authorities would one day be held accountable after all.

It was known that the Allies had mobilized citizens of other nations to do various jobs. So the Germans doctored their books as if to say:

“Please, take a look. We’re no different from any other people... Here, as you can see, all the civilian laborers are of Russian and Polish descent – we have no prisoners here... We’re running our affairs just like you...”

XXXIV

THE CAMP'S LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Members of about twenty-five different countries resided in camp, including all the nations of the U.S.S.R. – Ukrainians, Belorussians, Georgians, Tartars, Mordvinians, Kirghizians and so on. The administration considered all of them Russians.

The camp stood on Polish land and had been primarily intended to serve the Polish population; at all times Poles made up the majority of prisoners. They poured in from the various Gestapo outposts: Gdansk, Königsberg, Bydgoszcz, Starograd, Płock, Grudziądz, Kartuzy, Torun and many others.

The Russians had the next largest population, Germans were in third place, Lithuanians fourth. At the very end of 1943, however, a sudden influx of Latvian prisoners bumped the Lithuanians and Germans down a notch in the standings, and even gave the Russians and Poles some competition. Three thousand Latvians

arrived from Riga in one huge convoy of trucks. This was a somewhat checkered crowd, with many ethnic Russians among them, but because they were citizens of Latvia who spoke Latvian, they were included in the Latvian count.

The Latvians got off on the wrong foot in camp. They comported themselves with provocative arrogance, aggressively flaunting their Latvian background. They kept to themselves, and tried to organize all-Latvian work detachments. They sang Latvian songs day and night – hanging about in camp, going out to work in the morning, returning in the evening. Each song had an annoying provincial refrain: “Dzimdzi-rim-dzim-dzim!”

The Latvians bellowed their song, “rimdziming” away, even though this refrain caused them many misfortunes...

Other prisoners, especially Poles, literally went crazy from this song. It would happen that one would hear that luckless refrain, clench his teeth, rip a rock from the pavement and let it go into the band of singers. Then it would happen that the Latvians would more insistently rimzimdzin, – more rocks come flying at them. Why this rimzimdzin was so precious to the Latvians is hard to say... Only they were roughly laughed at, energetically beaten, insolently harmed. Defendants for the Latvians didn't show up. Of the twenty-five nations who lived in camp, not one liked the Latvians. The Latvians, out of vexation, began to rapidly die. And – even worse.

In March of 1944, an order arrived to send two thousand prisoners to the Mauthausen Concentration Camp. To split rocks – hard and heavy labor. The selection of prisoners was up to camp officials, the S.S. and the prisoners who worked in administration. Within three days, the two thousand were rounded up – every one of them a Latvian.

Even if Stutthof was a stinking hellhole, it was still far from being Mauthausen, a slaughterhouse in a stone quarry!

After this exodus, and after suffering attrition in camp, the Lithuanians again slipped to fourth place. As more died, they were replaced by new prisoners coming in, so the count stayed roughly stable, at about three hundred.

In the early spring of 1944, 165 Danes were hauled in. Until then, they'd been interned in Danish camps, not much worse than sanitariums. It was said that each man had his own room. One of them not only managed to get married with the authorities' blessings, he even finagled a separation from his young wife when things went sour shortly thereafter. Not surprisingly, this fellow made his living as an artist, a stage designer.

The Danes were mostly communists or fellow-travellers, Social Democrats and Spanish Civil War vets. By trade they were mostly laborers, craftsmen and sailors, though among them were also a few local officials, engineers and lawyers, plus one artist and one excellent chess player. The German government had at length decided that they were living too well in the Danish camps, so they stuffed them like sardines in the hold of a ship and brought them to Germany. On the three-day train trip through Germany, the Danes told us, they weren't given a drop of drinking water. When they asked for a drink, the S.S. would bring a bucket and pour it out on the ground where the Danes could watch the water seep into the soil.

In Stutthof the Danes were housed together in one block. Though they'd slid a long way down since their days in the Danish camp, they were still treated better than the other convicts. Nobody beat them, pursued them, persecuted them; they even received Danish newspapers. Of course, the newspapers were subject to Hitler's censors, but they still contained much more news than the German press.

In contrast to the Latvians, for instance, the Danes didn't brandish their Danish origins. While fulfilling their duties as slaves, they didn't bellow national songs up the very noses of their executioners... No one laughed at the Danes. They were respected and even loved. Our relations with them couldn't have been better. When they arrived in camp, we were already seasoned convicts; we knew how to live in camp; we could even help them out somewhat. After a while, the Danes began to receive parcels from their Red Cross on a regular basis, and they didn't forget the first aid we'd given them. Some of the Danes felt as if they were with family when they came to visit our block.

At the end of February 1944, there appeared in camp a crowd of several hundred Frenchmen – all dressed up in German S.S. uniforms. The French who had already been in camp for some time – very decent men, for the most part – found the hair on their heads standing on end at the very sight of these newcomers. They told us right away that they had nothing in common with this S.S. bunch, who had brought nothing but shame to the French.

This shipment of new French trash had been raked together from alleys and ashpits all over. They knew perfectly well that once France was reborn as a nation, there would be no place for them to hide – so of course they didn't want this rebirth to take place. The German government and camp administration were very well aware of these Frenchmen's predicament. Shortly after their arrival, the newcomers were offered their freedom – freedom to volunteer for combat at the front. Most of them signed up and left, but about thirty declined the offer. They stayed in camp, and eventually became good colleagues.

Towards the fall of 1944, more unwelcome newcomers pulled into camp – Latvians in full S.S. uniform, rank-and-file plus non-

com's and even officers. They lived together under the supervision of their S.S. colonel, who routinely beat them like dogs. Again that raffish refrain resounded through camp: "Dzimdzirim-dzim-dzim!"

This nauseating ditty, plus the German S.S. uniforms, were more than reasons enough to turn the camp's society against the newcomers...

Flocks of Estonians were also hauled in. Once a block chief took an instant dislike to one of the newcomers; he smote the Estonian, as was only appropriate. But the Estonian shook his head. He appeared unaware that the block chief was a powerful figure. Evidently, he didn't care for this business. He glowered and asked the block chief, "Does this sort of thing come over you often?" and gave him a bit of a punch in return.

The block chief found it amazing to be bashed in the nose. He tumbled under the table and lay moaning, "Oooh! Ooooh!"

The block secretary rushed to the aid of his fallen chief. The Estonian gave him a bit of the same and the secretary, too, rolled under the table. Now there were two of them moaning, "Oooh! Ooooh!"

It turned out that the Estonian happened to be a heavyweight boxer. Alone, he demolished the block administration, down to and including the cup consigner. The block chief escaped through the window without bothering to open it first and ran to get help, bits of glass in his hair. The Estonian barricaded himself in the barracks, and a famous encounter ensued. Windows shattered, walls rattled, chairs and tables were smashed to bits as this single Estonian fought a mass of officials. For the champion, the battle did not end well, but he wasn't the only one banged up... Afterwards, no one gave him any trouble. He was well respected in camp, as indeed were all the Estonians.

The biggest and most powerful fellow in our block had similar trouble. A neighboring block chief, a real professional thug, took it into his head to smash our man's brains out with a wooden stool. But our athlete knocked the stool aside, grabbed the block chief and twirled him in the air a few times, then plunged him into a mud-puddle, nose-first. From that moment, the defeated chief became our block's most reliable buddy.

Besides all the groups mentioned thus far, the camp also had a smattering of Belgians, Luxemburgians, Englishmen, Americans, Romanians, Greeks, Serbs, Swedes, Norwegians, Finns – and even one Japanese woman, though the devil only knows how or why she came to be there.

When Selonke cursed about Buchenwald and complained that there was no unity there, Bublitz would explain to him:

“There shouldn't be any unity among prisoners. Prisoners have to fight with each other. Otherwise, how could we restrain them?” Bublitz's doctrine was fully realized at Stutthof. Prisoners fought each other, each on his own. Alliances were ad hoc and ever-shifting; but at least no long-term bloody feuds developed. Most often prisoners didn't fall into cliques according to the color of their triangles, or even nationality. A greenie might get along famously with a red, just as a Jehovah's Witness might be friend a homosexual. Generally, people of different nations didn't bash one another for nationalistic reasons, as such. They might skirmish once in a while, more for variety than from real ill will – but when the fight was over, it was over. There were no constant running battles. By and large, people got along fine; only the poor Latvians were disliked equally by all.

XXXV

SPECIAL CONVICTS

In spring of 1944, a large, swampy section of our camp's territory on the edge of the woods was cleared and construction of an enormous brick wall commenced. The wall looked like the walls built to enclose a prison in a town.

"What the devil is this going to be?" wondered the prisoners assigned to build the giant wall. As if there were no other place in Germany to pile bricks during wartime!

Construction of the wall went rapidly. All other work was suspended – every brick was commandeered for this edifice.

The structure itself was strange, indeed incomprehensible. A tall, electrified barbed-wire fence completely surrounded our camp; in towers sat sentries with machine guns. This seemed quite adequate security for the camp.

The electric fence was not infallible, however.

Once this Russki high-tailed it out of camp. He was soon caught, returned to camp and walloped well.

“*Saubunde*, how’d you get through the fence?” Mayer asks him.

“Well, look here. I climbed over the fence by this sentry box...”

“You climbed over an electric fence? You’re lying, you *lump*, you wretch!”

“I am not lying. I really did climb over, right here by this sentry box...”

“Okay, worm, then show me how you got through under the guard’s nose! If you don’t, we’ll consider you guilty...”

The Russki showed him. Slipping into heavy rubber galoshes, he hooked his hands into the wire and scampered over, nimble as a cat, sprang down on the other side – and nothing awful happened to him. The administration cursed this Russki and their fence for a good long time, then added a few more rows of barbed wire.

An S.S. soldier didn’t fare so well with this fence. Returning from an important assignment, no doubt, his eyes failed him, he couldn’t see the wires through the fog of his hangover – he grabbed the electrified strand with a bare hand. The electricity sobered him up in a hurry. He jerked about and yelled at the top of his lungs. Two other S.S. men grabbed his legs to drag him off – and they too were instantly convulsed with the shock! Now all three danced a mad polka by the fence, howling like a pack of hounds in full throat!

They danced and shrieked until someone got it into his head to call the electricians to turn off the juice. Then the three swearing S.S. soldiers swerved homeward.

The electricity had failed to bump off even one of these three! Apparently the current was not entirely reliable as a guard of the camp...

So we thought that the failures of the electric fence might account for the new wall of brick. But then, several rows of barbed wire were strung from the inside along this new wall – and they were also electrified. No one could even approach the wall. It seemed electricity still had some use after all...

In the center of this diligently sequestered lot, barracks went up. So someone was going to live there.

We had thought our camp already contained some very accomplished criminals. So what devils were these that would have to live behind that other wall? Maybe some of the more notorious villains would be plucked from our midst so we'd be a little safer in this world?

This penned-in lot with barracks was named *Sonderlager* – special camp. Soon its new inhabitants began to arrive – from elsewhere. None of our own moved in there. We couldn't wait to find out what kind of bandits these could be that rated such rigorous isolation. Confirmed cannibals, maybe?

A small flock of men dressed in work clothes was herded in. Their apparel was clean, of fine sateen, well made – the kind of thing a master electrician might wear. They were all middle-aged, and appeared fairly intelligent. They stood quietly along the fence. We addressed them in Polish, Russian, Czech, French – no response.

Finally one of them answers: "We are Germans."

"Germans?" The whole office is surprised. "Who are you? Why are you in camp?"

"*Das dürfen wir nicht sagen* – that we're not allowed to say," they inform us, and don't answer us any more.

We're puffing rolled cigarettes and gazing at them. When the guard turns slightly away, one of them says:

"Give us a smoke..."

"*Das dürfen wir nicht geben* – that we're not allowed to do." We even the score with the standoffish Germans.

These Germans and the ones sent later were entered in the books under the collective name *Haudegen* – an organization of pugnacious warhorses. They were all sent over by the Poznan Gestapo. Somehow prisoners' clothing was delivered to them en route so they were already dressed for camp upon arrival. In Stutthof they were kept in strictest isolation. No one was to approach them and they were not allowed to go anywhere. Even the German S.S. guards could never leave this camp. They were fed very well, with meals prepared in the S.S. kitchen. They did no work. They were even given books to read – always Nazi propaganda.

Mayer's secret notes shed some light on this subject. These *Haudegen* were divided into two groups, noted as KuS and Ze. Possibly the first meant "communists and socialists" and the second "*Zentrum*" – Center Party members.

In midsummer, two more lots within the Special Camp were fenced with barbed wire and brick walls, creating two more Special Camps, even more fantastically isolated than the first. But these new barracks were decorated with a certain luxury. There was carpeting, the furniture was fine and the linens of top quality. A separate kitchen was installed and food prepared on the spot. Men and women lived there, almost like a family arrangement. Only later, by accident, did we learn that these were the families of the generals and statesmen who had fallen out of favor with Hitler, such as Gerdler and General Witzleben. Quite a few of us believed that among them was the man who ruled

Hungary for so many years, Admiral Horthy, ensconced with his family. Prisoners claimed to have seen them en route, with a coat-of-arms and crowns on the trunks. One woman of that camp told a curious prisoner from our side that if she were observed talking, the penalty would be death.

Before evacuation of the camp began, this entire group was again very secretly transferred someplace else ahead of time.

After the July 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler, more and more interesting people began arriving at Stutthof. The entire former senate of Gdansk – that is to say, what was left of it – was brought, led by the vice-president. They were all old men, shriveled and potbellied Germans, the remnants of the older generation's German leftist parties and the Center Party who had somehow managed to stay out of prison until now.

These fellows enjoyed a rather privileged status in camp – work wasn't mandatory for them. But then, by the time they arrived it was the end of summer in 1944; much had already changed in camp. The regime's spirit had decayed, dried up. And no wonder! Standards had fallen. Newcomers sat in the block four weeks at a time and did no work at all – as if they'd contracted some kind of bug and were sitting it out in quarantine!

Such things were unheard of in earlier days.

Other newcomers were so cunning that inside of four weeks, they'd fixed it so they didn't have to work for the next four months. By then, not even the devil himself would have been able to convince them to do a lick of work.

And there was more! A physical checkup was introduced for incoming prisoners. Doctor Heidel had to determine if a newcomer was camp material, *lagerfähig*. Was he fit? Could he handle camp life? Because Doctor Heidel never had time for such things, the physicals were carried out in his name by prisoner-doctors.

One prisoner had to determine whether another was suitable for camp or not!

Yes, indeed... By fall of 1944, our camp had completely degenerated.

XXXVI

PEDAGOGICAL SPECIMENS

Every block was assigned an S.S. leader or *Blockführer*, an S.S. tech or staff sergeant who served as disciplinarian and warden. Among them were some fascinating specimens, such as grace the very best livestock exhibitions.

For example: **Johann Mayer**, an S.S. tech sergeant, deputy to Chemnitz. So as not to confuse him with Traugott Mayer, the prisoners usually referred to him as Johann Konfektionsmayer, meaning Mayer the clothier. He was the camp's most infamous thief of prisoners' civilian finery; I have a suspicion he spirited my wardrobe into his own. This was the very man who'd bounded out to greet us that first night in camp with a fist.

Konfektionsmayer was about thirty: bent, bibulous, sexually satiated and somewhat insane. He was a killer without peer, an aficionado, a killer for sport. He beat not to inflict pain on his

victim, but because he thoroughly enjoyed beating. Swearing was another of his accomplishments. Yet, strangely, he didn't get angry when prisoners cursed him to his face.

Once during working hours Franciszek Dziegarczyk said to me:

"Well, professor, when will you be returning to the university to deliver your lectures?"

"What? Deliver lectures at the university?" Konfektionsmayer butted into our conversation. "Never! You're going up the flue, here, you're going right up the crematorium chimney."

"Well, now, Staff Sergeant," I told him, "we'll just wait and see who flies up first, me or you!"

Konfektionsmayer honked his peculiar laugh, pleased with my stupid retort... He was convinced that I was a complete idiot. As it turned out he didn't need a chimney after all; he was lucky if he found a piece of sod to cover himself with...

Konfektionsmayer could swat you with a stick, stick you with a knife – for no special reason, just for fun – then embrace you and whirl you off on some mad polka through camp.

Wherever Konfektionsmayer happened to be, fights, curses and laughter broke out. He was a happy man, even if he was crazy. Sometimes his wife would drive out to see him, with their several kids. Suddenly he'd be transformed. He became no more terrifying than a chick who's barely crawled out from under the hen. While the wife was around, he turned into a model daddy and a wheezy old paterfamilias. But when the wife swung around for home, it was a rare grass widow who escaped from Konfektionsmayer in one piece.

One day in his office Chemnitz was showing Konfektionsmayer a new government directive regarding S.S. vacations. This directive was pretty interesting. It ordered the S.S. men to arrange

their vacations to be sure to be home when their wives were most likely to succeed in enlarging their families, and the Reich.

Konfektionsmayer honked his infected “Ho-ho-ho!” and slapped Chemnitz on the shoulder. “Man, I’ve already got too many kids!”

It seems that in this case he exaggerated. He was so often ill with various unsavory diseases it seemed unlikely he’d father many more children!

Then there was **Peters** – a tall, muscular individual and the champion moron among the Stutthof S.S. None could call himself more stupid than he! Before the war, he’d hauled coal to walkups in the city of Gdansk, and forcefully asked for handouts in the darker alleys. Now he was an S.S. tech sergeant, our martinet. The instant he opened his mouth to speak, we all had to stand with caps off, samovar style. So I wouldn’t have to remove my cap in front of the likes of Peters, I spent two winters in camp without one. For if you failed to remove your cap before Peters, you immediately got a slap in the face. He was the most nosy and aggressive of spies, remorseless, with an endless supply of dirty tricks; needless to say, he had no conscience whatsoever. It was Peters who gave poor drunken Miller that vicious beating and threw him in a cold shower; Peters explained himself this way:

“You devil, you sucked up all that booze and didn’t leave any for me!”

Of course if Miller had left him some, they both would have gotten roaring drunk and there would have been no cold shower for poor Miller.

Peters strolled through camp with a posture implying that he often thanked the Lord for creating nostrils facing down in-

stead of up, for if it had been the other way around, he wouldn't have been able to turn up his nose at the convicts, for fear of drowning in a hard rain.

The newcomers hauled into camp were beaten by Peters with special brutality. Even the ones who were severely ill, he'd smack on the head with a stick or bash in the back with a board – but only when the authorities weren't looking.

A far different type was **Petersen**. He hailed from the Danish border – he was actually a Germanized Dane. By the end of 1943, he clearly understood what an idiotic business he'd gotten himself into by joining the German S.S. Germany's dimming prospects in the war and the consequences for his own fate were already becoming evident by then, but it was too late for him to back out. He tried to maintain the best relations with the prisoners – especially with Danes and Norwegians – so they would stand by him after the war. He'd bring news even from foreign broadcasts, which was particularly precious in camp and which he himself had to listen to in secret.

Foht was a simpler soul, a broad and burly man of about fifty with auburn hair and a nose gone blue from tipping moonshine. He owned an ample farm not far from camp with fine horses and cows, an ample wife and four ample kids. From this farm he sold various products to the camp; business was, to say the least, not bad at all. He could bludgeon and shoot people in camp without blinking – he had the camp authorities' special confidence behind him. He was appointed chief of the camp's Jewish sector, and in due course he was nicknamed King of the Jews. As such he proved to be a courageous fellow. He feared neither the racial regulations nor his sturdy wife, but maintained the most intimate relations with representatives from the Jewish

women's blocks. Foht's title was no empty one, for it was he who decided which Jewesses were to be poisoned, which starved to death, and which could still be forced to work.

Then there was **Klawan** – oh, poor Klawan! He wandered around looking like he'd lost everything in a fire! Even Konfektionsmayer, notorious moron, used to say that in Klawan's head there was nobody home!

Born and raised in Estonia, he'd worked for some German baron or other and developed a baronial world view and even baronial mannerisms. He'd served the famous Bermond, got a medal from the "iron division" of that time, and saw himself as a great warrior. Recently he'd been repatriated, of course, and granted a small estate near Poznan; the former proprietor, a Pole, was packed off to camp and starved to death.

Klawan was the only S.S. in camp who read books. He read many books, and it was these books that twisted his poor head all the way around. He would read some piece of Nazi garbage, and a foolish question would lodge itself in his brain. He'd come to the office, wanting us to explain this to him, and expound on that to him. But elucidating anything to Klawan was very difficult, since he was a complete imbecile and Nazi bigot who understood precisely nothing.

Every two weeks, practically to the minute, he'd come inquiring if his last name was really German in origin.

"It's Germanic, by the devil, it is! A hundred times, the name is Germanic!" Losing the last shred of patience you start shouting – but two weeks later, here he is back with the same stupid question. It got so I turned green when I saw Klawan approaching.

Once the two of us gazed out the office window on the spectacle of Peters beating people in the yard. Klawan was deeply moved – he never hit anyone, himself – and he said to me:

“No, it’s very difficult for me to live in camp. I grew up in Estonia; I’m a man of an entirely different culture. Here in Stutthof, I saw people beaten for the first time in my life. Where I’m from, in Estonia, as you well know, nobody beats anyone, ever – it’s a different culture...”

He’d just been assigned to camp and he’d already gone to Commandant Hoppe declaring that because he was from a different culture, he wouldn’t be able to fulfill his duties in such a camp. The Commandant calmed him down and said that he, too, was an adversary of brutality and asked Klawan to stay and commence his duties according to his conscience. In these matters of conscience, the Commandant promised Klawan his help, and as a sign of friendship, presented Klawan with a watch. “Here, look at this!” Klawan frequently showed off his gift from the Commandant.

Klawan often crawled to the Commandant with tales to tell; he wasn’t on good terms with the other sergeants. In fact, they all detested him. So Klawan sought out camaraderie among the prisoners, with whom he could discuss important matters written in books. Then he would go to the Commandant and tell him everything he’d heard from the prisoners. He wasn’t giving him all this information as an informer, or out of malice, but simply because he was incredibly naive – and, of course, because in his eyes the Commandant was such a looming figure of authority, an embodiment of such nobility, that visiting the Commandant was for Klawan like going to confession.

Klawan was an apologist of war. His life’s greatest memories were from the war. He felt war was necessary to improve people, individually and as a species. But when the war crossed into German territory, Klawan began to censure most heavily the very principle of making war.

He told my Polish colleagues that he couldn't understand the Lithuanians:

"Everyone knows that after the war Lithuania will be incorporated into Germany and the Lithuanians will have a chance to become Germanized. They'll receive the highest favors and honors – the title of a citizen of Germany. Yet they, the Lithuanians, are still clamoring for something and still feeling dissatisfied for some reason!"

He was a philosopher and a poet of power: "He who is in power is also in the right. Germany has incurred many losses during the war. It goes without saying that after the war it will need to obtain certain goods. Isn't that normal? The Baltic States, naturally, belong to Germany..."

"Well," I said, "Corporal" (for he never managed to make the rank of tech sergeant), "you have an estate and Selonke doesn't. But Selonke is more powerful than you. What would you say if Selonke got together a gang composed of fellows like himself and came to your estate at night and threw you out?"

He bristled at my question. "How could you," he haughtily inquired, "compare honorable war with common robbery?!"

Sadly, I wasn't able to comprehend Klawan's explanation of the difference between the two acts.

Once in early fall of 1944, when the front had reached the German border, I sat cursing because I wasn't being released from camp. Klawan said to me:

"I, too, am a prisoner in camp, just like you. Four times I submitted a request to be allowed to leave camp and go to the front, but they won't let me. So you see? I'm a prisoner."

"Well, all the same," I told him, "there's still something of a difference between us..."

"What's the difference? I see no difference!"

“Maybe this will help,” I said. “Let us take the case of a dog. A dog who meets up with an S.S. man is not required to remove his cap – but I am. A dog also has the right to walk on the sidewalk next to the S.S. men – but I have to slosh through mud in the middle of the road. You know, if my rights were brought up to the level of a dog’s, that would be a big improvement...”

“Oh! So that’s it!” Klawan mumbled heavily. His face took on a look as if I had struck him in the face. But there was no polite way to get rid of him: Klawan was even more boring than the typical German pedant.

XXXVII

CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS

In Mayer's office, prisoners' crimes and punishments were entered into a book – the **Strafbuch**. These were the ordinary crimes, the misdemeanors. Serious crimes came under another set of regulations.

There were two types of misdemeanors: theft and laziness. These occurred during working hours. For example, someone steals a potato, a turnip, a crust of bread, a cucumber, a tomato – he's considered a thief. The theft of other things was noted only in exceptional cases. Crimes of laziness were even more boring... Whoever stood up and sighed during working hours, spoke to his neighbor, had a smoke, or, God forbid, took a snooze in a sunny clearing – he was considered an uncouth loiterer. Some managed to break all these rules at one go! The S.S. labor leaders clobbered these criminals on the spot, jotted down their numbers

and submitted the lists to the office at the end of each week – so that these criminals would be entered into the book of punishments and punished further as specified in a resolution penned by Mayer himself.

The punishments themselves were also boring: three days without dinner, six days, nine days... Sometimes dinner would be cut to a third of a ration, sometimes to a half. Sometimes Mayer's prescription included five whacks with a stick, or ten whacks, fifteen... For those who were sick, lying in the hospital, the enactment of the punishment was postponed until they were well, but those who rushed into death were absolved of further punishment.

Once I got my office position, one of my most important duties was writing in the *Strafbuch*.

Unfortunately, I didn't succeed in this job very well at all – I couldn't make anything of it.

Although frequently prompted by Chemnitz, I collected the S.S. notices of the offenders only at the end of each month. The offenders accumulated at a tremendous rate. The S.S. labor leaders weren't the most literate of people – they didn't write the prisoners' numbers very legibly. I had to trace these numbers to find the prisoners' last names, their place of work, their residences, enter them into books and turn them in to Mayer who then decided on their punishments. I had to spend a lot of time on this job. Mayer, too, was in no hurry to flip through the book. Once he appointed a punishment, I had to report it to the block chiefs and secretaries, so they would carry it out.

Here is where I didn't succeed. I'm not sure who was guilty: the S.S. labor leaders who wrote the wrong numbers, or I, who misread their writing, but it usually turned out that most of the guilty prisoners were already dead. And the numbers matched,

and the last name was correct, and the date of birth was completely valid, but this condemned loafer was – look – already defunct, he'd flown up the chimney a long time ago and was by now quite, quite dead... And these prisoners always had the most punishments forthcoming. A smaller portion, but still a substantial number of guilty parties, was in the hospital. When they'd die or get well, who knew: you needn't think all the offenders and their offences would be remembered! Finally, a considerable number of the culprits entered in the book were the kind who would have sneered at camp dinners; they were such wonderfully talented organizers, so cozily established in their little niches, that they hadn't eaten a camp dinner in months. So it all came down to this, that there was practically no one left to punish.

Mayer received my monthly reports:

"This is crap, not a book!" he opined.

"What can I do?" I innocently inquired. "The labor leaders wrote it like this."

"Have they gone crazy, or what?"

"That I couldn't tell you, Captain..."

After my second report, Mayer no longer returned the book to me. It went out of service completely.

So in this undignified manner, due to the extraordinary number of dead, the traditional camp offences of theft and loitering themselves became extinct.

Of course, even if the punishment book vanished, the travails of petty thieves did not end. For the serious and accomplished thieves, even when the books had been kept, business was always good; but for the little guys, business was horrible. Stutthof had its own lynching law: the culprit could be punished on the spot, without administrative rigamarole.

Sometimes in a great bout of frivolity, the S.S. would cover some poor, hungry potato thief with soot, turning him into a tar baby, and lead him around the blocks and workshops kicking him, as if to say: here, look how black he is! Sometimes they deposited him by the gate to stand all day. And then sometimes they would seat him on a sharp fence post, shove a beet or turnip down his throat – depending on what he'd tried to drag off – and leave him sitting there all day. And once an S.S. officer forced a Frenchman to make a meal of a pile of fresh shit.

More serious than petty pilfering was the crime of speculation – carried on outside camp, that is. Inside camp, speculation was tolerated, or at least rarely punished. By 1944, the speculators had made themselves very much at home. In the barracks of the ninth block a black market and illegal exchange did a thriving business. Here one could get anything the heart desired, up to and including cocaine. There was no shortage of clothing, footwear, bread, margarine, moonshine and other useful if mundane goods. But it was somewhat more difficult for speculators who tried to operate beyond the camp's walls.

Contact with “outsiders” went on in two ways: through craftsmen who came into the camp from outside, and labor detachments sent out of camp.

For certain jobs, engineers and craftsmen from the outside were hired. On the side, they acted as middlemen in the black market trade, smuggling goods and money into and out of camp. Sometimes they were caught and locked up in the camp they'd previously only visited, but there were always other middlemen to take their places. Sometimes the S.S. itself acted as the middleman, but since they usually took a very large cut, it wasn't always worth it to deal with them. The wheeler-dealers found it more lucrative to do their business with the outside

labor detachments, or *Aussenkommandos*. There were two types: permanent and transitory.

The permanent detachments were formed in camp and sent to do a long-term job on the outside. Sometimes a supervisor from another town would arrive, the director of Gdansk's ship-builders, for example; prisoners line up before him; he walks among them, looking them over, squeezing muscles, inspecting teeth; finally he chooses his slaves, just like in **Uncle Tom's Cabin**.

The camp had many of these outside detachments and at least half of Stutthof's prisoners worked in them. In the Bydgoszcz underground dynamite factories worked a few thousand female prisoners; in the Police synthetic fuel workshops labored a few thousand male prisoners. Several permanent detachments worked in the cities of Gdansk and Gdynia. They were also in Hawa, and Elbałg, and Lębork, and Pruszcz Gdanski, and Słupsk, and Grudziądz, and Starograd, and Heiligenbeil, and in many other towns in West Prussia and Pomerania. These detachments were sent to live where they worked.

Other detachments lived in camp but left for work in the morning and returned in the evening. They worked for farmers and in neighboring shops where they even met with French and English prisoners of war, as well as with the imported French, Belgian, Dutch, Danish and Norwegian civilian prisoner-laborers.

These latter labor detachments were the best speculators. In camp they plundered clothing, tools, jewelry, sugar and margarine. They exchanged these on the outside for tobacco and alcohol, which they smuggled back in. Naturally, these detachments were sometimes searched. Alcohol was confiscated and the carrier got a good kick in the ass, but the harm done to the trade was negligible. One of my friends, a Russki from Leningrad,

famous as the best organizer in camp, received a minimum of twenty-five whacks with a stick per week. During his sojourn in camp he'd received, as he bragged, not less than a total of 3000 whacks.

"Eh, and so what!" he used to say. "My rear end's not made of glass – it's not about to break!"

He often smuggled alcohol and lived high on the hog, excepting his black and blue rear end, of course. Once, seeing that he was about to be searched, he gulped down a whole bottle of alcohol while standing in line. He fell over on the spot and was carried off to the block – where Selonke gave him a hard time for drinking alone! Selonke organized inspections with meticulous care, and no wonder; at least half of the confiscated alcohol went for his own personal consumption.

Sometimes it would happen that Chemnitz, having caught some small-time speculator, would bring him to the office. Chemnitz would either have a hangover or something awry with his stomach – he frequently had to drag himself around all twisted up – so he couldn't be bothered to deal with the speculator himself.

"Whack him twenty-five times," he would order some prisoner in the office. So the prisoner picks up Chemnitz's switch, waves it around the speculator's nose and leads him out to an adjacent room for the execution. "Crack-crack-crack!" is heard in the next room. But the one being whipped is as quiet as if he'd been gagged.

After five or six blows, the prisoner hisses in a stifled voice:
"Yell, you idiot!"

The one being whacked begins bleating as if his naked flesh were being peeled.

Chemnitz smiles in his happiness that one more powerful slugger has been discovered. The slugger is happy with Chemnitz's

praise. Even the small-time speculator is happy – that the office’s novice slugger whacked a chair instead of his hide!

The gravest camp crime was writing unauthorized letters to the free world. If a letter contained no pejorative information about camp, it was still worth fifty lashes – then the incident was over. But if the letter had any real news in it about what was going on in camp, this was a very serious matter. A somber interrogation commenced, with bludgeon accompaniment, followed by an interlude in the bunker with bread, water and bedbugs – and for a finale, an official punishment handed down from Berlin.

The authorities were very concerned to prevent news about life in camp from spreading in Germany, and especially beyond Germany’s borders. Having been caught trying to get such information out of camp, one usually hastened to die, in one way or another, so as never again to be tempted to write what should not be written. Even block chief Zimmermann – a bandit most valuable to the camp’s administration – didn’t fare too well when he broke this rule.

In March of 1944, he, Selonke and some other murderers were sent to Buchenwald, to a special S.S. school. From the school, Zimmermann was shipped to the front, but once there, for some reason, he was no longer eager to lay down his gallant head for the Third Reich. He high-tailed it from the front and with the help of the devil he landed right back at home with the devil, back in Stutthof Camp. The poor guy was brought in looking like he’d been hit by a truck: his snout was so mutilated, so swollen, that it looked like Zimmermann had two heads. It was practically impossible to recognize this murderer! They locked him into a bunker so the bedbugs might graze on his broad chest and, unfortunately for him, his notes about camp were found.

They weren't very significant notes. Nothing negative about camp was mentioned. Zimmermann only wrote that Mayer was an executioner, and that Chemnitz was an executioner, and that someone else also enjoyed executing... Poor Zimmermann howled and howled in the bunker repenting his notes. After howling for a few weeks, he hung himself. He hung himself rather strangely. He had neither a decent rope, nor a hook, but nevertheless, he found a way. In spite of everything, because of his extremely bad luck, his last aid came from his good friends, with Selonke in the forefront. This is what it meant to keep notes about camp!

Neither rattling a prisoner's bones nor even taking a prisoner's life were punishable offenses in camp. A doctor's certificate could almost always be doctored up to certify that the prisoner died of this or that; the favorite catch-alls were AKS, intestinal catarrh or pneumonia. But occasionally prisoner-doctors got stubborn. The victim – is present. The murderer – also present. The prisoner-doctors demand an autopsy. But usually such an effort was futile. Before long Selonke would butt into the business. His agents would extract the most decrepit cripple from the heap of corpses and shove him in front of the doctors:

“Here! For you! Dissect this if you're itching to cut something up!”

The doctors knew as well as anyone else not to cross Selonke; it was a fight they couldn't win.

But the wheels of official justice in camp did on one occasion unexpectedly start to spin, with terrible consequences for an old convict named Pabst.

Pabst was a German, an experienced brigand who'd slaughtered many people both in and out of camp. At Stutthof he'd held several important posts, most recently block secretary. Sober, Pabst was a close friend of Selonke's, but as soon as he'd

guzzled a few, Pabst would cling to Selonke's chest and Fritz would beat him unmercifully. But Pabst got back at Selonke by challenging the senior's authority in camp.

Many, many prisoners had been maimed or killed by Pabst, and no one had ever made anything of it. Then one day Pabst did away with a Pole. A political prisoner. It was nothing special. He killed a man – and that's all. But suddenly that snake Selonke slithered his way into the matter and blew it up entirely out of proportion. He found witnesses, wrote a protocol, announced it to the prisoner-doctors, to the Political Division, to Mayer. Whatever it was that so abruptly came over Selonke, only the devils know. It was unprecedented. Apparently Pabst had gotten on his nerves. But then maybe Selonke hoped to ingratiate himself with the Poles by doing this? It was a mystery.

At any rate, Chemnitz was forced to write to Berlin about Pabst's transgressions. Now Chemnitz frowns and writes. Writes and frowns. Writes and rips the paper to shreds. Rips the paper and writes again. This task is very unpleasant for him, a first in his life!

So what if the murdered Pole was a political prisoner and Pabst was a murderer many time over! In any case, this should be a question of race. Pabst was Germanic, and therefore superior!

Chemnitz barely managed to piece together a delicate piece of prose implying that Pabst, having gotten a trifle drunk on the sly, took this Pole and ruffled his feathers a bit, attempting to instill discipline, but for his own reasons this perverse Pole took it in his head to kick off. That the Pole managed to actually die was mainly due to the notorious Polish obstinance.

Mayer read Chemnitz's account and snorted. "Man! Do you want them to hang you, too?" He ripped up poor Chemnitz's sweat-soaked manuscript and wrote his own much nastier report.

Pabst was immensely surprised when he was deposited in the bunker to await the decision from Berlin. His surprise was even greater when he was led out of the bunker – to hang. He was pale all over, trembling like a drenched puppy in the cold.

When others were killed, Pabst had never trembled. But now that he had to climb the gallows himself, he could scarcely lift his feet. He had to be tripped from behind so he'd kneel in the proper place beneath the rope.

How can anyone know the thoughts of a man who's had so many close dealings with death?

With great satisfaction, Selonke slipped the noose over Pabst's head. Selonke was triumphant. Selonke's snout glistened like his leather coat.

This was the first and last time that the murder of a prisoner was punished with official pomp and circumstance in the history of Stutthof Camp.

XXXVIII

LA DONNA E MOBILE...¹

Prison love was everywhere and was in every case a very touchy, touching, tragicomic affair, oftentimes worthy of a psychopathologist's interest.

Love affairs were, naturally, strictly forbidden. But what in the world isn't forbidden? Launching revolutions is strictly forbidden, but even so, they are still launched! Comply with all prohibitions – and life is no longer interesting. Where matters of love are concerned, mysterious undercurrents are at work which don't want to hear about prohibitions.

It was very difficult for prisoners to get together with the women who lived fenced away behind high barbed wire. Luckily, it wasn't electrified yet, or it would have been a very poor situation indeed...

As it was, the system was cruel. Physical encounters with the girls were banned; even conversations were strictly forbidden. Whips were used to chase men away from the barbed wire fence...

But the harder the circumstances – the hotter the love. What is a barbed wire to love? What's a fence? A mere joke!

To kindle love doesn't take much in camp. One or two sweet glances, one or two soaring smiles, a kiss sent from afar, through the fence – and the heart flares, a flood couldn't snuff it!

Communications between those in love usually went by way of a go-between. And when a go-between is needed in matters of love – some devil will always involve himself.

Love letters were often intercepted by the authorities. They were usually written in Polish or Russian. Our office frequently had to translate them into German. We swore so much while translating these letters that the entire women's block choked with laughter. So much work, sweet thunder! The letters – so long, so illegible, one more stupid than the next! Nowhere else in the world were such stupid love letters written as in camp!

Say you meet some chum – you talk, you seek companionship – and he's not stupid. But if it happens that you have to translate his love letters, screw him, he's such an ass!

Men were as likely as women to write these endlessly silly letters. But women took the initiative in love affairs more often. This was probably because, all around, life in camp was easier for them. They had more energy for such exertions!

Sometimes the love was genuine and true; but quite often it was the purest fraud.

Once our dear friend Wacek Kozlowski had the bad luck to go and fall in love. And how he fell, in up to his neck, to the point of total delirium! The object of his affections was a young,

slim, comely girl. Every day he'd send her gifts: rye bread, and white bread, and cheese, and margarine, and bacon and sugar – even cigarettes, which were strictly forbidden for women – and much more. He spared nothing for his love...

The girl found it interesting to get gifts, but Wacek himself – that thick-skinned murderer, cynic, executioner, stinking and filthy – hell no! What would this girl want with such an old devil, especially when she's already picked out a more suitable boy for herself? He was an all-right guy, with a jaw cracked in some bygone accident. To this boy she presented all of Wacek's gifts!

Bur Wacek discovered the girl's treachery, and then the poor man went completely berserk. He beat walls with chairs, belted and growled, flailed his prisoners as never before! Finally, he caught that boy, the gourmand. Wacek cracked a few of his ribs, then simmered down. The girl blubbered a bit for her wounded boyfriend – and again began accepting Wacek's gifts.

Only the well-fed got entangled in matters of love – the starving and the crippled weren't interested, for some reason. Kitchen and hospital workers, block chiefs, capos, secretaries – this crowd made up the camp's love cadre. They were well fed. In camp terms, they were rich. They could send precious gifts to their loved ones.

The girls could also present gifts in their turn, for in their hands were the clothing warehouses and the laundry. If some cook or orderly, capo or secretary was walking about with silk socks, a silk shirt, a new fine wool pullover – it was clear that he was happily in love.

So love affairs were worthwhile for both sides.

Letters were most often delivered by special couriers, who were generally Russians. They were usually hungry enough to

take the risk, and when it came to withstanding beatings, nobody could compare with them.

Beside the women's barrack stood a huge, a really huge, garbage container. To see a Russki crawling into this bin and digging around for something to eat, this was a very common occurrence. Prisoners were always picking for food in the garbage. They gnawed on bones passed up by dogs.

So here's this Russki up to his hips in garbage, picking over it like a hen in a yard. Along comes a girl with a garbage pail. She hoists it up and dumps it on the Russki. Among the garbage dribbling down on his head he finds a few love letters... And he slips her his own batch of love letters.

Sometimes the authorities laid hands on such a courier. They'd knock him out of the bin with sticks, scaring him with all sorts of threats. But what of it? An hour later, another Russki is clambering into the container – he, too, is looking for food... The authorities proved powerless in these situations – there's just no way to dislodge everyone who wants to go root around in the garbage! To exchange packages and gifts, the lovers resorted to various devious devices.

Sometime in 1943, a sort of prisoners' orchestra was organized. Sunday afternoons it performed, near the barbed wire fence that separated the men's side from the women's. Three meters from the fence on either side – this was as close a contact as was allowed – stood row upon row of men and women. They gazed at each other's faces and swallowed one another with their eyes. They spoke with their fingers and hands and arms and the devil knows what-all else. They understood each other perfectly. Sunday nights following the concerts were noisy and full of adventure. Sometimes the wire fence was ripped down, or someone managed to dig under it... A few men would be found in the

women's barracks; a few women in the men's barracks; somewhere in an abandoned workshop or washroom, men and women clinging together...

Then came the inquests, interrogations... followed by cudgels, curses, shrieks and tears.

After such a night's expedition, the men were usually put into the bunker for a few days, but some were sent to the Hopehill brick factory – known as the abyss – for hard labor. The women were immediately shaved bald, regardless of whether they were political prisoners or only “disciplinary” cases, supposed to be released after a short term.

Chemnitz meted out a rather original punishment for one pair of lovers. During dinner break, when everyone was eating or resting, he ordered the lovers to join hands, sweetly snuggle up to each other and parade around camp.

The little woman, about fifty years of age, was on top of the world. She's whispering sweet nothings into the young man's ear, forcing herself on him, pressing her broad breasts against him. She's crooning and twittering – completely ignoring her husband who's sitting in the men's camp, having ended up in camp to begin with because he couldn't control her at home, either... Her partner in sin doesn't know where to focus his eyes; he's barely twenty-five. The women prisoners are giggling, sticking their tongues out at him. From a distance, the men roar like crocodiles, snort and wish him good health...

After that day, this poor Romeo didn't even want to glance at the women.

In the summer of 1943, a special labor detachment was organized, of Bald Magdelines. The leadership of this group was given over to **Legge**, a German bandit-sadist who wore a green

triangle with the point up; he'd landed in prison for numerous rapes. He was a mindless brute, no more and no less.

The bald Magdelines were harnessed to a huge wagon with wheels taller than any of them. High on the axles, like some raised catafalque, rested a gigantic cistern – for this was an enormous sanitation wagon. It serviced the men's barracks. The women had to haul it to dump in the fields.

Mayer and Chemnitz were terribly thrilled with their inventiveness. They were overjoyed about it for a couple of weeks. Then the wagon got stuck and tipped over, crushing one woman's legs and injuring many others. Only then were the women unharnessed.

In spite of all obstacles, after that summer the camp had an influx of a few score recruits in the form of screaming newborn citizens.

In the summer of 1944, to camp were hauled in Hungarian Jewesses. Love relations became cheaper, and weren't as persecuted as before. Whoever wanted, could have a hungry Jewess for a crust of bread. And they would appear, these aficionados – gentlemen. Even more so because in these cases nobody really controlled the Jewesses.

Selonke at this time was set up even better.

It wasn't always convenient to slink around the Jewesses living barracks. In the evenings a Jewess would be brought to his living barrack in the same box in which bread was carried. In the morning, she would be carried back out: the Jewish block would get the Jewess back instead of a box of bread.

Selonke – the camp senior: owned a lot, but he needed a lot.

XXXIX

CAMP NUTRITION

According to official records, camp's convicts were allotted 1800 to 2000 calories per day. In a prison where people don't have to do much, this might be sufficient to maintain life. But in a camp requiring considerable exertions, sometimes including extremely hard labor, 2500 calories – the norm for a man of average health living in freedom – is the absolute minimum. Even if a convict received his full official allotment, he'd still be condemned to slow starvation. And needless to say, the rank and file convict never received even the full pittance officially allotted to him.

Between 1940 and 1942, it is doubtful that a prisoner got even 1000 calories per day. From 1943 to 1944, the food situation improved. Compared to former days, it was markedly better – but it still wasn't worth a damn.

Food was hauled to Stutthof from Gdansk, Nowy Dwor and other towns and farms. At the warehouse, a share of the camp's consignment was swiped by the warehouse workers. Another chunk vanished en route – lifted by the drivers, the attending S.S. and prisoners working with the transport. A portion disappeared loading the trucks at the warehouse; another disappeared unloading at the camp. The camp authorities – the S.S. – craved extra food – sausage, margarine, sugar, flour, groats – so they pinched it from the camp warehouses. The S.S. had to bring food to their fertile families and even more fertile mistresses – food lifted from the prisoners.

Block chiefs wanted extra food, too, as did the secretaries, capos and capo's assistants, not to mention the kitchen staff, their mistresses, pals, and partners in crime, plus a multitude of other camp aristocrats and their friends. Each of them got a piece of the pie.

The books, naturally, always had to be in order. In the blocks, the prisoners received the aristocracy's leftovers, but the books reported that all was delivered to the prisoners. The looting of the food supply was impossible to control; and in any case no one really bothered to try.

The head of the kitchen was for many years S.S. Tech Sergeant **Ziehm**ann – one of the camp's most notorious thieves. He guzzled moonshine like kvass; he was never entirely sober. Several times he poisoned himself with this swill and came down with delirium tremens. He would then be taken to Gdansk's psychiatric hospital for treatment. Some more scrupulous S.S. would substitute for him in the kitchen, and camp food would improve slightly. But Ziehmann would again return – and all his dirty dreck returned with him.

Who can say how many groats, how much flour, how many heads of cabbage, how many cans of this or that go into a big vat of soup? One of my colleagues dedicated two years to a search for traces of meat in the soup, but he never found so much as a scrap. Yet in the books it was written: soup with meat.

When a block finally received what remained of its ration of bread, jam, margarine or sausage, that still didn't mean that the prisoners would get it all. The blocks were always overloaded with governing bodies, and by nature every government wants to eat more than those it governs. Besides, the block always had many administrative affairs to attend to – all sorts of renovations, contributions, functions to host. A two kilogram loaf of bread was estimated to suffice for ten or twelve breakfasts; somewhat less was distributed in the evening. And what was to prevent the bread slicer from dividing the loaf into thirteen or fifteen pieces? Who's going to tell him what to do? If you ask why you got so little bread, you'll get a rap on your forehead for being nosy – and that's the end of that gripe.

Each time the bread was handed out, the block's authorities kept a few loaves for themselves; the same thing happened with margarine and sausage. The authorities will never be the ones to suffer – that's why they're the authorities, so they'll get a little something extra. According to the books, every prisoner was supposed to receive half a liter of coffee and a slice of bread spread with jam every morning. But in fact there were only tiny foot-prints of jam on the edge of a shred of bread. On an ordinary morning, the prisoner received about 150 grams worth of bread and less than a half-liter of unsweetened coffee. (The block authorities got a full liter or more). The prisoner had to wolf down this meager meal while on the move from one day room to the

next, jostled and shoved and squeezed on the way, with Wacek prodding and poking with his stick.

“Scram, you fartheads! Get out of here!” Wacek shouts non-stop and clobbers our skulls.

And while you're walking to the other door, Wacek's hare-brain aides are already grabbing the bowl from your hands – there aren't enough to go around, they have to be passed back to the convicts without one. Supper is conducted in an identical manner. You receive about 100 grams of bread and a dab of margarine. The bread contains a noticeable admixture of sawdust – sometimes not too bitter, but at other times totally acrid. You eat this kind of bread and immediately you become a musician: your bowels grind and bray like a “shayne katarinka”, such lovely barrel organ sounds...

In the summer, supper was eaten in the yard along the fence, also very hastily – but at least there was something to swallow. Not everyone could eat the margarine. Some would be besieged by boils and abscesses from it. Sometimes this margine was made from only hell knows what refuse – it never slid easily into anyone's mouth.

Not until 1944 did the eating arrangement improve. Actual seats were provided – indoors, yet!

Bread was no longer served for supper. Three-fourths of a liter of soup was dished out, made of cabbage, or beets, or greens, or carrots, or spinach, or nettles, or sometimes turnips. In the second half of 1944, pea soup was provided twice a week, or porridge, or macaroni.

The problem was that this soup was prepared under filthy conditions; in Lithuania a good farmer cooked the swill for his pigs more hygenically than they cooked our soups. Sometimes

the produce, red beets for example, was quite good – but so what? The soup was still unpalatable – the beets were neither sliced nor washed but boiled with the dirt still on them. Carrots, also, weren't cleaned, only drizzled with water. Carrot soup was always one of the worst. Cabbage was tolerable only occasionally and accidentally, otherwise – rotten, decayed, moldy. The prisoners were given only the green leaves and stems, while the white leaves went to the S.S. Generally, all the better produce went to their kitchen, while the prisoners got – putrescent rubbish.

Perhaps the worst were the turnips. A raw turnip is edible, but raw ones were never served. Turnips were always boiled in camp, and in our soup they stank like old goats; they were fodder, fit only for the stomach of a cow. Turnip soup was served quite often.

You'd be eating and there would be a tremendous urge to throw up. You have to eat, you have to... You have to maintain life. There isn't anything more!

The greatest thrill was to find a potato in the soup. But so few potatoes were conferred on the rank and file – the camp's aristocracy organized them for themselves. And these poor little potatoes were only good in the fall. In the winter, they were always frozen and rotten. By spring, they were mottled black and white, like a breed of Dutch cow.

It was not surprising that with such nutrition the devils began jumping around in our stomachs.

Of course, it was possible to supplement such nutriments, somewhat and sometimes, but for this, one had to be courageous, resourceful, and blessed with good luck.

The camp had a large rabbit-breeding establishment. These were Angora rabbits, bred for their hair. Those who worked with the rabbits could manage to get by, so long as they maintained

friendly relations with the rabbits. An amiable rabbit could always be talked into dying. And a dead rabbit couldn't care less where he goes: along the fence or into your stomach.

Another resource was wild pigeons. In 1943, quite a few flew into camp in the spring, but by fall not one was left – all had been devoured. Kittens also had fairly tasty meat, similar to rabbit, but they had to be soaked in a strong vinegar solution for a long time. And so few kittens wandered into camp!

Of course, no doggies dared show themselves in camp – for when they did, their poor little pants got pulled off. There were frequent scandals with Selonke's dogs, the Shepherds given him by Chemnitz. He guarded them as best he could, but not one of them lived longer than a month. The prisoners gobbled them all – and gobbled them in such a way that not even Selonke ever found the guilty glutton... But this type of luck was enjoyed by very few.

Wacek would sometimes pick out bits of food from parcels sent into camp and divide them among those prisoners in his block who were in the worst shape. Once he even gave me a few little pieces of dried black bread – for some reason he was benevolent to me. Could it have been that when he boxed my ears I didn't fall to the ground? Such things impressed him.

I picked up these two pieces of dried bread by bending down low and then moving aside – at least I could suck on them! I crawled out of the crowd, squeezed through, and – hey! My bread crumbs are gone! Some brute already filched them! What a crook!

I sagged down by the fence and choked on my tears. Now I finally understood why my father used to tell me when I was small that after picking up a piece of bread that had fallen on the ground, you must kiss it.

The devil damn that bread and its thief!

Worst of all was that the hunger gave me no peace even at night, in my sleep. I barely close my eyes – and a gold chariot rolls by drawn by six lively steeds. In the golden chariot sits a lovely lady, scented with heavenly victuals. She drives by, smiling to herself, waving her delicate hand – goodbye! Damn!

For some reason the bread kept haunting me in the guise of a fancy, fragrant lady riding a golden chariot. The devil take her!

If only I could get a tiny bit of bread somewhere! With that intoxicating aroma of rye in a hot oven. Plus a smidgen of an onion head sliced across, diagonally... though I wouldn't mind if it was cut into little round circles, either – thin ones, transparent ones. And to top all of this, if only there was a pinch of salt! Does man need a lot to be happy?

No! I can't go on like this. I'll either dash that damn golden chariot to pieces, or... or... Or what? Or I'll go steal!

You think they'll catch me? Kill me, perhaps?

So what! The devil take them! Let them kill! Big deal!

No, I do care! I can't...

By the way, about an hour ago my neighbor tossed a green-tinged slice of bread out the window, into the garbage. A whole slice, I want you to know!

I wonder where it's gone to?

Lord, oh Lord – I'm so hungry!

XL

LETTERS AND PARCELS

Installed in the position of head postmaster was S.S. Tech Sergeant **Platz**, known in camp as The Bald Penguin.

Platz was in his sixties with a receding hairline and eyeglasses balanced on the tip of his nose. He was of medium height, slightly humpbacked, and his face resembled a crumpled fertilizer sack. He was now a thoroughly addled old man, and must have once been the most pedantic creature in all prewar East Prussia.

Platz would brief you in advance on the hour and the minute you must come to him – and you'd better be punctual! If you arrive a minute early, he'll show you the clock and say: "Get out! You're too early." If you arrive a minute late, he'll show you the clock and say: "Get out! You're too late."

There was never any way to reach him on time – his clock moved in mysterious ways. With his magic clock he pushed around not only the prisoners but even the S.S.

He was the camp's chief censor, too. His previous employment made him highly suited for this task: before the war, he'd wielded an iron rod with which he scraped horse droppings from the tramway tracks in Gdansk. Now he determined how many lines of writing per letter were permissible. If there were a couple of lines too many, this Judas would simply snip them off, and what could you do about it? He had plenty of time to count the number of lines, but to count the words, well, that was just too much. So it made no difference how long each line was – five centimeters or twenty-five, he didn't care – only the **number** of lines was consequential. And if some minute thing perturbed him in a letter, it went into the trash – and that was the end of that.

I was constantly litigating with him, so he often complained about me to Mayer. Poor Platz was perpetually perplexed about what my letters could possibly mean. He always thought I was writing one thing while thinking something entirely different.

In one letter, I wrote that the devils only know how much longer I'd be locked up in camp. He ripped up my letter and admonished me:

"You can't mention the devil's name in a letter." I wrote another. I replaced the devils with gods – but this letter, too, went in the basket. The gods, it turned out, were also unmentionable.

Platz called me in and lectured me: in a letter one can only write: 'I received the package and letter in perfect condition. Thank you very much and please send more. I'm well and content, feeling wonderful and kisses to all.'

“But Sergeant,” I said, “it’s pointless for me to write such a letter. Why don’t you print up these notes on faded paper – I’ll just sign them and everything will be fine.” “Out!” he yelled, so out I went.

He confiscated another of my letters because I’d written: ‘It’s a boring business sitting behind rusty wires...’

“How dare you write that you’re sitting behind rusty wires? Can’t you see anything else in camp? Can’t you see the birches growing?”

I rewrote the letter. ‘Our electrified barbed wire fence shines and sparkles as if it were sprinkled with fine silvery sugar. Visible behind the fence are three birches, two tree stumps and one mushroom.’

“You scoundrel, you mucked it up again! I’m reporting you to Mayer!”

The Penguin filed a complaint with Mayer, but Mayer wasn’t terribly interested.

“You have to write that you’re healthy,” Platz told me.

“But what should I do if I’m really sick? Sergeant, would you be so kind as to feel my side?”

“Get out!”

I went out and composed a new letter: ‘According to the effective rules and regulations, I am healthy...’

The Penguin once again tore up my letter and chased me out of his office.

On other occasions The Penguin destroyed my letter because it was too long; the next one he destroyed because it was too short, consisting of only one sentence; as such it constituted a mockery of authority, he felt. Another letter he shredded because it was too sad, and the next because it was too joyful... Other prisoners had an easier time getting letters past The Pen-

guin, but I couldn't seem to hit on Platz's approved tone. I was not a favorite of his; indeed when he saw me he looked ready to vomit.

Our block was allowed to write and receive letters every week; the others did so every two weeks. By 1944 weekly letters were permitted to some of the other types of convicts, but they didn't benefit much; half their letters went straight in the basket.

Letters were the sole means of communication with the real world. No visits were permitted, so no outsider could directly witness camp life. Thus letters were enormously precious to a prisoner. And The Penguin massacred so many of them!

But what were the worries and miseries of others to him? He was, after all, a specialist at scraping horse droppings from tramway tracks!

In any case, letters were for him a very dull aspect of his work. He had a much more interesting task: handling parcels.

By the beginning of 1943, regulations had already been relaxed to the point where each prisoner could receive one package up to the weight of two kilograms per month. Later it was two kilograms per week, and by 1944 restrictions on the number and weight of packages fell away altogether. In summer, the camp received a few hundred, a thousand, sometimes upwards of 2000 parcels daily.

This great load of stuff was dragged into camp from Stutthof each day by prisoners hitched to gigantic wagons. Civilians in town stood around and shook their heads: those poor prisoners straggled so hard to pull the wagon! The authorities by 1944 couldn't take it any more and replaced the prisoners assigned to that detail with horses.

This was a startling innovation, to have horses in camp; apparently they too had been convicted of racial inferiority. The

poor things were utilized for the most strenuous labor, even to tow logs, the same kind I'd been towing the previous summer. But it appeared that horses weren't as compliant as people. They did somehow manage to tow the logs, but they firmly refused to haul wagons with packages: they reared, kicked the wagons, mangled parcels. It began to appear that this behavior was the spawn of some evil saboteurs – and in fact the agitators were prisoners, the same ones who had previously pulled the wagons themselves.

The townspeople of Stutthof had no cause to pity overmuch the men who dragged the wagons. Prisoners relished this job, for it was very profitable; even the German sailors finagled strenuously to land a spot on this crew. While hauling packages, it was always possible to swipe something en route. Indeed, the transport detachment lived splendidly. Even cripples recovered health and vigor working there.

The feckless horses were roundly cursed and humans returned to their posts, which, of course, suited the prisoners down to the ground.

En route, packages were heaved and hurled about; some were dropped and split open. You don't need to think the valuable stuff was just left lying along some fence, when there were better places for it to go – like under some prisoner's shirt. And if a package doesn't know enough to split open by itself, what's wrong with giving it a little help?

There were other common mishaps. Often a package's address had been rubbed off in transit – so no one knew who to give it to. The finest of these went to Platz and his S.S. aides. And scraping the address off an intact parcel, should that be necessary, wasn't such a difficult feat. You rub it some with a wet rag – and no one could read the prisoner's name or number.

By checking a parcel's appearance, sender, and address, an experienced censor could always determine whether it was or wasn't worth the trouble of scraping off the address and grabbing it for himself.

Some packages were quite opulent: bacon, ham, butter, fat, white bread, cake, sugar, tobacco, cigarettes, chocolate, whiskey, clothing – there was everything in them!

Platz was a very wealthy man. He provided lavish amounts of produce for his family and relatives in Gdansk. He had every reason to be proud of himself and to curse such obscure elements as I was at that time...

Whatever remained of these raggedy parcels after Platz and his aides got through with them passed into the hands of the prisoners who worked in the postal department. They, too, lived in relative splendor. They gorged themselves like greedy bulls, and what they didn't consume themselves they sold or traded. They wouldn't even look at ordinary moonshine, they had access to the real stuff. Their resources enabled them to present the girls with all sorts of finery, like undergarments, fine silk hose, or anything else a sweetheart might desire...

What a wonderful job assignment that was! Many of the young men working there could never have landed such a lucrative job in freedom. Here too toiled His Holiness, Jehovah's future prime minister...

A considerable number of packages arrived bearing the names of dead or transferred prisoners. One man had died a half year ago, but packages in his name kept coming. The Political Division usually informed relatives of a prisoner's death in camp, but quite often the deceased's last name and place of residence were written incorrectly and the addressee never received the notice. And when Russians and certain categories of Poles succumbed,

the camp didn't bother to notify anyone. So parcels kept arriving in their names.

Of course these were never returned to the sender – the goods might needlessly spoil in the mail! They were sent straight to Chemnitz for disposal as he saw fit. Chemnitz took the better part for himself and his mistresses, choosing the bacon, butter, sugar, cigarettes, sausages... But he couldn't consume it all, there was just too much, even for him. Plenty was left for Lehman and Selonke. What remained when they had had their pick, Chemnitz diverted to the office capo to distribute among prisoners. Naturally, Chemnitz often pointed out those who he considered especially deserving; with food, his office could play its own brand of politics. And here the women's block was not forgotten...

Packages that somehow managed to find their way into the prisoners' residential blocks were checked first by the block authorities. In 1943, during such inspections, the inspectors took whatever they liked, usually at least half the package. But from midsummer 1944, they took only what a prisoner gave them himself. Of course, a prisoner wasn't stingy when it came to providing for the block leader and the block chief; in the long run it made more sense to give than not to give.

These packages provided the goods that compensated various craftsmen: shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, glaziers, locksmiths, barbers, woodcarvers, artists. These men's services were in demand by everyone, but especially the prisoner-aristocrats and men of authority, Mayer and Chemnitz foremost among them. With even a piece of a parcel, you could get a lot in camp. The master craftsmen and the more resourceful provided for themselves quite well – they weren't dying of starvation.

It was quite another matter for those individuals who'd come out of the scholarly professions, or farming – their services were

needed by no one in camp. They simply consumed the government's bread! As far as the administration was concerned, these useless individuals could croon, or they could croak – whichever they desired. It was this gang that coalesced as crowds of creeping cripples. As for crooning, they didn't do much; croaking was what they did best.

XLI

GUARDIAN ANGELS

Several S.S. companies were responsible for camp security – keeping the prisoners in camp, in other words. The number of these guardian angels fluctuated between 800 and 2000, and sometimes there were even more.

All of the camp's non-security administrative personnel came from the S.S. too. The Third S.S. Company at Stutthof was led for quite some time by the handsome Lieutenant **Matthesius**, an exemplary sadist and model thief. At length he found himself facing robbery charges in an S.S. courtroom, where he was sentenced to a couple of years in prison. He was replaced in camp by **Reddich**, a wry old avuncular character who'd been Stutthof's blacksmith before the war. He had very long, hard hands and a back so hunched it appeared to have a hump. Reddich was terrifically loyal to the S.S. but not very adept at the parade drill; he

never managed to put the right foot forward and his brave forces couldn't even march straight. Otherwise, he was a wonderful company leader, with a good throat for yelling and drinking.

All the other S.S. companies were in charge of security matters. At night, the S.S. kept watch in towers with searchlights and machine guns erected along the wire fences that surrounded the entire residential barrack area. During the day, the S.S. formed a cursing hedge around the labor enclaves. Every fifty meters stood a man; on a foggy day, they moved in closer, guarding every bush. A great many men were needed for this task.

As mentioned earlier, many labor detachments operated outside camp, and lots of S.S. were needed to escort them to and fro and keep them out of temptation. A single detachment would be assigned twenty or thirty attendants, for a detachment might have as many as a thousand prisoners or more. And every time a bowlegged convict was sent on the most trivial errand he had to have a guard for an escort. In many cases you couldn't move from the spot without the benefit of a guard. A guard was the convict's passport, in lieu of a visa stamped on the forehead.

A portion of the guards were Germans, but a negligible portion. They were intended to function as models for maintaining order, being purebred. But most of the S.S. guards were foreigners gathered from different corners of Europe.

The S.S. evolved in several phases. Before the war, Germans had joined up voluntarily – consciously. Some sought a fast and easy career, a merry life getting rich on the nation's expense account. Others joined for more ideological reasons, because they believed in Hitler and all the works of the Nazi Party. Though the reasons for enlistment differed, however, in practical terms there was no difference in the behavior of the recruits.

When the war began, many German men found themselves in the Army. The land area governed by Germany expanded suddenly and the S.S. needed new people to meet its increased responsibilities. The S.S. took on more and more police duties; it was assigned to crush any opposition; on occasion, the S.S. even had to be ready to join forces with regular German Army units. With this expansion of its tasks and duties, the original members of the S.S. took over the various governing positions and acquired assorted *führer* or leadership ranks; the great grey mass of the rank and file S.S. grew, recruited now not only in Germany itself, but also in occupied Europe. The new members included various entrepreneurs, careerists, opportunists and plain criminals. But even this new blood wasn't enough for the Nazis; they announced a general mobilization in occupied countries and pressed young men into service. According to international agreements they couldn't take them into the Army, so they drafted them into the S.S. and forced them to sign documents stating that they'd volunteered. Sometimes the Germans pretended to be taking men to work, but instead stuck them in S.S. compounds. Sometimes they simply seized people, held them in some jail or camp, and from there hauled them straight into S.S. lines.

The entire situation was confusing, because people in these various European countries had little understanding of what the S.S. organization was; furthermore, the S.S. and the Army had almost identical uniforms. The Army wore the German eagle on the chest, while the S.S. wore it on the sleeve – and that was the entire difference. How could a common laborer or farmer notice or grasp the meaning of such a distinction? In any case, not all people are born heroes; not all are brave enough to protest or hide; not all dare to defy threats when called up for mobilization. And once caught – there was no way out.

The men pressed into service with the S.S. were usually sent to another country, one foreign to them and far from home, to fulfill some police duty. A man thrust into the S.S. in this way, living in a distant country, was kept under very severe discipline, diligently watched by German chiefs and rigorously punished for the slightest transgression. Such a greenhorn S.S. felt no better than a prisoner.

Among Stutthof Camp's S.S. guards, four types must be distinguished: 1) Germans, original S.S. volunteers, "the old grenadiers" – the S.S. buttress and bulwark. 2) Germans, mobilized later and en masse into S.S. lines, not remotely comparable in rights and responsibilities with the first type. 3) Foreign opportunists, S.S. volunteers. 4) Foreigners pressed into service – victims of fate, almost always the poorest of the poor.

The foreigners had black tunics and a badge denoting nationality attached to the sleeve; instead of a hat, they wore a kind of yarmulke. They had almost no direct dealings with the prisoners. The German guards looked down from on high at these foreigners as upon worthless lackeys – but the prisoners had to rapidly remove their caps in front of every one of these foul-mouthed sheep.

In 1944, just before Easter, Klawan the numbskull S.S. philosopher approached me in the office and asked me to help him translate certain terms and expressions into Russian.

"Okay, Corporal, but to translate these terms I have to know the entire text. I can't translate isolated phrases or know which meanings should be emphasized if I don't know the context."

"Sure, well, even I understand that," said Klawan. "Only I can't show you the whole thing. It's... a secret..."

"Come on, what kind of secret could there be in camp? There's nothing here that we don't know!"

And in fact the authorities couldn't keep a secret in camp – something always crawled out into the clear. Brave Klawan agreed that he had no reason to tremble about the consequences of divulging his great secret; it would come out soon anyhow, one way or another. So he laid out the situation:

There was a plan afoot to present the Ukranian guards with an Easter gift: a brothel for their exclusive use. The Ukranians were human, after all, they deserved to be serviced! The commandant had composed a short treatise on brothel rules and etiquette and had commissioned him, Klawan, to translate it into the Ukranian.

“You see, I can translate it, all right,” Klawan blushed. “But I've never been in one of these... I don't know what to call certain things...”

“The devil! What makes you think I've been there?!”

“I thought,” he stammered, “I mean, since you're a professor, you should know everything...”

No! I've never yet lectured on such matters! Actually, this bawdy house was being set up for reasons somewhat different than those Klawan offered.

During their free time, the Ukranian S.S. loafed around the town of Stutthof and the outlying villages. They partied with the war widows and grass widows, offering the German S.S. fierce competition and flagrantly sullyng the purity of the race. If these Ukranians had done such things without benefit of the S.S. uniform, they would have been immediately stashed in camps, and a few hung straightaway to make the point clear. But sticking uniformed S.S. into camps, on a charge of spoiling racial purity – this was somehow discomfoting. So the authorities came up with a creative alternative: to provide them with facilities in camp.

And so, prettily painted, graceful little cottages were erected in a pine grove. All the conveniences were installed. Barbed wire surrounded the cottages so prisoners wouldn't get ideas about dropping in uninvited. To service the few hundred Ukrainians and to suit a variety of tastes, two of the most attractive ladies available were picked: Niunce and Lola.

Niunce was not very tall but slim, with black curly hair, vivid, shrewd eyes, soft and fat lips, and a slightly hooked nose. She moved as if constantly in the throes of an electric current. When she passed a higher S.S. officer, her garter would always somehow unfasten itself above the knee.

"Hot damn!" the object of her attentions would exclaim, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Often, incredibly often, Niunce would drop in at the red brick administrative headquarters – she had all kinds of business to take care of with various officials. Otherwise, she was an okay girl.

Lola was entirely different. She was a tall and sturdy blond with a very wide bosom and even wider buttocks. Her face wasn't bad, just a bit small for her majestic figure. She'd sashay through camp like a rocking locomotive on a narrow railway track. Lola was actually rather attractive. She strode along with a sort of serene Olympian seriousness, impressive as a flying fortress.

The leader of this little establishment was the Prussian tramp Krauss, an old dame who'd scalded out one of her eyes in camp while frying potatoes. She was a plump, bowlegged cynic.

When the Ukrainians discovered the authorities' project, they were incredibly outraged:

"Tfu!" they spat, and cursed under their noses. "When there's blood to be spilt, then we're equal to the Germans, but when it comes to this sort of thing, suddenly there's no more equality!" These Ukrainians waxed truly indignant. "When we go to a vil-

lage, we're fed a good meal, our thirst is slaked, we're bedded down quite comfortably and invited back again! But now we're offered this special treat – contribute half a mark to the government's treasury for the purchase of a ticket – and then even bring gifts to the little ladies.”

Most irritating to the Ukrainians was that they could drink neither whiskey nor beer in this house.

“What do you mean, we can't get drunk? In such a place, at such a time?! Only German pigs can do a thing like that in cold blood! No, we're not idiots. Let the Germans go hang themselves in their whorehouse! We're not setting foot in there!”

And lo and behold, the Ukrainians did not visit granny Krauss on the first day of Easter. Not even one. Nor did they go the second day, either.

So Granny Krauss sat in her slip by the prettily painted cottage, warming herself in the sun, applying polish to her little nails. Having removed their skirts, Niunce and Lola slunk lazily along the barbed wire fence dressed in elegant panties.

“Here, take a look!” they called to the Ukrainians. “Aren't we something?”

The Ukrainians stared from afar. They cracked sunflower seeds and spat out the hulls. Not a single man drew near.

The ladies were beautifully turned out for Easter. The camp authorities had provided them with hedebo slips, silk stockings, patent leather shoes, crepe de chine dresses, fur collars, colorful hats – powder, cream, rouge, cologne, and everything else they needed.

By the third day of Easter, the militant Ukrainian hearts could hold out no longer. A whole bunch of Ukrainians scrambled over to stand in line by the wire fence. They were inside the pretty cottages fifteen minutes apiece.

By 1944, Allied airplanes were flying over the camp more and more often. They didn't bomb the camps anywhere. It seems that they were perfectly well informed about the camps and had good photographs of them – or so the camp authorities surmised. When Allied airplanes bombed Gdynia, Gdansk, Elbağ and Bydgoszcz at night, it was an interesting performance for us in camp.

Once the Americans flew directly over at noon. Their motors buzzed like a million bees as the planes flew in a three-tier formation. German planes flapped like owls down low along the slopes and forests so the Americans wouldn't see them. The Americans ignored them.

The Americans flew to Gdynia. They sank a few ships there and damaged the others, demolished several small factories and wafted away.

It was lunch break at this time in camp. One transport column was hauling food to prisoners in a brick factory. The capo of the column drove up to the brick factory and looked around, but his escort was not to be found.

Where could this devil have disappeared? The detachment returned with lunch to search for its guard. They found him stretched out on the road, lying still, not moving a muscle – for all the world like a dead cripple.

An American bullet had gone right through his head and come out his foot.

The detachment brought its escort back to camp along with lunch. Nobody had noticed when it was the Americans had fried this sentry.

Another American bullet hit a chair which was usually occupied during working hours by the DAW workshops' chief. Since it was lunch break, he wasn't sitting there. If he had been, the bullet would have skewered him lengthwise.

A third bullet hit the hospital and landed between two beds. A few more bullets were scattered around in the yard, but they didn't touch a soul, either.

So in five years of war our abundant S.S. unit suffered one solitary casualty – and this guy was probably felled only because he'd dawdled on the road.

In wartime, there was no better place to be than in an S.S. unit!

XLII

RUNAWAYS

One of the biggest disasters that could happen in camp was an escape. Not only did the S.S. detest the runaways, but so did the prisoners. And we had our reasons!

It was incredibly hard to escape from Stutthof. It was possible with great difficulty to break out of the camp itself, but that didn't help much. Stutthof's geographical situation didn't lend itself to a clean getaway. In the first place, the entire area around camp was filled with police and S.S. agents. Even civilians played the spy; they were under strictest orders to inform the police immediately of any escaped prisoners they spotted, and even to pursue them on their own. But to avoid all this by attempting an escape across the sea was hopeless, and along the peninsula, it was almost as bad. The road out spanned a network

of canals, rivulets and the Vistula's two large branches, and every crossing and bridge was guarded.

Though it was not altogether impossible to escape, one had to be very well prepared to attempt it. The runaway had to know the entire geography of the area perfectly, and every road and lane. He had to be capable of telling lies in fluent Polish and German. And of course he also needed civilian clothing, food reserves and loyal helpers beyond the camp's walls to supply transportation, shelter and documents.

Without any one of these things, it was not a good idea to run from camp. And still people ran. Inside camp, this was the result:

During evening roll call, it suddenly becomes clear that one or maybe even a few inmates are missing. Who they are – no one knows.

The search begins immediately. Which block is the fugitive from? Which labor detachment does he work in, what's his name, what's his number? All this takes time, rarely less than an hour and sometimes several. While this goes on, the prisoners stand in formation.

Once all data has been confirmed, the search for the fugitive begins. The S.S. is mobilized and police dogs are called out.

The entire camp stands until the fugitive is found. He's brought back beaten, bloody, bitten by dogs – dead or alive.

The entire camp stands. Ten, fifteen, twenty thousand people stand waiting, hungry and tired. They stand for hours, sometimes all night, sometimes a full day and a night or even longer.

What would this cast of thousands call a fugitive? Don't ask.

If he could escape for good, this Judas, maybe that would make it worthwhile... But they'll haul him back anyway, ripped

up by dogs! For one selfish wretch, thousands of us have to suffer!

The authorities are nervous. How will they explain to Berlin that someone has escaped? This will imply poor security at the camp. The fugitive could tell the world what is going on inside! Who's going to take the blame for that?

Standing in close ranks with the other sentries, the Ukranian S.S. also swear to all devils: they've stood all day, now they'll have to stand all night. It's not so bad if it happens to be summer, but if somebody tries to run in winter – when the snow bites your cheeks and drifts up towards your knees...

In the meantime, the authorities grab the fugitive's neighbors – the ones he works and bunks with, friends, acquaintances, anyone who's had anything to do with him at all. They're supposed to know where the fugitive has gone. They should have known he was getting ready to run. Why didn't they inform the authorities?

These neighbors feel lucky if the authorities are content to dish out only fifty lashes apiece. More than once, such good neighbors got worse: tortured for days, sometimes to death, or even solemnly hung.

How could such a neighbor ever find the words with which to honor a runaway?

A recaptured fugitive, if he still shows signs of life, immediately comes under the lash; one who cheated them by dying first is beaten anyway, as if he could still feel it. A fugitive who manages to survive gets a black circle, with a tiny red circle in the center, sewn on his chest and back – to indicate where the bullet should enter if he tries to run again.

If a runaway has committed some sort of crime in the outside world such as breaking in somewhere while searching for food, or

if he's had the nerve to resist arrest, he is beaten like a drum in camp. If after this operation he is still alive, he is put into a bunker for a week or more, for the bedbugs to feast on. Then he is hung, with great ceremony; and all the camp's citizens are summoned with loud drumbeats to witness this glorious spectacle.

Until the summer of 1944, with few exceptions, only Russians ran. The ones who didn't run placed bets on those who did, or snitched on those who were thinking about it. The Russians wrote scores of letters to Mayer asking for an "audience". I had to translate these letters into German; sometimes I was present as translator when such an "audience" was granted. The snitches were anxious to inform the authorities about escape plans they claimed to know of. Sometimes they got something nice in return for these exposes; sometimes they got a whipping from Chemnitz. For some reason, Chemnitz couldn't stand these volunteer-spies. Rather quickly the names of these volunteers became known in camp, which had predictable consequences. Unfortunately, other informers stepped forward with new information.

The Russian fugitives' attempts at freedom almost always ended tragically. They ran with no preparation whatsoever: they didn't know the region, didn't know the languages, they had no outside ties... One Russki took one single wooden spoon with him – nothing else. Was he intending to bail out the Vistula, maybe?

Others who ran showed unusual endurance. One, for example, swam a few kilometers through sewer pipes half filled with water and waste. Another sat for twelve hours plunged up to his ears in the outhouse – all in vain. Both returned bloody, torn by dogs.

The Poles rarely ran, but when they did they were better prepared. One Pole broke out and stayed out for a year, was brought back to camp and then cut out again.

This time even his footprints vanished. This was one of the very few successful escapes in the history of Stutthof Camp.

In 1943, a Lithuanian vanished from camp. A Plekaitis supporter, he'd roosted quietly in camp for four years, having registered as a Pole in the beginning, in case an opportunity should present itself. He was a tranquilly disposed man, known and trusted by everyone in camp. The guards no longer even watched him. One day he walked right past the guards and left camp – they didn't even ask where he was going. He managed to swim both branches of the Vistula and remained in freedom for three months, but he didn't make it back to his homeland: he was betrayed by German women who spotted him digging up potatoes. The poor guy was returned to camp.

Once a Pole wearing a prison uniform was dragged into camp. He said he was a farmer from the Starogard district; he'd been on his way to market with his filly when he was attacked by escaped convicts! They took everything from him and dressed him in convicts' clothing – that was why the police had detained him. The camp authorities felt sorry for this poor farmer. Since he was already all tricked out like a convict, why not keep him a while, just in case? Not until three months later did it emerge that this hapless farmer was himself an escaped prisoner from the Stutthof Camp's division at the Hopehill brick factory.

A Russian woman once fled in a truly elegant way.

Following morning roll call, she somehow snuck past the guards inside the camp and showed up by the chain of guards outside.

"You tramp, where you headin'?" a foul-mouthed, greasy Ukrainian guard asks her.

"*V Ukrainu, milenkij, idu, v Ukrainu.* I'm going to the Ukraine, dearest, to the Ukraine," she tenderly tells him.

“Sure, sure, now fade away...” growls the Ukranian. He struts off, pleased with his wit. A while later he glances back – the woman is gone. Truly, she faded away, as he had suggested – faded away completely.

The Ukranian’s dumbfounded, he can’t even swear. Quivering with fear, he reports to the authorities. Ten minutes later the dogs give chase, but even they can’t sniff out the woman.

It was as if she’d been swallowed up by the earth. And in fact no one ever saw her again.

One morning I arrive for work and see a strange sight.

I count five prisoners and five German guards. Drunk Mayer is staggering around and smashing the snouts of – the guards! He’s bashing the guards and passing cigarettes to the prisoners. They barely have time to suck one down before he’s shoved the next one down their throats:

“Smoke, *blöde Sauhund!*” Mayer yells. “Bloody bastards!” He smacks a guard.

“What the devil is going on?” I can’t understand a thing.

It develops that this is a labor detachment, lately returned to camp. Once they had lived together in harmonious obscurity near Gdansk, in Schön Warling, eight prisoners and several guards. The prisoners walked to work at neighboring farms without escorts. Some even ran various businesses together. But one night three Polish prisoners flew the coop.

“Goddamnit, how’d it happen?” Mayer asks for the hundredth time, as if the question had just occurred to him.

“Well, then, we got up in the morning to wash,” a prisoner relates, “and we look: the window’s open. The window’s open and the three runaways are gone...”

“Why’d they crawl out the window and not through the door?”

“The door was locked from the outside...”

“What time did this happen?”

“We don’t know, Captain, Sir. We were sleeping. We didn’t hear them. When we woke up, they were already gone...”

“So where were the guards?”

“The guards locked our door and went to sleep in their own quarters...”

“What did you do when you saw the window open?”

“We crawled out the window ourselves and went to tell the guards about this unfortunate event.”

“And the guards – what?”

“And the guards what? The guards – nothing...”

“Now where did you find the guards, again?”

“In their quarters. We woke them, told them what happened...”

“Yes? Tell me more. Were the guards sleeping well?”

“Sure, I guess. They looked pretty comfortable. We knocked for about ten minutes, till we woke them...”

“So why the devil didn’t you run?”

“What do you mean? Why, out of respect for the authorities... It wouldn’t have been right.”

“Here’s a cigarette, *blöde Saubund!* Smoke!” Mayer shoves a cigarette at each prisoner and slaps the guards around some more.

It was easier to escape from those detachments stationed outside camp, some distance from Stutthof. From there prisoners ran more often and with better luck.

Once our old friend, that cow milker and street musician, Don Juan and gifted liar Willi Freiwald was dragged back to camp with another German runaway. He’d run out on his labor detachment in Police, near Szczecin. That detachment’s senior then was Wacek Kozlowski, and its top foreman, the next in the

chain of command was none other than Willi Freiwald himself. He was nabbed in Berlin, playing music at an inn.

“Freiwald, Freiwald, you ran, too!” Mayer reproached him.

“Captain, Sir,” Willi replied, “it was so bad with Kozlowski, so terribly bad, that I decided to walk back to Stutthof...”

“But Berlin lies in the opposite direction!”

“I didn’t have a compass, Captain, Sir. So I got a little lost... And once I got as far as Berlin how could I not at least have a drink?”

Towards summer of 1944, two Englishmen were hauled in.

They were sort of strange. One had been born in Manchester, the other in South Africa – at least that’s what they claimed. They had no papers, only a huge sack of canned food which a few S.S. officials split amongst themselves in brotherly fashion.

These two Englishmen told a different story every time they were asked how and why they’d landed in camp. They complicated and twisted up everything that they could have made up a terrific crime novel.

“They’ve been up to something, that’s for sure!” I told my capo. “I can’t wait to see how they’ll escape from camp!”

They conned Mayer beautifully. Mayer trusted them. After three months, they landed jobs in an outside detachment – in Gdansk, with ship-building, right in the harbor!

Three weeks later, a message arrived from Gdansk: “Those two Englishmen boarded a boat and took off for Sweden!”

“*Blöde Saubund*, bloody bastards!” yelled Mayer. He wrote to Chemnitz: ‘*Echt englisch gemacht!* It was done in true English fashion!’

For the lucky ones in the outside detachments, it was possible to escape. For the Russkis inside who tried to run, it almost always went like this: the dogs tore them, the S.S. beat them, and Selonke strung them up.

Towards summer of 1944 the Russians suddenly stopped running from camp. No one knows the reason why they stopped – and that's it. That summer in the matter of running away, the Latvians took their place – with exactly the same results!

The Latvians ran, the dogs ripped them apart, the S.S. beat them, Selonke hung them, the prisoners cursed them...

XLIII

GOING TO THE DOGS

As an extra precaution, the camp kept a separate dog detachment composed of about twenty quadrupeds and several bipeds in S.S. uniforms. The bipeds were a pure Germanic breed; the quadrupeds were mostly of the German shepherd race, but there was some mixed blood. For example, the largest predator among them was a black, wooly giant of an entirely unknown breed, renowned for having ripped up more than twenty people all by himself.

This detachment's leader was called *Hundeführer* – dog leader. There was also a *Hundemeister* – dog master, but this title didn't fit; he didn't master the dogs, he only fed them.

The biped dogs lived comfortably in separate brick cottages, and the lodgings for their four-legged friends were also splendid.

They all ate grandly. They had meat, such as the prisoners never saw; they got soup, and specially baked biscuits too. By and large they lived in happiness and peace.

But nothing stays the same on earth. Doggy heaven was not fated to last.

Fiendish villains started stealing from the poor pups – they stole meat and biscuits from right under their big wet noses...

This was truly heinous treachery. Stutthof had never heard of such a crime.

A guard was set to capture this despicable thief. He was nabbed leaving the dog pen with pockets full of doggy biscuits.

The thief was a young, resourceful guy, a Russian from Moscow itself, a high school graduate, I believe.

“Stop!” the guard yells. “Where’d you get the biscuits?”

“Here, I took them from the pen, from the doggy bowl...”

“You’re lying! How could you get the biscuits from dogs like these?”

“Easy. I went over and took them...”

“Could you show me how you did that?”

“Why not? Be glad to...”

The guy enters the dog pen again. Three German shepherds are loafing about loose. When they see him, they bristle, bare their teeth and growl. He begins to calmly chat with them, winking confidentially. The dogs calm down. He pulls some biscuits from his pocket and tosses one to each. They run up to the biscuits, sniff, and gulp them down while the guy sidles over to the bowl piled high with more doggy biscuits. With one hand he’s pulling biscuits from his pocket, tossing pieces to the dogs; with the other he’s stuffing his pockets from the bowl. He’s emptied three bowls, and left nothing for the doggies.

The dog master stares wide-eyed, he's never seen anything like it. Finally, he says:

"Well, okay, but what about the wooly one, the big killer, can you rob him too?"

"Why not? Be glad to..."

The dog master releases the killer. The guy starts talking to him, winking again, tossing biscuits from his pocket – in no time he's emptied Wooly's whole bowl.

"Pigs, not dogs!" fumes the master. What is he going to do with this thief?

"Well, okay... wait, wait... But can you get this big sonofabitch back into his kennel?"

"Why not? Be glad to..."

The guy grabs the first stick he sees and clobbers the dog's rear end and says something rude in some sort of doggy tongue. The dog, acting just like a dog, yowls like crazy and speeds off to his kennel and curls up there like a puppy.

"This is scandalous!" the dog master swears. He brings the incredible thief to Mayer.

"Why steal those biscuits?" Mayer demands. "Don't they taste like hell?"

"Maybe to you, Sir, they wouldn't taste so good," the guy replies, "but to me, who's got nothing to eat, they're delicious." The guy had sharp answers. This was the only solved theft in the camp's history that went unpunished. Mayer ordered a large loaf of bread to be given the guy if he promised to quit embarrassing the dogs.

But these dogs got duped the next time in an even more outrageous way.

In the spring of 1944, two civilians, a father and a son, were brought to camp from Gardinas. The father was about sixty and

the son twenty-five. Both were practicing Methodists, or something; they both abstained from meat of all kinds and celebrated Saturday instead of Sunday. Stranger still, they didn't remove their caps in front of the S.S. Of course they got what was coming for that! The S.S. would knock their caps off, but they'd immediately put them back on. They only removed their caps for God. For servants of the devil, which included the S.S., they would neither remove their caps nor even consent to stand without them once they'd been knocked off. To do otherwise they accounted a mortal sin.

These two Belorussians were tenacious as hell. Their caps cracked from the constant pulling, but they didn't change their beliefs, and they made sure their caps stayed on for the S.S.!

It got even hotter for these two when they refused to do any kind of work in camp. They agreed to sweep only that area where the block chief walked! All the other camp jobs served the war and the devil – they wouldn't serve either the one or the other. To them war was even more repulsive than the devil.

The S.S. spared no efforts to beat these thoughts out of their heads. But the Belorussian heads turned out to be particularly hard. They didn't surrender, didn't change their beliefs. They'd sit in the residential block with their caps on and wouldn't work. And not a thing could be done with them – you can't hammer in the spirit of industriousness!

The authorities ran out of patience and sat the stubborn fellows down in a bunker – maybe they'd be willing to croak. But the two of them sit – and nothing happens! They won't croak. It doesn't seem to make any difference to them, block or bunker. In the bunker they only get bread and water but in the block they hadn't eaten anything else anyway, since they suspected traces of meat in the soup. So the two of them sit in the bunker

snacking on bread, sipping on water – and nothing! Absolutely nothing happens to them. They don't even get thinner; they were bags of bones to start with.

They sit in the bunker a week, a second week. They sit in the bunker a fifth week, a sixth week... How long will they sit there, by thunder?!

The authorities again lose their patience. The authorities send their most sensible representative – Klawan himself! – to give them a lecture.

The philosopher-corporal decides to put the son through the grater first – maybe he'd be more reasonable.

"Look," Klawan tells him, "you two will kick the bucket here in the bunker. The old guy, forget about him. It wouldn't be out of his way to die, but you – you're young. You have to live. Just think!"

"But to die is exactly what I want," the son mutters.

"What do you mean, you want to die?" Klawan is amazed. "Look, you'll still find yourself a girl. You'll marry, have children... Isn't it good to be alive? Don't you want to marry?"

"No!" grumbles the Methodist. "I don't want to live with murderers like you and the other S.S. I'm ashamed to be alive with you – and that's all!"

Klawan, like a doggy with his tail between his legs, drags himself to Mayer to announce the sad results of his mission.

One time these two Belorussians were taken from the bunker for a walk – just a walk to warm up in the sun. After all, it was rather chilly in the bunker... Along the way, they happened to wander into the dog pen. There, as if on purpose, were a few loose German shepherds and that big terror – Wooly. What an amazing coincidence!

The dogs growl, snarl, gnash their teeth. Then yapping, they run up to the Belorussians, and sniff – snuffle – and shrug their shoulders a little. Raising their snouts, they glance up at the unshaven chins of the two from Gardinas – and wag their tails.

‘No thanks! Vegetarians aren’t our kind of meat.’ Such appears to be the doggies’ decision. They report to the fence post to do their next doggy duty, saluting smartly with a hind leg.

The authorities had clearly lost their battle with these sectarians.

“They won’t oblige us by starving to death, and even the dogs decline to tear them up...”

The two returned to sit in the block. No work was forced on them. With the S.S. they could talk while sitting – and with their caps on, yet! The authorities appeared to have caved in completely.

After a few weeks, the two were taken to another camp – Buchenwald.

Their encounter with the two from Gardinas demolished the dogs’ prestige completely. Everyone thumbed their noses at them. The disillusioned authorities cut down their meat rations. Instead of biscuits in their bowls, they got a kind of cereal so disgusting that no one bothered to steal it from them.

The authorities stopped sending dogs to capture runaways. Instead they dispatched the block chiefs, secretaries and capos – a whole pack. And they ran through the camp compound just like dogs.

They scampered, sniffed and snuffed. And finding a hidden, scared runaway, they ripped and tore at him no worse than had their buddies, the bankrupt quadrupeds...

XLIV

VIKING DESCENDANTS

Towards fall of 1943, construction of another camp was begun about three kilometers from ours. Much smaller than Stutthof, the new structure was named *Germanenlager*.

The name perplexed us. Already we had with us a full complement of Germans – and Dutch, and Swedes, and Norwegians, and Americans and English – all members of “the Germanic race”. Was there still another Aryan offshoot we didn’t know about – a true thoroughbred that couldn’t mix with the others?

By the New Year the Germanic Camp was completed, but it stood empty through the winter. Then in March of 1944, the first residents were brought to the camp – 265 Norwegian policemen.

They arrived dressed in civilian clothes. These were no rank-and-file cops, but upper echelon police bureaucrats, the major-

ity with university educations; a few were themselves professors. All were tall, handsome, athletic men, well-bred gentlemen, pleasant and sincere.

They had been seized and whisked away to this place with neither indictment nor trial. Apparently their capture had been planned long beforehand, since their quarters had been prepared months ahead of time.

The camp's authorities treated them courteously. No curses, no casual blows. They didn't dress them in convict garb, but – in Italian military uniforms! For this reason the camp nicknamed them Badoglio's Brigade.

The Norwegians received double rations of food – a full portion from our kitchen and a full military portion from the S.S. kitchen. Our Lithuanian block subsidized them with cigarettes, for which they repaid us later very generously with real Norwegian herring provided in large barrels by the Red Cross. A special doctor was appointed them, one who lived among them as a friend – at first a Pole and later a Lithuanian professor of medicine.

Their daily schedule was very different than ours. They rose two or three hours later than we did, and did no work. They weren't even asked. The sole mandatory activity was an hour or two of exercise a day.

Their situation was strange, all right, but it was evident that it couldn't last long. Prisoners don't get such treatment for nothing.

S.S. Tech Sergeant Petersen, half Danish himself, was presented to the Norwegians as their block leader. He got along with them very well. But then the commandant commissioned Petersen to politically enlighten the new men. Normally, they didn't bother with Nazi propaganda in camp; we were all viewed

as has-beens, a doomed lot, a waste of time, no longer useful in this life. For the Norwegians, it seemed different projects were in store.

An order is an order! Poor Petersen had to go teach political wisdom to the Norwegians. A week later, though, a very worried Petersen returned to the commandant:

“I can’t do it!” Petersen confessed. “They’re almost all university graduates... I’m an illiterate, what can I teach them? It’s a bad joke on education, that’s all...”

Petersen told the truth. The Norwegians were gently mocking him. At least the commandant had sufficient sense to understand this situation – Petersen’s undeserved punishment was ended.

A month later, a rather more impressive teacher was presented to our Norwegians – a *Hauptsturmführer*, a captain. He wore the black S.S. uniform. A Norwegian quisling, he’d been specially recruited from Norway. And he really put his foot down with our friends.

“What? You want to eat German bread for free?” he hectoring the Norwegian policemen. “Do you really believe that they’ll keep you like dolls in a dollhouse indefinitely? I’m warning you – you’d better join in the mutual battle against the enemy of Germanism...”

The Norwegians shook their heads as they listened to these lectures. They didn’t protest openly, but they didn’t go in for this quisling business, either. Silently they smiled to themselves, thinking the devil knows what.

It seems the Norwegian degenerate-Gestapo didn’t give a very good report of them to Mayer, for Mayer began to curse them, at first behind their backs, but later right to their faces. *Blöde Sauhund!* There was no talking to him.

During harvest time, Mayer decided to shake up the Norwegians a bit. He put them to work in the villages, reaping and bundling sheaves of grain.

“There’s a war on for preserving European culture. Others are shedding their blood and you’re just lazing about! You have to help – of your own free will!”

If it’s a must, it’s a must; what can be done! A Norwegian labor detachment was formed and off they went to harvest. A few days later, though Mayer was already chewing them out:

“You’re lazy, *blöde Saubund!* You don’t want to work? Is this sabotage or what?”

The German farmers were extremely dissatisfied with the Norwegian laborers. A Polish or Russian prisoner-worker could be shoved and beaten as the farmer pleased – these workers had no rights. But the Norwegians didn’t respond to this sort of thing. They’d smile at a farmer’s ravings; they refused to spook at his threats. And so the German farmers complained to Mayer – apparently they had no further use for workers of this kind...

Mayer quit sending the Norwegians to the village. For a while all he did was curse them, then he changed tacks again. He urged them to don the German S.S. uniform with a Norwegian badge and take over camp security! The Norwegians laughed. Mayer threatened them with the hell knows what. The quisling lecturer vanished from camp.

Eventually, the Norwegians got a note from the commandant – an ultimatum.

It was unprecedented for the commandant himself to write a note to prisoners! He demanded that they decide by the tenth of September about taking over camp security. On the tenth, the Norwegians answered with a note of their own. In essence it said:

We have sworn allegiance to our king. We are men of honor. So long as the king hasn't released us from this allegiance, we can't break our pledge, and can't pledge allegiance to anyone else; therefore we can't wear the S.S. uniform.

The irate commandant still did not give up, but wrote a new communique inviting the Norwegians to meditate once more and begin work on October first. The commandant argued thus: 'It seems that this Norwegian king of yours has turned traitor and broken all his own allegiances, becoming an enemy of the German nation and the Germanic race. If you remain loyal to your traitorous king, then you, too, will become adversaries of the German nation and the German breed, and will be viewed as such from that point on.'

The commandant wrote a ten point dictum, listing various punishments for the Norwegians' uncooperativeness. Finally, he threatened to transfer them to another camp, a really horrible one – Oranienburg – a camp among camps, where they'd certainly fall to rack and ruin.

The Norwegians unanimously rejected this second ultimatum, too.

The authorities fumed, the authorities raged; but in the event, they didn't dare carry out the entire list of threats. First they merely took away the S.S. kitchen's food, but this didn't scare the Norwegians. From the Norwegian and Swedish Red Cross, they received such opulent packages that they could manage very well without any camp food at all.

Mayer then assigned the Norwegians to do the most difficult and loathsome jobs. They split and carried rocks, built causeways, and did the work of horses dragging logs from the forest and hauling the sanitation wagons. The Norwegians labored and toiled but didn't join the S.S. lines.

As if to spite Mayer, the Norwegians began dying off. This antisocial behavior raised a storm of resentment in Mayer's soul. He buried a few of them, but after getting the devil from Berlin, he left the remaining Norwegians in peace.

He ground his teeth but didn't order them to work.

These descendants of the Vikings proved themselves worthy of their ancestors' fame.

For a long time Mayer couldn't get over the way the Norwegian's obstinacy had sullied the honor of the German race. When a huge crowd of Finnish merchant marines was herded into camp – with wives and children – Mayer lodged them in the Germanic Camp, next to the Norwegians, apparently hoping that the Finnish marines might shame them by displaying the proper characteristics of the Germanic breed.

XLV

WEHRMACHT INVASION

Towards summer of 1944, rumors spread throughout camp, getting everyone more and more agitated.

The word was that the conflict between the German Army and Himmler's S.S. Organization had become so intense that the Army was going to try to put the S.S. out of business. The Army would kick the Organization's elite core into the doghouse and ship the rank and file S.S. to the front. All concentration camps would be controlled by the Army, which would check everyone's dossier, release the innocent and stick all the S.S. murderers into camps...

Hearts beat fast listening to such rumors – the hearts of prisoners and S.S. alike.

Just when the rumors were starting to really sizzle, *Wehrmacht*¹ Captain **Zette** arrived in camp to take on his duties as a second

Schutzlagerführer – camp chief, officially on a par with Mayer. Three Army tech sergeants accompanied Zette for the block leader positions: **Berger**, **Pomorin**, and **Jahnke**.

The camp's S.S. hung their heads – it seemed to them, too, that the rumors were materializing, that their warm golden days were coming to an end. The mood was heightened by the arrogant behavior of the *Wehrmacht* – they didn't respond to S.S. greetings, stuck their noses everywhere, interfered with the black market organization of produce, hailed prisoners like friends and chatted with them...

Tech Sergeant **Jahnke** from Gumbinè who apparently had once been a Lithuanian named Jankus, strolled through camp and openly exclaimed to the prisoners that this hell just couldn't go on, that everything would soon be different. But Tech Sergeant **Berger** pulled an even more incredible prank.

A considerable number of Jewesses from Lithuania had been hauled into camp by this time. They were housed in separate barracks, and this Berlin-born Pole named Max was appointed their block chief. He typified the sadistic bully, beating the women mercilessly. Now, when Tech Sergeant Berger saw the kind of job Max was doing, he gave him the business. Berger roared like a lion:

“You savage! How dare you beat women?! For five years I was a sergeant at the front and I didn't hit anyone, but this kind of savagery I can't ignore!”

Berger was fat but very tough. He rolled up his sleeves and told Max, “Now watch out for yourself, you *Halunke* – you scum!”

Berger, it developed, had once been a boxer: he polished Max's cheeks so brightly that for about a week Max's head was so swollen it looked like a giant red cabbage.

So the *Wehrmacht* ‘invasion’ made a lot of noise in camp. The pitch rose even higher when the Gdansk area war commandant abruptly announced that the camp’s armed forces were now at his disposal and under his direction.

The S.S. leaders bristled and scuttled. The commandant flew off to Berlin; Mayer rattled out of camp in a truck. A few days later they returned calm and bright-faced. If a showdown was imminent, these two didn’t seem very worried about it.

Several more tense days passed – then came the comedy of the famous attempt on Hitler’s life. Under the circumstances – the involvement of Army officers in a plot against the *Führer* – the *Wehrmacht* was no longer in a position to challenge the power of Himmler and the S.S. As the remnants of the *Wehrmacht*’s leaders came under the S.S. heel, Mayer and company lost no time in subduing the *Wehrmacht*’s challenge to their authority in camp.

Tech Sergeant Berger was shoved off to Bydgoszcz to head a detachment of Jewesses working in underground dynamite factories. The camp’s other *Wehrmacht* members were incorporated into the S.S. lines right away. Captain Zette alone somehow couldn’t manage to get an S.S. uniform sewn for himself – so he continued to walk around in his old military one. Thus Mayer cut him out of camp business. Zette not only didn’t get an office, he lacked even a chair. For a few months the poor guy skulked around camp with absolutely nothing to do. He poked at garbage in the yard with a stick, picked up buttons and pieces of thread, groped for something or other under the birch tree. It was pitiful to see how this little man struggled without work; how Chemnitz and the lowlier cops scoffed at him!

Really, though, Captain Zette was of no account. He didn’t know how to behave. Why would he want to pick a fight with such a wily crocodile as Mayer?

The remaining sergeants, Jahnke and Pomorin, also from Gumbinè, did consent to slip into S.S. uniforms.

Pomorin was a quiet, obedient lamb – a cloth merchant by profession. He sewed on the S.S. insignias, checked the hem-stitching on the shirt and smiled his vacuous lopsided grin like a simpleton in a fairy-tale. Jahnke, on the other hand, shuddered and spat. In the prisoners' barracks, he cursed the S.S., visibly recoiling with repugnance in their presence.

It really was hard for Jahnke. He was a mature man, a university law graduate, cultured and enlightened – and fate had dumped him into this kind of work, into this kind of company! The postwar implications were clear to him, too. He often conferred with influential prisoners about what he'd have to do to get out of the S.S. and land in camp as a prisoner himself. He viewed this as his only possible salvation...

He even arranged which block he'd live in when he became a prisoner.

A few weeks later, Pomorin flew out of camp. He was the guy who had been on guard duty when the Russian woman announced she was taking a walk to the Ukraine and vanished without a trace. For his stupidity, Pomorin was awarded a three month stint in Mackowy, a camp reserved for S.S. offenders.

Jahnke now spent half his time getting drunk with the prisoners. When Chemnitz came around to roust him out of the prisoners' barracks, Jahnke would yell, "Get out of my sight! Suckling pig! After you've spent five years at the front like I did, then come talk to me!" And Chemnitz would go away empty-handed.

Jahnke tried everything to get out of the S.S. He would present his revolver to the block secretary and lie down in a prisoner's bed. For such antics, the commandant would stick him in a

bunker for several days, but he refused to release Jahnke from his employment.

After serving his time in the bunker, Jahnke would start all over in the barracks: cursing the S.S. and getting drunk.

Despite all his best efforts, Jahnke remained in the S.S. to the end.

During the evacuation of Stutthof Camp, the leader of the prisoners' column was S.S. Sergeant **Milkau**, and Jahnke was assigned to assist him. Milkau spoke a little Lithuanian and was an enthusiast of the beer brewed in Mažeikiai; his dream was to settle down in Lithuania after the war and open a shop of colonial merchandise; he was such an infamously brutal thief that a rebellion against him broke out in the column, with both S.S. and prisoners participating. Mayer had to remove Mikau as leader – and he assigned Jahnke in his place.

When the prisoners' column blundered across the path of a Red Army unit, Jahnke was killed by a bullet from a tank, never having fulfilled his strange dream – to become a prison convict.

XLVI

THE GENERAL STORE

A small store, called the canteen, was set up in camp for those prisoners with money. Possession of real currency was strictly forbidden to prisoners, however; all the money we had when we arrived had been confiscated and deposited in Hapke's office. Every four to six weeks a prisoner was allowed to withdraw fifteen marks worth of coupons from these deposits, and the canteen accepted this prison script as payment.

The S.S. often visited the prisoners' canteen, though, and the canteen workers were glad to accept hard currency from the S.S. This proved very convenient for camp moguls of various sorts.

Despite the regulations, loose currency was always available in camp. Shrewd newcomers managed to smuggle money in, not surrendering it all to the cashbox. Others forgot about money they had in their pockets, which the clothing attendants found

and quickly put into circulation. Money also came in with various labor detachments and hired craftsmen who did a brisk black market business, stealing and smuggling camp goods and selling them on the outside. With one thing and another, there was real money in camp. When Lehman and Selonke sat down to play cards, hundreds and thousands of marks crossed the table. Gambling was strictly banned in camp, yet gambling went on in every block, sometimes for very high stakes.

In spring of 1944, the ineffective currency controls were eased and the new category of “distinguished convicts” was introduced. **They** wore the letter **V** sewn on their sleeve, didn’t have to get their heads shaved, and were allowed to write and receive letters each week. This rank was given to various clerks, tradesmen, craftsmen, capos, block chiefs and secretaries and even to several rank and file prisoners. As a matter of principle no one was paid outright for camp labor, yet rewards for work were presented to these convicts every week, ostensibly as a bonus for jobs well done. The rewards were paid in tokens worth between one and five marks, redeemable for script in Hapke’s office. In a month, a convict could accrue between thirty and forty-five marks in this way, which he could then spend in the canteen. The distinguished convicts were soon in better financial shape than the trustees. Since work wasn’t mandatory for trustees, they couldn’t assume regular posts and therefore, couldn’t get the new rewards; they could only withdraw the fifteen marks a month from their accounts.

The trustees, of course, didn’t take this lying down. They found another way to get even.

Our block grew famous as the only block that didn’t steal food, so we were frequently invited to fill in various kitchen aide jobs. Soon we had a stable work crew of fifteen to thirty members

unloading produce from trucks at the warehouses. Others worked at other food-related jobs – harvesting vegetables, cutting and pressing cabbage. The crew had to be ready to work at any moment, day or night; its members received their pay unofficially, in kind rather than cash.

Few prisoners were “distinguished”, and the ones who weren’t had a very tough time. They could buy little or nothing at the canteen. In spite of the inferior quality of the canteen’s goods, it was still vital to the prisoner. Depending on what was available, you could purchase slightly moldy cheese, boiled beets, mineral water, potatoes, lettuce, radishes, fish, carrots. All this represented a considerable supplement to the standard camp fare, and it was more cleanly prepared than in the camp kitchen. The dandies got their shavers, creams, various pastes and even birch oil here. But most important, a convict could purchase smokes in the canteen.

In prisons all over the world, cigarettes and tobacco are as good as gold. With tobacco, one can always bargain for bread, soup, margarine – anything. In 1943, good quality smokes were readily available for all the money you had. By 1944, they were somewhat less accessible, but even so, the moneyed prisoners had more tobacco than free Germans or even the rank and file S.S. Here’s how this came about. All profits from the canteen went to the S.S. An S.S. soldier stood in front of the canteen while prisoners worked inside. No matter what kind of wares came into camp, the prisoners bought them out anyway: what else could they do with their script? The S.S. brought in merchandise, setting any price it wanted. And the S.S. had many ways of getting stock outside and inside camp; everything left-over from the S.S. canteen found its way to the prisoner’s shop.

Not surprisingly, a job in the canteen was one of the most desirable assignments in camp.

For a long time, only one prisoner worked there, a Pole, an innkeeper by profession. The Germans had taken his two sons into the Army and they died on the front during his fifth year in camp. Later, he got an aide; he had taken on another by the time camp was dissolved.

Canteen workers were rich by camp standards. They lived in the canteen itself, and didn't bother even to look at camp food. As the only source of extra goods, they could do business any way they liked. Say a prisoner is buying some commodity; he hands over his sheet of coupons to be clipped. The worker clips as many as he wants. Don't bother checking on him – you'll just get your nose bashed and that will be the end of your shopping spree.

A prisoner buys toothpaste and pays a mark and a half – that's a lot of money for a prisoner. The prisoner fondles the new tube: it's old, hard, and crumbling, and the paste doesn't squeeze out of the tube. What can a man do with this kind of toothpaste? He asks to exchange it in the canteen, having paid a mark and a half, after all! Instead of a new tube, he gets a fist in the face. The canteen worker chases him out, shouting.

“Stupid! Spread the paste on bread and eat it, for all I care!” He kicks his ex-customer like a farmer trying to shake shit off a pitchfork.

The prisoner shambles off with a sob – there's nothing else he can do.

The canteen workers reaped great profits. They knew how to sell their wares.

Their most valuable commodity was tobacco. Upon arrival of a transport of smokes, the canteen workers didn't sell the whole

shipment – a large portion went into storage. The prisoners bought out everything for sale and proceeded to smoke up their ration or lose it in card games. Soon there's not a butt left in camp. The smokers are yowling and howling, craving a smelly smoke. There's smokes still available at the canteen, but not just anyone can get them now. Only if you've got ties with the workers, or know how to flatter their incredibly overblown egos, or have gifts to give them – potatoes, milk, margarine, sausage... Officially, women were forbidden to smoke in camp, but they'd still barter for tobacco in the canteen, offering fine underwear, socks, handkerchiefs and pullovers, plus laundry service, in exchange for smokes.

Once the commandant was preparing some kind of party – he was getting five very expensive fish especially shipped from Gdansk. Two of the fish disappeared en route. The entire transport was shaken and searched but the fish couldn't be found. The drivers explained that while ferrying across the Vistula, those fish must have slipped into the water. For positing such a profound hypothesis they got knocked on the nose. And so? They got knocked on the nose, nothing worse. The expensive fish intended for the commandant's party was cooked to a turn and devoured by the canteen workers.

The canteen also sold stationery, envelopes and postage stamps. If you wanted to write a letter, you had to get along with the canteen workers or you'd be missing some necessity.

The canteen served as maildrop in love affairs; love letters and presents often changed hands there. Wacek Kozlowski left presents for his girl there, but the canteen passed them on not to the addressee, but to the girl's true lover, saving everyone time and trouble. Indeed, it was in front of this canteen that Wacek caught his larcenous competitor and gave his bones a shake.

The canteen workers associated only with influential prisoners. In all the blocks, they were welcomed as honored guests. At block social events, boxing bouts for example, the canteen workers would be escorted by the block chiefs, secretaries, capos... They got the best seats in the house, like the prosperous businessmen they were.

Yes indeed! A man could live and live well in this world, if he had a good head and a source of merchandise!

XLVII

THE WOMEN'S SIDE

The women's situation in camp, generally speaking, was incomparably superior to that of the men's. Their death count, for example, was negligible.

In the beginning of 1943, there were about 500 women; soon their number rose to 1000. In midsummer they were dealt a cruel blow: around 500 of them were delivered to a special women's camp, Ravensbrück – a real convent, with not one man.

The women's leavetaking at Stutthof was a tearful sight! How many romantic bonds were severed; how many flaming hearts were doused!

Preparing for their unpleasant journey, the women's side sobbed and sniveled. The men didn't look much better, stuck to the barbed wire fence like flies. But the authorities did take into consideration the ache of breaking hearts: they led the women

out of camp by a circuitous route, thus saving a few buckets of farewell tears. The men missed the transport entirely.

History did not record the feelings of these departing women, but I know that the lovelorn men suffered dreadfully! For at least two weeks they stumbled about stunned. Later – they simmered down somewhat. What else could they do? It helped tremendously that soon even more women were driven into camp, women who also had pretty faces, fine figures and hearts thirsting for love...

Women's work took place under a roof. Only at harvest time did they appear in an open field. They peeled potatoes in the kitchen – a potato or two left over for them made for a tasty morsel. They also peeled potatoes in the S.S. kitchen, and here the pickings were even better. They serviced the S.S. officers' mess hall, did all the housekeeping chores in headquarters. They performed the duties of maids and governesses in the commandant's private home, in Mayer's, in Chemnitz's and elsewhere.

The women took care of the clothes, patching, sewing, washing, ironing.

Work in the laundry was hard and unpleasant – the women were poached in billows of steam. But everywhere else, compared to the men, the women had it much easier, especially since their work was often very profitable. They had at their disposal valuables like underwear, socks, and pullovers. Women could always offer a better article to prosperous prisoners and, naturally, they got presents in return. More affluent prisoners gave them underwear to launder. Prisoners who played up to the women could get a perfectly good article in return for their own rags. Those who didn't ingratiate themselves got rags in place of their own good clothes. And to whom were they going to complain – when the whole transaction was banned in the first place?

One person who really ruined the moods of the women was the chief of laundry labor and clothing maintenance – S.S. Tech Sergeant **Knot**. A very rare specimen was this – unique!

Knot was the champion clod of Prussia and Pomerania, greatly surpassing even Peters himself. He was of medium height with wide shoulders, a monstrous belly and crooked legs; he looked like a crapulous orangutan.

What a bellow! What a basher! What a boor! He liked to outline the women's faces with his fist, tug them by their braids, knock them to the floor and kick them with his specially made size-15 shoes! But he was a complete imbecile – one could always outwit him. Accountability for underwear and pullovers was an entirely remote mystery to him... It was easy enough to get around him.

Not many of the women were criminals – only a few German females. There were several Jehovah's Witnesses and a small number of "asocials". Most of the women were either political prisoners or disciplinary prisoners. The latter group fluctuated frequently: one batch was driven in, another was released. Some returned a second time, a third, even a fourth. Several admitted that from time to time they were better off in camp than working for a farmer who made them work at hard jobs for long hours, beat them often and fed them poorly. They returned from the farmers looking knocked about, but they visibly revived once back in camp.

One time Mayer put the entire women's block in formation by the sidewalks in two or three rows, on both sides of the street. The commandant paced along the gates and scratched that area where theoretically his beard should have been. Chemnitz brought along three well-built male prisoners smeared with soot, carrying the biggest drums ever seen.

With heads held high and very serious expressions, the drummers bang away “Pum-pa, pum-pa, pum-pa...” A solemn parade begins.

Following the somber drummers, a plump woman shuffles, her face covered with her hands... She appears to be crying... And so she is, deeply moved by the music of the drums.

“Pum-pa, pum-pa, pum-pa, pum-pa...” beat the grim drummers with heads held high. They don’t even glance at the jeering women on the sidewalks – it’s as if such things didn’t exist in their world.

“Cecilia, Cecilia, what’s the matter? Cecilia, don’t be silly, quit crying!” shout the women, bobbing on the sidewalks.

So they know her. She’d lived in this camp a long time, working as a cook for an upper S.S. official. In time, the authorities transferred this official to Berlin; because he liked the cook so much, he took her along. Now she was back in camp, returned by that same official. She was returned neither because he no longer needed a cook, nor because her culinary arts had deteriorated. No, it turned out that this cook had sullied the racial purity of this higher official. This higher official, having such high regard for her culinary arts, might even have forgiven her this sin, had she not proved herself such a devil. She had the nerve to sully the racial purity of other German officials in Berlin! No German heart could forgive this, of course.

Gallant Cecilia, so portentously drummed back into camp, wiped her tears on her white apron. At length, though, she looked around; she saw some old friends; and then she smiled. To some, she sweetly winked; to others, she stuck out her little tongue; to still others – she flung a few vivid oaths...

One thing quite reprehensible about the women’s side was the complete lack of unity. Say some dark night one or several

girls should risk their braids and reputations to admit a lad to the washroom or some other secluded place. The other females would immediately start a ruckus. For no good reason they start shrieking, flick on the lights and look – the authorities are here already. They capture the unfortunate couple, stick them in a bunker, and chop off the woman's lovely braids.

The same was true with correspondence. Girls in love have such sunny dispositions – they can't wait to tell their neighbors all about their amorous adventures. But the neighbors, if they've got no lovers of their own, have no sympathy for these tender emotions. They begin a campaign of loud gossip and reproach; soon the noise reaches the ears of the authorities; the letters are seized and again the female gender is abused in the office in the harshest terms. The typewriter clatters on for hours translating these damned letters!

The S.S. had a deep aversion to Russian women dressed in military clothes; they especially despised the women pilots of the Russian Air Force. The camp authorities tried to liquidate them as quickly as possible. Most often they were shot; sometimes they received certain injections. A female soldier occasionally managed to stay alive, but the women pilots took flight to the blue vault above, everyone without exception. Frequently they had no idea what was coming – they remained calm till the last minute. But sometimes they found out beforehand – then dreadful scenes took place...

There was no preliminary inquest, no court decision; all this would simply happen...

The women who were police prisoners, so-called, would quite often return from their visits with the Gestapo maimed and beaten. Many were incarcerated as hostages for their husbands, sons and sons-in-law who remained in hiding. Some had lost a

few sons apiece – the boys died on the front as German soldiers, while their mothers agonized in camp.

There were several old women in camp who were at least eighty years old – they, too, were political criminals!

XLVIII

CONSTRUCTION FEVER

There's a law of nature known from ancient times: it's extremely convenient to steal from construction sites. Whether or not the S.S. authorities were aware of this law is difficult to judge, but in any case they observed it; they built, and they stole, on a very grand scale.

For five years thousands of people worked at constructing Stutthof Camp, yet even at the end it was far from finished. Even the most essential of the camp's facilities were never completed.

The crematorium, the gas chamber, the bathhouse, the laundry, the kitchen – all were squeezed into inadequate and unsuitable buildings.

Take the crematorium, for example. The incinerator in the crematorium could accommodate only a few corpses at a time; it was completely unsuited to such a large enterprise. There were always corpses in reserve... But then the corpses could afford to wait their turn, they weren't pressed for time. The disgusting part was that the crematorium was made of wood, crummy boards thrown together. In this same building, next to the corpse warehouse, the crematorium's workers had a food locker where they kept bread, sausages and hams. They even rigged up a moonshine still, on the sly. The moonshine was a necessity for them as

a defense against the stench of the corpses; the authorities turned their backs on the still. One time the crematorium workers got blitzed, and while cooking up a batch of moonshine in the kitchenette, they burned down the entire crematorium. The surplus corpses got a trifle ripe but they were still suitable for the incinerator. The remnants of the food, on the other hand, no longer passed muster, even with the crematorium specialists.

The gas chamber was also deficient. Clothing was piled inside to be deloused, but many of the pale gray beasts clung to woolen fabrics and survived to wreak fresh havoc. And when the necessity arose to poison humans with gas, the chore was truly burdensome. Closing people in the chamber wasn't hard; they'd be herded in, packed tight, locked up and that was it. But releasing the gas into the chamber was terribly inconvenient. S.S. men wearing gas masks had to clamber onto the barrack's roof and toss the gas-creating mechanisms through the chimney into the incinerator. From the incinerator, the gas drifted quite lazily into the premises, in no hurry to fulfill its assignment. The chimney itself had to be hermetically sealed so the fumes wouldn't escape and be wasted. After enough time had elapsed, the fumes had to be dispersed – and the S.S. had to mount the roof again like cats in heat. In short, the situation was complex.

The authorities had been concerned with this inefficient state of affairs for a long time. Back in 1943, they started erecting a gigantic one-story building in a peat bog. The building covered a huge expanse. It was to accommodate the gas chamber, the bathhouse, the kitchen, the food larder, the laundry, the office and many other facilities. Thousands of people worked on the site, but construction progressed slowly: some material was always lacking. The missing stuff would finally arrive, but by then the material on the site had suddenly vanished. And try to find it!

The devils left not so much as a scent. So the authorities struggled, swearing at the bricks and bricklayers alike.

A new gas chamber was at last successfully arranged, designed for disinfecting clothing and despatching people. Several cartloads of clothes were loaded in the chamber for a trial run. The doors were locked, the furnaces ignited. The firemen barely had time to sit down and shoot the breeze when “Whoosh!” the whole chamber filled with smoke! The clothes burst into flame and left behind only a stench.

The new kitchen didn’t fare much better. It was almost completely outfitted with a sewage system, central heating, waterworks and new built-in boilers; only the glass for the window panes was lacking, plus a few other small items. But when the winter of 1944–45 set in, 500 meters of piping shattered, as well as a few hundred faucets. Someone forgot to drain the pipes. And in wartime, where were they going to get so many new pipes and taps?

Three halls of enormous size were also begun. Officially it was claimed that they were to be used to mill lumber in the future, but actually they were intended to house a factory for airplane parts. They were erected right next to the prisoners’ barracks: if the enemy planes had decided to bomb, they would have had to incinerate the prisoners. But it never came to that. The halls were finished, expensive machinery was hauled inside for assembly, all stood in readiness – when the roof fell in with a terrific crash and crushed the new machines.

With so many big projects going on, large quantities of material were stashed in warehouses. This German material had peculiar properties: it seemed to melt away into thin air. Every day materials vanished. In time, the shortage of building material became critical. Clearly someone was swiping the stuff, but

how could they find the culprit? Some S.S. stock clerks were sent to the front, but this move didn't replace the missing material. The authorities puzzled one way, pondered another, but they still couldn't come up with a workable solution. They decided at last that there was nothing left to do: the warehouses had to burn.

And burn they did! A pretty sight to behold. While they were burning, however, it became evident that ammunition and other explosive materials had been secreted there for some mysterious reason. When these went off, there was no question of getting near enough to put out the fire. So the warehouses burned clean to the ground.

If warehouses could be so ignorant and irresponsible, how could anyone be surprised that shortly after the warehouse inferno the entire construction division flared up, with all its plans and blueprints, all its ledgers and inventories? Ammunition exploded in this fire, too – it looked as if hell itself had broken loose! The cause of the fire was never discovered. It was determined that the construction division's fire had begun in the furnaces, but the premises were empty at the time. No one was held responsible!

The bathhouse didn't manage to burn, but it, too, remained unfinished.

From earlier times, the camp did have a sort of bathhouse, with intermittent, tepid showers capable of accomodating about a thousand, or in desperate cases, two thousand people. At the end of 1944, when about 40,000 people lived in the camp, the little bathhouse was approximately as useful as a dead canary...

The prisoners took the matter into their own hands. They organized bathhouses in all the blocks – country style showers. And they rigged up bathhouses in all the barracks, no worse

than the authorized ones. They improvised furnaces, laid pipes, installed faucets and all else that was needed. And the authorities turned their backs on all this, though occasionally they'd come around, interrogate, swear a little...

"Where did you scarecrows get these pipes?"

"They were sent from home in packages... in the mail..." "Oh, and the bricks were sent from home in the mail?"

"Oh sure, Captain, Sir, from home, in packages..." "*Blöde Sauhund!*" Mayer howled. He knew perfectly well that the material had been taken from DAW government warehouses. But according to the laws of camp life, this wasn't theft – it was organization.

For purposes of organization, there was another excellent source: the S.S. canteen's depots. Here the S.S. kept portable treasures, life's little essentials: sheets, blankets, pillowcases, towels, underwear, overcoats, furs, soap, razors, utensils, tools and so on. The depots' stocks were frequently renewed with confiscated prisoners' goods, those that no one had organized on the way to the depot. With thousands upon thousands of prisoners arriving, treasures accumulated.

The S.S. and Gestapo would rip off certain valuables from the newcomers and haul the rest of the booty to the depot. Also various camps in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were being evacuated and a large share of their treasures landed in the depots. On the day fifteen typewriters were brought in from Riga, seven of them vanished without a trace. Of eight sewing machines shipped in, only two remained. The S.S. members who evacuated Riga tried to itemize the goods they'd brought in, but proved incapable of it: garbage was all that remained to be listed. At this depot it was possible at times to organize silver and gold spoons and rings and watches, plus bolts of English cloth for suits!

The senior depot sentry, a German S.S., had a weakness for sugar moonshine, so he frequently needed to organize sacks of sugar. This snake guzzled moonshine like milk and slipped some to the other S.S. They tried to hide the fact they were swilling it; they reported for duty equally drunk. But the snake wouldn't give prisoners even a drop. Prisoners had to organize varnish from the DAW carpenters' workshops. This stuff made a wonderful liqueur, very thick. For the drunks, it was doubly convenient – you'd get loaded and satisfy your hunger as well.

In the carpenters' workshop, a tremendous amount of varnish disappeared, but it could still be justified somehow. The situation in the hospital was worse. The authorities, naturally, tried to spoil the alcohol by pouring gasoline and other dreck in it, but the camp had wonderful chemists: they'd convert this foul dreck into fragrant nectar.

“Are they taking alcohol baths? What the hell!” the authorities cursed, checking the alcohol accounts. But there was nothing they could do.

In the S.S. depots, sugar breweries bubbled. The one and only brewmaster was my dear friend Jonas, the Prot from Biržai. He cooked and cooked that sugar, but he didn't bring me any; he swore that the snake of a stock clerk wouldn't even let him taste his own brew. And he told the truth. Only very rarely did he return from the brewery smashed – no more than twice a week. Otherwise he was sober as a judge. You can't get much from a barrel with a straw!

And Jonas didn't stink too much of moonshine; just a touch, a little bit. You could smell him from about three meters away against the wind. Occasionally, some official desired to have a chat with him. The official shouts for Jonas to come closer. He steps to within five meters of the official. The official moves nearer, but like a goat, Jonas steps backwards.

“Wait, you dirty mutt. Where are you going?” the official says to him.

“According to the effective laws, a prisoner has to retain a five meter distance from an official,” explains my dear friend, the Prot from Biržai.

“Not five, three,” the official retorts.

“Yes, you’re right. But five meters are better than three. Five meters show the authorities greater respect!” And again Jonas pulls back.

Try guessing what he reeks of!

XLIX

THE GRIM REAPER'S SHELTER

The concentration camp was a very complex death mill. Every individual crossing over its threshold was actually already condemned to die – sooner or later. Frequent starvation, beatings, long hours of hard labor, nights of no rest, parasites, bad air – sooner or later they did their job, if some other disaster didn't do it first, or if someone didn't take it into his head to finish you off himself.

In such an atmosphere, the cruel psyche of the camp resident matures. Thrust into a brutal environment, the instinct for survival takes over; a person scarcely has a chance to notice how he is drawn into a state of primal fear, how little by little he becomes an organically functional piece of the horror. The dreadful and drastic measures he takes to do battle with the Grim Reaper, he already views as mere expedients. His ethical sense

grows dull; abominable acts no longer seem so loathsome. His only desire is to live. He'll violate an intimate, snatch his last crumb of bread, shove a pal into the Grim Reaper's embrace, if by doing so he might himself remain alive! This hideous situation becomes the norm: once you've stepped on this treadmill, it's nearly impossible to get off. It's hard to rediscover the golden mean, hard to tell the difference between self-preservation and ruthless injury to a friend.

Oh, if only all the prisoners would understand each other, would quit brutalizing, beating, robbing each other – there'd be more food for everyone, and the work wouldn't be so backbreaking, and daily life wouldn't be such a hell!

It's easy to say: if. What's there to do when none of this exists, when the one or two hundred who comprehend this situation are completely helpless to change the environment, to overcome the predatory instinct that seems essential to staying alive.

In these savage struggles for survival, some drown others; breaking through to the top, they give full rein to the predatory instinct, and no longer bother to pause on their way; they have more than they need to keep living. The others, the ones with no luck, unable to break through to the surface at any price sink down in the dregs and die. You slip in the constant skirmish for life – no one extends a helping hand to lift you up. The brawlers behind you may yank you to the ground and stamp you flat, then stride or slog over you without a second look, staring all around in an idiotic terror. They feel no remorse. There's nothing for a conscience to do, no need for one, no time to fret. Today you fell – I'll fall tomorrow; what's the difference? No one will bat an eye for me, either.

Perhaps the most horrifying thing that camp does to a person is this inexorable erosion of every trace of what people call conscience, humaneness, simple respect.

One good thing about these surroundings is that the fear of death vanishes completely. With death a threat at every step, a person gets so used to the prospect that it becomes insignificant, trash underfoot.

Death loses every vestige of nobility or tragedy. Lyricism is out of the question.

If they kill you – so they kill you; if they hang you – so they hang you. What's the big deal?

People die in camp without anxiety. They don't make death into a catastrophe. They're certainly not sorry to leave this earth. It's all the same to them.

The minute they're dead they're disrobed, a number is written on their naked chests and their personal belongings are immediately pinched.

The corpses are stacked just like cordwood in a shed near the hospital. The shed is tiny and the corpses don't all fit. The extras are dumped on the ground next to the hospital. No one inquires about the cause of death, no one inspects the bodies. If they're dead – they're dead; no reason to fuss. As if we ourselves won't die tomorrow or the day after!?

Only the corpse's teeth are examined. If someone hasn't managed to steal the gold already, an S.S. man extracts it with rusty pliers. A fraction of the gold he turns in to the treasury; the rest he keeps for himself.

A transport wagon arrives drawn by ten or twelve prisoners. The transport workers pile the corpses into a big black coffin. The coffin was built to accommodate three corpses, but five or six are stuffed into it. The lid doesn't even close. Black and blue arms and legs, withered like twigs stick out of the coffin; they flutter to the rhythms of the swaying wagon and wave as if beckoning passersby. When there's even more corpses, the coffin is dispensed with; corpses are simply piled in the wagon

like slaughtered pigs bound for the butcher. One is thrown next to another; one is tossed on top. Sometimes they're covered with a ratty gunnysack; sometimes nobody bothers. It makes no difference to the corpse, and for those of us who are still alive, it's neither here nor there. What's the difference?

The wagons head for the crematorium adjacent to the hospital's windows. Day and night the crematorium belches rosy and pale yellow smoke over the camp. This smoke isn't especially palatable. In fact it's rank, truly rancid, a weird stink like frying rubber.

It's a heavy smell, the smell of human meat grilling. Very heavy, day in and day out!

Near the crematorium, the corpses are heaped in a warehouse. After the moonshine brewers burned down the warehouse, the corpses had to be unloaded into a massive heap right in the yard, which was very inconvenient.

The crematorium's incinerator was adapted for liquid fuel and the corpses burned for about two hours. In 1944 there was no liquid fuel to be found, so a switch was made to coke. In a coke fire the corpses burned for about six hours. At this rate there was no way the crematorium could ever manage to burn all the corpses, but there was no material left to build another one. The corpses couldn't be buried either, because the camp stood on a swamp. Water stagnated near the surface, just two shovelfuls down. After a good rain, buried corpses would rise out of the ground and would have to be dealt with all over again.

The crematorium workers always took the top layer of corpses, the most recent additions, to the incinerator. So the bottom layers rotted. If it weren't for the repugnant reek, a rotted corpse would have been more convenient to stick in the incinerator. As soon as a fresh corpse was fed into the furnace, it immediately

raised up its arms and legs, as if consciously warding off another corpse from entering the oven. But of course he could not be incinerated alone; others had to be shoved in, too. The uncooperative corpses caused a lot of grief: their flailing legs and arms had to be wrestled down before their neighbor could be jostled in. Decayed corpses didn't thrash – but that smell of theirs was horrendous.

In December of 1944 and January of 1945, quite a sizable daily surplus of corpses would accumulate – up to one and a half thousand or more. Every day two to three hundred people died. The crematorium was helpless to deal with them all. The chimney fractured from overwork, and threatened to collapse if kept so hot without respite. The dead, waiting so patiently to be burnt, were silent but hardly unnoticeable. When the weather was cold it wasn't so bad, but when a thaw set in, the camp's mood grew foul. The stink of the corpses crept into every corner. Even boiled potatoes had a questionable flavor. Worst of all, this feckless smell had the temerity to permeate certain official abodes. Consequently it was determined that a serious battle with the corpses must be undertaken. The authorities deliberated deeply but couldn't come up with anything better than to order prisoners to dig holes in the forest, dump in the corpses, douse them with tar and burn them.

Corpses smoldered slowly in these ditches. More tar had to be frequently applied, and the prisoners had to play the chef, using a pitchfork to flip the corpses like hamburgers, until they were cooked to a turn. In daylight this sight was dramatic enough, but at night it became an operatic spectacle!

So the little corpses smoke and smolder, shrouding the whole camp with the fumes of frying rubber. The stokers jump around the pit with pitchforks like devils tussling with witches on Walpurgis Night!

Serious problems cropped up here, too. As soon as night descended, alien airplanes would begin to circle the camp. They didn't actually toss bombs at the corpses but their buzzing was still unpleasant: you never knew – would they drop a bomb, or were they just harrassing us? Or maybe the beasts were photographing everything? It's impossible to extinguish corpses quickly and besides, tar can't be wasted! But due to these intimidating airplanes, night work had to be halted. The burnings could only continue by day. Winter days are short. The population explosion of corpses carried on.

The corpse situation hadn't always been so disastrous in camp. From August to October 1944, there were 50,000 to 60,000 prisoners in camp, but very few died daily – between three and fifteen. There were even days when no one died. No fresh corpses! The authorities were displeased with this meager showing, naturally: how can capital invested in a crematorium remain inactive?! So the authorities manufactured corpses by artificial methods. They'd take a truck or two filled with the aged, the sick, the crippled and other weaklings and then "Rat-tat-tat-tat!" and there's your corpses! The Jews, who had grown quite numerous in camp at this time, were particularly heavily relied on for this project.

They weren't always shot – bullets are made of metal after all, significantly more valuable than a corpse. More frequently the authorities resorted to gas. Of course, those being herded into the trucks were not told where they were being taken; they were lulled by an announcement that they were on the way to jobs where the food would be better. But they soon realized in what direction the gears of fate were grinding. They refused to board the truck, they wouldn't enter the chamber; the S.S. had to scuffle to get them back in order.

The S.S. had an especially difficult time with the old Jewesses. They had to be lifted into the wagon – they refused to climb aboard themselves – and then lifted out of the wagon again. Most annoying was that once they were seated in the wagon, they shouted and screamed so that the whole camp resounded: “*Wir sind auch Menschen!* We too are people!” The S.S., it seems, was of a different mind, however. Not once did the shrieks of the Jewesses convince them.

The Jewesses seated in the wagons weren’t the only ones who shrieked. Those left behind on the other side of the electric fence also yelled – daughters, sisters, mothers. They all shouted and screamed – some louder, some softer. S.S. nerves had experienced everything, but even they couldn’t tolerate this screeching for long. The S.S. ran out of the Jewesses’ block. The prisoners, of course, had no place to run. The prisoners listened. The prisoners listened and ruminated. What they underwent while listening was their personal affair. There’s no reason for outsiders to butt in.

To stop the Jewesses from ravaging any more S.S. nerves with their shrieks, a new means for coping with them was conceived. The Jewesses would be herded on foot to a small train, so they’d believe they really were being taken to work. Next to the train stands a husky commandant’s official wearing a railroader’s uniform. He invites them most politely:

“Please take a seat on the train, dear ladies!” Once the Jewesses were stuffed into the train, the doors were locked. As soon as the train began moving, gas was released into the cars.

This method was used only one time – nothing was gained by it. The Jewesses, sensing the fumes, started screeching inside the train, too. They smashed against the doors and knocked on the windows; they frightened the civilian residents along the way.

These hastily created corpses weren't considered officially deceased.

The officially deceased were marked with the letter T in the record books – for *Tot*, dead – and were crossed off the list of the living. Those who voluntarily hung themselves got the emblem **FT** – *Freitod*, suicide. Others were noted with an **Ex** – *Exekution* – performed in accordance with some Gestapo court decision.

The corpses that had been rushed off to death in special trucks and trains and chambers were denoted in the books by the initials **S.B.** This must be read, Lord save me, not as Sruoga, Balys, but *Sonder Behandlung* – special treatment. Those unfamiliar with the Gestapo's special language might make what they wished of this delicate title!

Sometimes sentimental women would arrive at the gates of camp, wishing to possess at least the ashes of an only son, dear brother, beloved husband. This wish was always complied with.

Money was demanded for the ashes, for the urn, for the packing, for the postage – this came to about 230 marks. The authorities would then give an order to scoop out a couple of kilograms of ash from the common pile of ashes, which were mailed to the grieving woman. Of course the authentic ashes of an individual were never sent out; it was impossible to do. Everyone's ashes got mixed in the furnace. And by the time a request for ashes arrived, the dearly beloved had been long since strewn the devil knows where. How would you gather him up? But you don't want to hurt the woman. Isn't it the same for her? Ashes are ashes.

Ashes were frequently requisitioned. To get 200 marks for a few leftover kilograms of ashes wasn't a bad deal, but there had to be corpses!

L

“GOLD ALONE RULES OVER US...”¹

Until late spring of 1944, the number of Jews in camp was negligible. Oh, there had been some, but most had already managed to vanish without a trace. Only four remained, good master craftsmen. They kept themselves aloof and unassuming, submerged in labor columns. It appeared that the authorities had forgotten them entirely.

In spring of that year, Jews began flooding the camp.

First of all, Lithuanian Jews were delivered to camp from the Šiauliai and Kaunas ghettos. Men and women. Children and elders.

Before departure, the Germans ordered them to bring along their most valuable belongings: money, gold, diamonds, their best clothes, underwear and similar goods. This would be useful to them in Germany, they were told. The Jews left with the

greatest hopes, hauling their treasures in trunks, sacks and bundles, moaning and groaning about how heavy these loads were!

Once the Jews arrived, a true gold rush hit the camp, just like the ones Jack London described.

The Jews, like all newcomers, were driven first to the bathhouse – several thousand Jews, and the bathhouse held a mere handful. Though they were propelled through at an outrageous pace, the march lasted several days. When the first party left the bathhouse, the mouths of the remainder dropped wide open: they no longer recognized their tatehs and mamas. The Jews had been shaved and shorn and dressed in camp rags like all newcomers. Their entire wealth, so wearily lugged, disappeared without a trace, as if it had never existed; and no exceptions were made.

This is how the whole villainy begins: the riches are taken from the Jews entering the bathhouse. Hats are put in one pile, coats in another, suits in a third heap, underwear in a fourth, shoes in a fifth. Pots and pans, rings, gold pens, watches, money and soap are all separated into stacks.

The Jews are hustled into the bathhouse totally naked. Inside they're searched again and a few more items are discovered. The men are somewhat manageable in the bathhouse, but the women are a real misery. They hide gold in their mouths and in their armpits. They hide rings, watches, even alarm clocks in places you can neither see yourself nor show another. But the bathhouse attendants nonetheless rummage conscientiously, and they keep finding odds and ends.

I was coming back from the hospital, where I'd had a swollen jaw bandaged up, when I encountered the S.S. philosopher, Corporal Klawan, by the bathhouse, surrounded by Jews.

Klawan is slicing bread. It's Jewish bread that they've brought with them. He's slicing it and pulling out currency that they had baked into it. Seeing me, Klawan beckons.

"Have a look here, Professor," he gloats. "Look for what kind of money these Jews sold your Lithuania!"

"Oh! This is very interesting," I reply, as if astounded. "Can you tell me what **kind** of money they sold it for? Good Heavens, Corporal, this is all German currency!"

"Yes, it's German, so what?" he answers.

"And the money's genuine, not counterfeit?"

"No." He holds up some bills against the sun to check the watermarks. "They look fine, they're not counterfeits."

"In that case, Corporal, give it back to the Jews, along with the pants you've stripped off them."

"What? Why?" Klawan is gaping.

"Come now, Corporal, it's perfectly clear. If they sold Lithuania for good German money, then the Germans must have bought it. And if the Germans have already purchased Lithuania – you won't have to go to the front!"

"Oh, is that how it works?" mumbles Klawan, obviously displeased with my response to his wit.

There were more problems with the clothes than with the bread. Any way you looked at it, cutting up clothes seemed a waste. You weren't going to slash a silk coverlet. Every item had to be fingered; every suspicious seam was rent. What a job that was! Shoes also had to be dismantled. In the soles, in the heels, something was usually found.

And some of the searchers got really lucky. Let's say a prisoner organizes a piece of Jewish soap. He's contentedly washing with it, lathering – it's good soap, it foams and slathers. Finished washing, the fellow looks and, why, there's some thing

shining in the soap. He scratches it – it looks like gold. He scrapes it out – and my Lord, it’s a gold watch! He shakes it near his ear and – lucky devil – it’s running!

From now on you can believe he’ll slice open every bar of soap he gets his hands on! Word of such a find gets around, and soon everyone’s slicing soap. And finding treasures, too.

The Jews waiting in line, having sensed what was happening to their countrymen’s fortunes as they passed through the bathhouse, began hiding their valuables even more cleverly. They buried them in the sand where they stood. With so many Jews scattered throughout the camp, the sand in all the compounds had to be sifted for buried treasure.

Other Jews simply swallowed their diamonds and gold. For such pranks they were filled with castor oil; then the toilets had to be searched. The entire contents of the sewage pipes were filtered through small sieves!

The problems didn’t end here. Not all the gold seekers were obedient. A gold miner who found a valuable might stick it in his own pocket or rebury it in a spot that had already been searched. One midafternoon, the busiest time in the office of the political division, all the prisoner-employees are hunched over their writing when one of them, a big bellied German, begins to buzz: “Brrrr... brrr... brrrrr...”

“Fritz, are you nuts? What’s wrong with you?” The other prisoners stare at him.

Fritz is all red in the face, pressing against something in his pants. He’s pressing and ringing, fumbling and buzzing.

“Okay, Fritz, show me what you’ve got in your pants!” laughs Tech Sergeant König.

Fritz is very sad. He feels disgraced. After a struggle, he pulls an alarm clock from his pants’ pocket.

“A blockhead! You’re a blockhead!” König shakes his head. “You wear a green triangle and you don’t even know how to organize a clock!”

That was König, all right. Everyone mocked Fritz’s block-headedness and the incident ended there. But other sergeants were of a different mind in these matters. They went after the gold hoarders. They started frisking them, then whacking them with sticks, beating the riches out of them. They treaded the paths the gold collectors treaded, and the sand in the compounds had to be sifted all over again...

Another prisoner, panning for gold in the sewage pipes, finds a ring and swallows it himself. The gourmand is battered with boards and treated to a supper of castor oil – and the wealth of the pipes must be sifted anew...

Lord, what great labors were performed to secure those Jewish treasures! For at least two months the camp was crazy for them, caught in such a fever that it forgot the rest of the world; forgot Berlin, forgot the authorities, forgot the war... Only solitary misanthropes hung around the fringes and grumbled like Mephistopheles:

“Gold alone rules over us...”

There was a saturation of gold, gold enough for all: for the treasury, the government representatives, the convict aristocracy – there was even a certain remnant for individual Jews.

All the S.S. men and prominent convicts began writing with American and British gold pens. The “Pelican” brand was no longer in great demand. Some had two, even three pens. They owned pens and sent pens to their wives. And what wonderful watches turned up in camp! Watches of the finest Swiss firms – primo, fantastic! What an elegant assortment of rings – solid gold, wedding bands and engagement rings, festooned with diamonds!

The lordly Selonke, who was known as the grand duke of Stutthof by then, became a millionaire, at least in German marks.

When the Jews arrived in Stutthof, Selonke immediately inaugurated a goldsmiths' workshop in his residential block. He found a master goldsmith, a Russki from Riga, supplied him with two helpers and set them to work. These jewelers became haughty, they no longer went to any other camp jobs – they worked for the grand duke himself! They gobbled bacon and guzzled moonshine. From their heights, they'd look down on the rank and file convicts as dogs scorn tripe. And why not?!

Not for Selonke alone did they work. They also worked for Chemnitz and Mayer, reprocessing Jewish gold. All orders went through Selonke. The goldsmiths would no longer even accept commissions from lower ranking S.S. men, unless it happened to be a pal who could provide good alcohol. For their great services to the Third Reich, Chemnitz and Mayer got rich.

Then the Latvian Jews arrived. They were fewer and had already been almost cleaned out along the way; but they, too, still had a few things. Gold fever struck again, though it never got quite so hot again after the first episode.

When the gold was all gone, Selonke's enterprise folded, and the jewelers were thrown out of his block. Once again they settled down with the rank and file prisoners. Once again they regained their human semblance – they even talked with the rank and file convicts! In their own block, they founded a secret and much more modest workshop, laboring at their own risk to service lower-ranking S.S. and convicts' aristocracy. They plied their trade by night because by day they did the work of ordinary prisoners. Their nightly endeavors didn't last long, either. One midnight the authorities caught them red-handed and confiscated their gold and tools. Selonke himself dealt their hides fifty lashes; the

clients who'd left gold with them also got a whipping. The craftsmen were whisked away to the Hopehill brick factory...

Knowing too much in camp was always very dangerous, but getting tangled up in the authorities' secret pursuits was only risked by the biggest ass or the condemned man – in either case he didn't live long.

LI

THE FLOOD OF JEWESSES

The authorities had many problems with the Lithuanian Jewesses. The camp simply was unprepared for such a mass of new citizens – there wasn't room. The only solution was to stuff them into the barracks, one on top of another. Worst of all was that they brought children; older kids and tiny ones, too.

The authorities had to keep track of how many new citizens they'd received: no matter what kind of convict he might be, he was still a piece of property. But the number of children! There was no way to keep track of them all. Women would hide them wherever they could – under straw, under blankets, under skirts... You'd count and count those kids and look – one starts screaming here, another starts there. They crawl out from under skirts and zoom into a pile where the kids have already been counted, while the counted ones take off to their mamas. Confusion reigns

and the count has to begin again... Some women brought their adolescent boys dressed as girls and others did the opposite. But the authorities of the Third Reich want an accurate count of how many there are of the former and of the latter – the science of statistics is based on such information. So now check every kid! This screaming being – is it a man or a woman?!

Mayer's attitude was clear: he's running a concentration camp, not a kindergarten; he doesn't have any spare wet nurses. There's nothing for children to do in a camp; they should be removed to a more suitable location. But now how is this supposed to be done? The women won't give up their kids without a row – they're shrieking, shouting, scratching out your eyes. The kids are screeching even more madly. So now fight with the hags and wrestle with the kids!

This isn't the battle of Tannenberg; it's much crazier. But the determination of the intrepid S.S. overcame even this obstacle: the children were wrenched from the women and transported to no one knows where. The camp howled and wailed; it seemed like the earth was crashing all around.

In midsummer of 1944, Hungarian Jewesses began arriving in Stutthof. About 250,000 of them had passed through the Aushwitz Camp, but the S.S. there could no longer do anything with them – they had to send them to other camps. Even in wartime, the Germans found sufficient transportation for such occasions...

Stutthof got more than 30,000 Hungarian Jewesses, but they were easier to cope with than the Lithuanian Jewesses. First, the Hungarians entered bereft of their children; this was a great relief to our authorities. Second, their hair had already been cut short; our barbers heaved a deep sigh of relief. Finally, they arrived plucked clean and very poor; our chiefs took no interest in them at all.

The preliminaries were dispensed with much quicker with these Jewesses. Naturally, no lodgings had been prepared for them beforehand, so barracks had to be rapidly erected. While the construction was underway, the women nestled in a structure without a roof; more than once they slept on the naked sand with only the azure sky for a blanket. Sometimes they weren't given even a piece of bread for days at a time. No clothes were available for them either; the clothes they were wearing upon arrival had to be confiscated for disinfection and searched for precious objects that might have been sewn into them.

So flocks upon flocks of naked women gather together; young guys led by a Jehovah's Witness dispense clothes to them. Each gets a scanty, shabby dress with a six pointed star on the breast and back. The dresses are uneven but the women are even more so: one is a beanpole, another is a tub; one is short and skinny, another is broad as a barn – but the guys hand dresses to them in turn, regardless of the size of the woman or the dress. Upon receipt of an outsize dress, the small woman chops off a piece and fashions spare parts. The big woman has less luck, she has to walk around half naked. And they're none of them too happy about this. Even armed with stout clubs, the young guys led by the Jehovah's Witness can barely defend themselves.

Various labor detachments were soon formed for these women. The old, the feeble, the ill were assembled and returned to the bosom of Abraham via the gas chamber. Detachments of healthy women were sent to work outside at various places – dynamite factories, for example. Most dug trenches or worked at airports. These women received slightly better clothes, but those who remained in camp continued clumping about half naked. The overcrowding in the barracks was terrible; any attempt at hygiene was a story long forgotten.

Late in fall, many of the outside detachments started coming back from their jobs. The women sent out to fill these positions had been healthy; they came back crippled, barely dragging blue, sore infested feet. They were stooped, half dressed in squalid rags, and so skinny that when they walked they rattled like bones in a sack dragged along a cobblestone road.

These women, the crippled cripples, were crammed into one barrack, the famous Barrack Thirty. Some straw was strewn around, like in a cow barn, and they lay on this straw. Centipedes ran about on their sores but the women no longer had the energy to pick them off. Women from other barracks were also herded into Barrack Thirty – those who were weak or ill. They went there knowing they were heading towards an unavoidable and painful death. Those who went to the gas chamber straight-away were incomparably better off: an hour or two and all their accounts with life were squared. Nothing hurt them anymore.

It was quite another story for the women in Barrack Thirty. Hard labor, starvation and the cold sucked their strength, sapped their health, while they died slowly of sores caused by starvation. In Barrack Thirty not only did they go untreated – it would have been impossible to tend to them in there, anyway – but they also went unfed, as if to say: ‘do what you like, gnaw on each other for all we care.’ These women had one great interest in common – how to die as quickly as possible; but they weren’t all successful in this. Some died, some still stayed alive. One died atop another, or toppled over a live one. The live woman no longer had strength to push away the dead woman, or to crawl out from underneath. Some of the live ones couldn’t even crawl any more. Occasionally, the slightly stronger ones would manage to drag the dead out the door, throw them in the yard, but usually they couldn’t manage even this. They’d crawl away from

the dead and die themselves. And so the corpses lay there alone or in heaps, waiting for the corpse removers to stop in and pick them up for the trip to the crematorium or the tar pit.

In the winter of 1944–45, this barrack was the leading corpse producer, yielding 200 to 300 per day. Epidemics raged here – three types of typhus, diphtheria, dysentery, scarlet fever and the devil knows what else. These raged in all the barracks of the Jewesses, and from here they flung themselves into the men’s camp. The carriers were various prisoner – Don Juans got infected over to the hungry women by night and day. They came down with all sorts of typhuses; even the S.S. began to get sick and started dying. Chemnitz himself contracted spotted fever and one of his deputies actually died. A quarantine was declared for the camp, at least until all the Jewesses died – but there were still a few thousand left. The situation seemed hopeless.

Towards the end of 1944, some form of sanitation commission from Berlin arrived in camp. All the cripples were herded into a secluded barrack, locked in and heavily guarded so they wouldn’t crawl out. Heidel himself led the commission through camp and showed them what was okay to show. The commission, naturally, didn’t see the Jewesses’ camp. With the commission’s work finished, one prisoner-doctor who was in charge of the contagious diseases got brave and declared:

“I still have a few more things to show the commission...”

Doctor Heidel turned beet red, but he couldn’t openly object. The prisoner-doctor took the commission straight to Barrack Thirty. The members entered the building, grabbed their noses and tiptoed back out. When they departed, Heidel and his S.S. aides skulked outside the Jewesses’ residential barracks for several days, not daring to step inside. At last they worked up

enough nerve to open the windows and air out the premises. They discarded the filthy straw and emptied the pallets. They burned the straw, and out wafted a smell of something frying – could it have been the bedbugs? They hauled in new straw and stuffed new pallets. A bed or two was even brought in...

But Barrack Thirty remained untouched. It was the perfect substitute for that ill-starred new gas chamber – it performed the same job by itself, and the treasury of the Third Reich was not poorer by so much as a pfennig. Everything just took care of itself...

Conditions of the labor columns outside camp varied. Some people in such detachments faltered early and were sent directly to Barrack Thirty. Others had an easier time, especially those in smaller detachments; in a few of these, no one even got sick.

The **Wehrmacht** had established warehouses inside Stutthof Camp, and it demanded one and a half thousand laborers; it got the Jewesses. The Wehrmacht, upon receipt of their Jewesses, scrubbed them thoroughly in the bathhouse, dressed them in relatively sound and warm clothing, lodged them in their own barracks, and fed them from their own kitchen. These Jewesses, compared to the others, were true aristocrats. Not one died in all this time. But the rest of the thirty-five thousand Jewesses in camp were all condemned to death. If the S.S. was not able to kill them all, it was not for lack of trying.

To manage the Jewesses' labor detachment – and later the other women's detachments as well – female S.S. members were brought in. They were mostly German girls aged 20 to 30, evidently mobilized specifically to do this work. At the end of the year, two older S.S. women, fat as elephants, evacuated from Riga to our camp; they guzzled whiskey like old truck drivers and cussed even worse than the S.S. men...

On the whole, the S.S. gals didn't have a very good name in camp... They didn't use clubs to beat the women prisoners; they had narrow belts for this. They could do wonders with those little belts, controlling a whole crowd of crippled Jewesses, for instance. Needless to say, these individuals weren't too lazy to sharply slap the orifice a prisoner would have used for eating, had there been food. They were wholly unsentimental about the members of their own sex. Still, not all of them were wretches and bullies. A few decent girls could be discerned among their group, suffering no less from their position than other prisoners...

One evening I was returning to my barrack from work. On the road leading from the train, a uniformed S.S. girl approached. She was blond and round faced, hatless, walking with her arms hanging hopelessly at her sides, crying, bawling, choking on her tears. I felt sorry for her.

"What happened? Can I help?"

"Nooooo..." she sobbed. "Lord, Lord..."

In a broken voice she told me that she had had to accompany a transport of worn-out Jewesses to the train station... She didn't know where they were being taken. She was incapable of helping them. And she felt so sorry for them – and she could do nothing...

The girl vanished into her barrack still weeping.

LII

ALL THE DEVILS DEGENERATED

Towards the end of 1944, the degenerate features of camp began to manifest themselves more and more clearly.

While the battles had raged far from East Prussian borders, our S.S. men kept their fighting spirit. They believed absolutely in Hitler's Providence, and in the trenches dug by our Jewesses on the frontier zone. Once the war operations crossed over the border, though, the S.S. confidence began to drip like a runny nose. As early as midsummer of 1944, more than one S.S. member had delivered himself of the opinion that the war was already lost, and started guzzling whiskey by the gallon.

Because there was no ophthalmology specialist in camp, Heidel allowed certain prisoners with eye problems to voyage to Gdansk at their own expense. My eyes had ached unrelentingly for eleven

months, and Heidel consented that I, too, should make the trip to Gdansk – three times, no less.

I was permitted to travel in civilian clothes with tiny convict emblems sewn on them. One who wasn't familiar with their meaning couldn't have known the breed of bird I was.

I was escorted by a special S.S. warden with whom I sat on the train, puffing a pipe and shooting the breeze like with an old buddy. The head of Gdansk's eye clinic, a professor, discovering who I was, examined my eyes for an hour and a half, conversing affably, disregarding a whole flock of waiting Germans – some of whom had Party badges on their chests. He ignored my warden, too – the guy was left standing by the door; no one invited him to take a seat or offered so much as a kind word.

My warden was instructed to watch diligently that I didn't traipse around town, meet with anyone or talk to a soul. I was to sit under lock and key, from train to train.

After the clinic, however, my warden and I stomped straight to the Ratskeller – to eat the best dinner in Gdansk, where the town's top officials dined. My warden had food coupons, but I had money. He knew perfectly well that it was strictly forbidden for me to have money, but I paid for the dinner and the beer, which the polite waitress didn't begrudge us. Then we dropped into about seven more taverns, tasting different brands of beer and searching for wine. I could have gotten some from one innkeeper, a member of Gdansk's town council who sported a beer belly and a Party badge, but my warden ruined the whole business; spotting him, the innkeeper turned green with fear. How could I convince him that this S.S. wanted wine, too, and that he wouldn't bite the hand that gave him drink? That he wanted wine the innkeeper could believe, but that he wouldn't bite afterwards, no, not at all.

My next trip to Gdansk was with another S.S. warden. Once we were alone, we talked politics quite freely – it turned out that he wasn't a completely stupid boy. Nearing Gdansk, he said to me:

“I'd let you loose in town by yourself, but someone could stop you and ask for documents. They'd suspect you'd escaped from a camp, and then you and I would both be in trouble. We'd better stick together.”

So we walked through Gdansk, touring all the town's landmarks. We stopped at one tavern, then at another... In one empty place, the innkeeper forced himself on us, wanting to talk politics. The Allied landing in Normandy had just begun.

“In my opinion,” the boob proceeded to bleat, “it was a good move to allow the English and the Americans to disembark on dry land. In my opinion, why should we swim out there to fight, when we can wait for them to swim here and then beat them!”

“Oh sure,” my warden agreed, “just let them bring over more of their army! We'll annihilate all of them here – and the war will be over!”

“But in my opinion,” the innkeeper went on, “and I am stressing that this is my own opinion, we should take over the British Isles... We're always falling into calamities where they're concerned...”

“Oh sure,” my warden agreed. “We'll push all the Englishmen from the island into the sea. Not one Englishman will remain on the island. Let all of them go down to a watery grave! The bastards! May their breed vanish from the earth!”

“But, in my opinion,” the innkeeper persisted, “and I'm stressing that this is my personal opinion, the Jews are the guiltiest of all for our misfortunes. And I'm stressing that this is my personal opinion...”

“Oh, absolutely,” agreed my warden. “Naturally, it’s always those Jews. We’ll collect all the Jews in the world. We’ll hang them all. We’ll shake them on pitchforks.”

The two of them prattled politics like a couple of old biddies on broomsticks, one gibbering, the other jabbering; listening to them, I’m getting uncomfortably warm and seeing spots.

‘The devil! I’m like a flea stuck in the syrup, now,’ I think. ‘I talked so openly with this stupid boy-warden, and now I’m really done for! He’ll tell the authorities everything, and that will be it for me!’

When they’d blabbed themselves out, I paid for the beer and we left; I felt like I was being gnawed by lice.

“Did you hear what I was talking about with the innkeeper?” the warden asked me when we got outside.

I didn’t know what to say. “He was an old friend of yours?”

“No! Never saw him before. First time I set foot in his damned place...”

“Then I don’t understand the drift of your discussion.” Again an unguarded word had slipped out.

“How do you want me to talk to him?” he asked angrily. “I’m in an S.S. uniform. He’s afraid of me. I couldn’t talk any other way. As for me – how could I know what sort of devil the pig really is?!” And the warden cursed, completely incensed.

From then on, he talked to me intelligently again.

On my third trip, my third warden led me to a suburb of Gdansk, to his mother-in-law’s house – a visit that violated the strictest orders of the authorities. He sat me in a room next to a stove. “Here, sit here,” he said.

I sat down. I had no choice but to sit. I sat by the mother-in-law’s stove for one hour, another; I sat for a third hour like an almsman, except I didn’t say any prayers.

Okay, I'm not budging. By now I'm bored and getting angry. He's hush-hushing something with his mother-in-law, and I get only the stove? So how long will I have to sit here?!

Finally, the warden's mother-in-law brought in a plate of bread and a good half bowl of soup and put it on the table in front of me. Macaroni! Cooked in milk! Is she crazy?

"Here. Eat, so you'll be healthy," she said. The warden's mother-in-law was a husky, broad woman in a soiled apron.

I dig so deep into the soup and chew so hard my ears wiggle. Damn! That macaroni was wonderful. Immediately my heart turned sentimental. A few minutes later, the mother-in-law swayed back into the room bearing a plateful of potatoes and freshly cooked pork! My mouth dropped open – the old woman must be crazy!

"Eat for your health," she says to me. "We're farmers. We've got more. You won't be depriving us..."

I toss down the succulent pork with potatoes. This is turning into a royal dinner!

The hefty mother-in-law slips in a third time, slinking silently, glancing to be sure the son-in-law's not watching. "Psst..." she whispers, a finger pressed to her lips; she sashays over and leans up against me.

"Tell me, how is it over there, in camp... Is it really as horrible as people say? And how does my son-in-law conduct himself there? Does he harm you?"

Well, stuffed with her regal dinner, I just can't upset this good-hearted woman!

"No," I say. "Your son-in-law is like all sons-in-law: he doesn't do anything malicious."

And truly, her son-in-law wasn't a bad sort. Nobody complained about him. But then, he was only a rank and file soldier

with no important responsibilities – he didn't have the opportunity to display his temperament.

"Oh Lord, Lord!" sighed the woman. "What did he do, after all? They took him and put him in a uniform... He's got to stay where he's assigned... What can a person do with himself? Only, don't say anything to him!"

Spotting a radio in the other room through the half-open door, I told her, "Right now the German staff is announcing the war news on the radio. Would it be possible to hear it?"

"Oh no!" She began waving both hands. "That's politics! We're scared of politics."

So citizens of the Third Reich were afraid even to listen to their own leaders' announcements! Poor people.

By the end of the year, discipline in the camp itself started going haywire. Mayer showed himself in camp less and less. In his place, he'd send that innocent lamb Captain Zette, who still didn't comprehend a thing and was incapable of delivering the simplest order. Occasionally he'd grope through the pockets of those prisoners returning from work – but this constituted his entire administrative repertoire.

In the meantime, Selonke appointed two experienced bandits from among the prisoners as camp policemen. He tied striped brassards on their sleeves, handed each one a thick whip and let them loose to "create order" in camp. At Selonke's direction, they performed muggings and beatings, and Selonke's power grew even greater.

After the New Year, communication with the women's barracks became very easy. Not only did the men and women write endless letters to each other, they even threw parties; the women hosted boisterous revels in their barracks.

From the warehouses various things began to disappear rapidly. First the S.S. dragged out the prisoners' luggage and better quality civilian clothing, to be prepared for any eventuality. After the S.S. had first pick, the prisoners supplied themselves with civilian clothes. No suitcases were left, so the DAW workshops began producing them. The authorities set about packing their belongings. The hospital was the first to burn documents publicly. The political division followed directly, incinerating its files and dossiers on the edge of the compound.

Various rumors spread through camp. It was clear to everyone that some sort of evacuation was unavoidable and that it would occur very soon – but where and when, no one knew. Some thought that a long trek on foot was in store – four hundred kilometers or so. Others insisted that at the last moment the prisoners would be released, at least the political ones. A third group shrugged their shoulders and turned their attention to the barrels of tar being brought over to the residential blocks.

“Huh,” they said, “you’ll see. They’ll set fire to the barracks at night and fry us all alive. Those who fail to ignite will be shot like pigeons...”

Since the authorities banned newspapers in camp, rumors were especially rampant. No more mail, no letters, no parcels arrived. Every radio in camp was picked up and tucked away somewhere.

All of this was disconcerting. No one knew anything for sure – even Mayer didn't know. Several times he urgently approached higher authorities for advice about what to do, where and how to evacuate. He got no reply.

In 1944, our Lithuanian block received quite a few parcels. Various items were sent to us from home: underwear, pullovers,

shoes, clothing, cigarettes and food. What a pity to have to leave all this behind! It wasn't known where we'd be going, where we'd find shelter for the night.

The authorities gave orders to prepare for travel, to take along a change of underwear and blankets.

Because it was the dead of winter, we decided to construct sleds – we'd haul our wealth, whatever we had! You never knew – maybe everything we possessed in Lithuania had gone up in flames in the meantime. Maybe we wouldn't find anything left standing.

So we built sleds. Some worked alone, others worked in collaboration with others. We rehearsed how we would tow our belongings – everything went like clockwork. Other blocks followed our example. The authorities saw our labor but no one asked questions; it was all the same to them now, too.

The Red Army had already taken Elbląg. Some of the Jewesses who had worked there returned to Stutthof on foot. Others, the weaker ones, were left behind on the way – but they somehow managed to hobble back to camp on their own.

Elbląg was 35 kilometers from Stutthof. Days, airplanes carved the skies. Nights, they bombarded Gdansk and Gdynia. Artillery boomed in the distance. The ground shuddered, the sky turned red.

But orders to evacuate still did not arrive!

Pessimists and skeptics triumphantly muttered:

“So, weren't we right?! There won't be any evacuation. You see full casks of tar all around. They're going to stew us and shoot us down. They'll poison us with gas and sizzle us!”

Anxiety grew. Security around camp increased. Machine guns no longer perched only in the towers but also on the surrounding hills to cover every pathway and pass.

LIII

GOOD-BYE, GOOD-BYE, FOREST OF THE GODS!

On January 24, 1945, an announcement was made to all prisoners: "Be prepared to travel. Tomorrow at four o'clock in the morning, we're leaving."

Wonderful! At least they won't scorch or shoot us here!

Who could have slept through such a mad night! Everybody's scurrying like drunken cockroaches, tugging at bundles, wandering about the bathhouse.

By four, we were all in formation with our sleds. Mine was piled high with two bundles of treasure and one huge blanket.

Glancing at my gear, an S.S. acquaintance shook his head:

"Ich sehe schwarz," he prophesied, "I see black. You'd be better off leaving the damned stuff right here!"

The camp was divided into eight marching columns, each with a name, an S.S. tech sergeant, a group of guards and a

detachment with dogs. Most of the guards and dogs had been brought in especially from Gdansk. This was not reassuring.

“Smells like a rat,” was whispered up and down the line.

Left behind in camp were the Jews, the prisoners too ill to walk, and the determined schemers who had cooked up some vague plans for the future.

“You’re going to burn like bedbugs,” we told them sadly.

“Oh, we’ll see who goes up in flames faster!” they replied, searching for a darker corner to hide in.

Our column got to march first. It had about 1600 male prisoners, including our own tiny block, two other small blocks and a lot of the walking wounded. These latter ones, who barely managed to stand, had been awakened at midnight and handed two pairs of underwear, a shabby prison garment and a smock resembling a hospital lab coat, a ragged blanket, an enamelled tin bowl, a spoon, wooden clogs – and that was the extent of their wealth. Most of them had no socks when they stepped out into the midwinter snow.

Every prisoner was given a two day ration of bread and margarine, but the majority ate theirs all at once, on the spot, making it easier to carry...

That lamb, Captain Zette, saw the marching columns off. Mayer stood by the window in the red building and swilled whiskey. He didn’t show his face in camp, apparently for fear that the prisoners might mistake him for a rag and rip him to shreds.

Our column moved out... Good-bye, good-bye, Forest of the Gods! Yes, some magnificent curses were cursed in your inhospitable shadow!

It was less than a kilometer to the railroad tracks – and that was just how far our sleds were needed!

The train had passenger cars for German civilians and the S.S. retinue. Prisoners were jammed onto freight cars and platform cars – one and a half thousand of us. The crush, the pressure, was incredible. There was no question of taking in the sleds – people were climbing on top of each other, hanging on to each other; one squeezing, a second yelling, a third picking another’s pockets... About a hundred people from our column didn’t fit – they were attached to other columns.

Squashed several layers deep, we rode eighteen kilometers – up to the Vistula.

Scenes glimpsed on the way were quite stirring. The paths and lanes were full of Germans, some in vehicles, others on foot. One was pulling a dilapidated baby buggy piled high with valuables; another tugged at a sled; a third pedaled along with all his belongings tied to a bicycle. Bandy-legged oldsters, women with children, all were heading for Gdansk; Gdansk – that place of salvation...

“Heil Hitler!” the cheerier convicts cried, waving as we outdistanced the refugees. “We’ve got a ride, at least, while you breeders of the pure German breed are hoofing it!”

Well before we reached the Vistula, the highway was jammed with wagons and pedestrians. The Vistula is wide – and a ferry steamer, even a big one, can’t deal with such a mass of people and horses.

Several kilometers from the Vistula, we, too, are let out of the train. I tumble down into a waist-deep snowdrift.

Now how in the world am I going to carry these two damned bundles of mine!

I hurriedly pull things from the bags and strew them in the snow. Glancing around, I see others doing the same. One even flings away an entire suitcase. A few have managed somehow or

other to haul along their sleds, and they quickly secure their belongings.

While I'm discarding my things, a fat, dark prisoner suddenly appears beside me, an Abkhasian from Caucasia, from Sukhumi, named Ilja – muscular and strong as a mule. He's standing there with an empty suitcase stolen en route.

"*Duša moj* – my soul," he laughs at me. "Don't be stupid and don't dump your things. You'll need them. Give them here. I'll carry them for you. In return, give me something to eat on the way."

I did have food in reserve: crackers, bread and bacon. I also had cigarettes. Gladly I swung one of the packs onto the Abkhasian's back – there was no way I could carry both myself. With the one bag on my back, I puffed through the drifts like a locomotive.

We arrived at the riverbank – and look at this! They're giving us our very own ferry!

"Heil Hitler!" the convicts wave to the Germans on shore, still waiting their turn to get across. For once we're better off belonging to a not-so-pure race!

Beside me on the ferry was a shrivelled little Imeritian from Caucasia, from Sochi, a fellow named Alexander. "If you give me some food," he says to me, "I'll carry your other sack!"

"Fine! Take it!" I can't carry it any more. I look and others with food reserves are providing themselves with porters...

We rolled off the ferry and dispersed throughout the whole crowd of prisoners. Our block broke up. Again we've become rank and file convicts – the same as all the others.

We can't travel on the good roads because they're reserved for the Army and German refugees. We're moved along on foot-paths drifted over and piled high with snow. Snowdrifts and

more snowdrifts, often waist deep. Surrounded by guards and dogs, we're driven forward at a stiff pace. It's hard to walk. We have to stay together; those lagging behind are forced to run to catch up. But it's almost impossible to walk so jammed together. The prisoners who are barely alive sway along: one pushing another, stepping on each other's heels...

The chief of our column, S.S. Tech Sergeant **Bratke**, bellows like a mad bull and frequently fires his revolver in the air. Bratke is about forty-five and obese, with a low forehead and wide cheeks – a policeman, born and bred. He has enormous physical strength. He can march like a freight train, and he drives the others hard. Every two hours there's a five minute rest, then we're moving again. After five hours of this furious pace, towards evening, he gives us a half hour rest. Whoever still has food tries to eat; whoever doesn't, sucks his fingers. My ailing heart is ready to go on strike; I no longer even want to eat. My Abkhasian and Imeritian pals are digging into my bacon with both hands. After the break, we pick up the same violent tempo, herded like animals toward a slaughterhouse. Even the S.S. attendants swear. They schlepp along with their dogs, tongues already hanging out.

Twilight comes, then complete darkness. We find ourselves on an empty causeway. The walking is easier because there's less snow, but it's so slippery it's hard to stay on your feet. And it's cold, so very cold. We're tired to the point that walking no longer even warms us. The attendants' revolvers begin to sound off, a bang here and a bang there, finishing off the ones who can't go on.

Yes indeed, you think, this is hell. You look around to see if some revolver isn't aiming at you...

Suddenly an S.S. appears next to me, speaking Lithuanian.

"So, where'd you learn that?" I ask.

The S.S. reels off every swear word he knows. It turns out he's a blacksmith, name of Šešelga, a Lithuanian from Kybartai. Three years before, the German S.S. caught him and hauled him off to work in Germany. He tried escaping but they shut him in prison. He spent six months there, then they drove him straight to an S.S. compound and put him in uniform. Since then he'd been in Gdansk, until receiving his current assignment.

"Aren't you forbidden to talk to prisoners?"

"Of course, but it's dark now."

"You're speaking to me pretty candidly. Aren't you afraid?"

"I know who you are, Sir... I know you from your literary works..."

Šešelga had already met the other Lithuanians of our block. It was heartening to have an ally in uniform.

By ten o'clock that night, we'd walked over forty kilometers. We reached the town of Pruszcz Gdanski, where we were supposed to sleep; Mayer had already arrived by car. During inspection, men fell to the ground, exhausted. I was among the first to go. Sixteen people from our column were missing; the S.S. had done them in en route.

We spent the night in a wrecked tenement where English prisoners of war had lived. Now it had no windows and was, naturally, unheated. There was very little space; such a crush developed that we were no longer cold, even without a furnace... Prisoners dropped wherever they could. Some fell on cots, some lay underneath, some collapsed in the corridor; a few corpses lay among them by morning. There was no food. They gave us nothing. Feed yourself the best you can; chew the wooden soles of your clogs, if you want. Someone organized a couple of small vats of coffee but they served only a few. The remainder got only air, and stinking air at that.

In the morning, it's the same. Not even a piece of bread, not even a gulp of coffee. Nothing. Nothing at all. My Abkhasian, Ilja, straddles my bundle and rolls up his sleeves and fights with the attacking crowd – such a great number of willing carriers have turned up! But the Abkhasian, Ilja, shouts that he's carrying it alone and that he won't let any other devil touch it...

The second day of the journey was exactly the same as the first, except the distance covered was shorter by several kilometers. More than twenty were shot on the way. Again it grew dark while we were still marching. We got lost on the drifting pathways. Another six kilometers we trudged, through snow, across fields. Lodgings were a barn with some straw. The temperature was about -20 C [-4 F]. Again, there was just a sip or two of coffee for some: for the others a curse and a club in the ribs. I snuggled up with a friend in the straw and moaned like a dog in the moonlight.

It's cold, by the devil! Tooth no longer hits chattering tooth. In the meantime, some poor bastard lying up high comes down with a dash of diarrhea, and so "Drip, drip, drip..." the culmination of his misfortunes drips on my friend's head and on my own...

This Judas would be worth hanging, but where are you going to find him at night? Handle it the best you can – lick it if you want!

Again there's not a bit of food in the morning. We march, beginning the ascent into the Kashubian hills.

Higher and higher. The snow deeper and deeper. The snow drifts, drenches, lashes the face! People collapse along the way like rotting logs. The S.S. shoots them where they lie.

Several days dragged on like this until we reached the hamlet of Żukowo.

LIV

FEAST ATOP THE POTATOES

In the hamlet of Żukowo, we were stuffed into a huge barn sprinkled with just enough straw for a cat to blow its nose. The first prisoners to crawl into the place swarmed over this straw and kept the others away by brandishing sticks ripped from the roof. Everyone else lay on the bare dirt floor with nothing to cover themselves; the barn was full of holes, and the temperature was -15 C [5 F]. Some didn't even have room to lie down. We climbed all over one another, trying to keep warm.

In the dark, our convict buddies cut open our sacks, very neatly, and neatly removed the contents. One prisoner tried protecting his stuff, and had his arm slit to the bone. So it went, tussling and slashing. The will to live got boring, so boring, you didn't know what to do with yourself. What in the devil's name could still lie ahead?

Meanwhile, one of our group was lucky enough to get acquainted with two German prisoners, leaders of the green-triangled criminals. It so happened that they discovered and, with S.S. help, occupied the best spot in the barn. After much bartering and the passage of bribes, the Germans agreed to accept us into their company.

Their special spot was the potato cellar which was composed of three compartments. The center one was the most desirable, filled with potatoes to within a meter of the ceiling. The other two had fewer potatoes and weren't as warm to lie in, but even these were paradise compared with the rest of the barn.

The luxurious middle compartment had already been staked out by the criminal element, our fearless leader Franz with his Polish assistant, and a German crematorium capo, known as a peerless lecher. So my friend and I found ourselves in honorable company! Atop the potatoes in adjoining quarters resided two Poles, Vlodek and Vlodek, old convicts well-seasoned in camp.

For some reason, they had undertaken the care of the noted Warsaw University Professor Ro-ski.

Prof. Ro-ski had landed in camp because he'd refused to form a cabinet of Polish ministers willing to work according to the whims of the Gestapo. He was an old acquaintance of ours, a righteous man with a good heart and a fine friend in times of misfortune. Everyone knew him in camp. Like all true Warsaw denizens, he was highly articulate, and like the majority of professors, rather naive. Consequently he always had an abundance of news. Only another Warsaw native, the old captain Ost-ki, could compete with him in this regard, but these two didn't compete; they were united on all news they reported. Together they were the camp's most gifted rumor-mongers, so notorious that their broadcasts came to be known as the **Ostro** agency news.

If you heard a bit of news in camp, you first checked to be sure it didn't originate at Ostro; if it had, you put it aside: it would turn out to be a distant relative of the truth, at best.

Prof. Ro-ski, chief of the Ostro agency, had met Vlodek and Vladek for the first time in the barn. He couldn't figure out why these two had suddenly decided to take care of him – but this mystery was cleared up shortly.

We lived in the cellar several days. One evening, while Vlodek and Vladek were working on improving the professor's quarters, they stole a travelling bag from one of our Lithuanians, containing cigarettes and other valuables. Any idea of conducting a search was ended when they pulled out knives; we had to be reconciled with fate. But Franz, chief of the bandits, wasn't like that. Once he discovered that our bags had been sliced up and our things stolen, he rushed to our assistance, sending several of his agents to search for our goods in the barn. The devils only know how they worked in the darkness, in a crowd of thousands, but sure as hell they grabbed first one culprit, then another... The inquest was conducted independently by Franz, which was in keeping with his status as sovereign of the cellar. He doled out twenty or thirty lashes, according to his own discretion. And look! He's already found a good part of our things! Now, that's talent, by the devil! But Franz didn't touch Vlodek or Vladek – they were in on it together. Franz managed to perform utter magic. He organized bread, coffee, boiled potatoes and plenty of good, hot soup for us, not just once but a couple of times! In our situation, this was more than a miracle. Franz worked in tandem with one German S.S. whom he called his brother-in-law. This Franz looked mighty powerful with his S.S. brother-in-law! Compared to him, we felt like dwarves. We had this constant fear that he'd throw us out of the cellar. We had to invent something that

would impress Franz. He had an S.S. brother-in-law, so we had to find an S.S. with even closer relations. Fate itself came to our aid. One of us managed to become acquainted with an S.S. who turned out to be an interesting specimen.

He was a doctor of philosophy, a graduate of the University of Berlin. He had been a Wehrmacht lieutenant, but because of some disciplinary transgressions he'd been demoted to foot-soldier and shoved into the S.S. lines. Our Lithuanian reached an agreement with him to announce that they were long lost friends who had just this minute run into each other.

This S.S. doctor of philosophy crept into our cellar and cursed the Nazi government so vilely, relating such scandalous anecdotes about Hitler, that we were doubled over with laughter!

Just as soon as Franz began bragging about his S.S. brother-in-law, our Lithuanian immediately snapped back:

“What is your brother-in-law but trash! Mine is a big shot S.S., an old friend, a doctor of philosophy! Did you hear how he cusses Hitler?”

Franz was helpless against this argument. He had to back down. Our situation in the cellar improved within the hour. Franz not only began respecting us, he even feared us a bit. He and his S.S. brother-in-law organized our food yet more diligently.

We even had Kashubian women hauling hot soup to us in our cellar. We talked to them in complete freedom – something beyond even the devil's imagination! Prisoners were strictly forbidden to speak so much as a word to a stranger, yet here strangers were coming down to our cellar, unrestrained, unrestricted – and women, no less! We owed much to Franz's astonishing organizational talents.

But one time, Franz himself got organized right out of his pants.

He had organized several litres of moonshine, and his S.S. brother-in-law came to visit him in the cellar, along with Kostek, the famous bandit, and Kostek's aide-de-camp. These two lived at the other end of the barn and organized nicely for themselves, independent of Franz.

Now a real bandits' feast is brewing next door to me. They drink their moonshine, punch each other in the nose and go on drinking. They drink, vomit and drink some more. This is all going on right here by my head. Totally exhausted, they finally sprawl out wherever they're sitting. During the night, the S.S. brother-in-law vanishes from the cellar; and towards morning, the same happens to Kostek and his aide-de-camp. At last, the crematorium capo sits up and raises hell – the potatoes themselves are bouncing around. Aroused, Franz sputters:

“Shut up, you crocodile! I still want sleep!”

“Don't tell me to shut up!” the capo splutters. “Look what these bastards did! Here, get an eyeful!”

The capo points at his pants – they're sliced and slashed. During the night, the guests slit them open and made off with the pockets. Not only are Franz's own pants shredded, so is his jacket! Some guests! Franz has never entertained the like. Now he confers with the crematorium capo about how they'll deal with Kostek, the fiend. But before they can hatch a plot, Kostek himself turns up with his aide-de-camp, and both of them have big knives in their hands. Kostek is no less infuriated than Franz: during the night his hosts ripped off his beautiful new leather coat!

The disappointed guests are storming Franz but Franz won't go quietly. Knives flash and lunge in the dimness – after a time the fight ebbs, wounds are bound. Guests and hosts sit down,

pals once more, to polish off the moonshine. One drinks heartily; another takes one look at the swill and vomits straightaway.

That same night atop another pile of potatoes, another great drama transpired. Prof. Ro-ski's caretakers suddenly started strangling each other, one yelling "Vladek!" and the other yelling "Vlodek!" The Ostro agency chief wrung his hands, hovering, imploring his protectors.

"Vlodek! Vladek! Vlodek! Vladek! Vlodek! Vladek!" Afterwards no one could figure out which of these two, Vlodek or Vladek, suddenly smashed his feet into the stomach of their ward. The old man tumbled down the pile of potatoes, moaning. No one dared get near Vladek and Vlodek, who went right on trying to choke one another, reeling around in the spuds, oblivious to anything else. One leapt up to flee, upset the candle – another of Franz's goodies – and the cellar was plunged into darkness.

One mad Pole tears off after the other, and they trip on the others lying in the darkness, sprawl, jump up – and vanish.

By the time we found and lit the overturned candle, Vladek and Vlodek were gone without a trace. Everything appeared to be in order – except one of our group seemed to be missing his shoes, another his coat, a third his traveling bag. Vladek and Vlodek had swiped them all; they never did return.

A few hours after this incident, the block chief who lay next to me disappeared, too. On his departure, however, he didn't steal anything, and a few days later he returned to the column. He had this story to tell:

Among the S.S. was a Pole who had been forced into the S.S. lines; he was willing to guide those prisoners who wanted to risk an escape past the S.S. guards to the outskirts of the hamlet of Żukowo. After that, you were on your own. This S.S. had led Vladek and Vlodek, in fact. He'd also taken the block chief that

far, but the block chief thought better of it in the end. “The snow was very deep. While we were in Żukowo, it drifted for four days and four nights without stopping and it was hard to get far. Dogs would track us down. Further on you reach Kashubian villages. During the day, the Kashubians will gladly take you in, feed you, give you food for the journey, but no one will take you in for the night. Everyone’s afraid. They drive you into the forest to sleep. And in the forest, when you have no connections, what can you do in the deep snow? They’ll catch you, sooner or later. There’s spies all over the place. And once they catch you, they’ll hang you for sure.”

Three days after his attempted escape, the block chief caught up with the column; he saw less risk there. The column’s leader, Bully Bratke, took him back with open arms – now he’d be even more valuable to Bratke.

The fact is, though, Bratke didn’t get too upset about the number of escapers. What he couldn’t tolerate was the weary and the weak – they were all shot along the way. An escaper was simply added to the number shot – no one checked their names and numbers! That was all there was to his bookkeeping. Bratke’s column kept melting, dissolving.

In Żukowo, my Abkhasian, Ilja, robbed me, too. He unpacked the bacon, cigarettes, crackers and other things. I had to say goodbye to him. Of two bags, only one remained. But I felt I had made great progress.

While in Żukowo, we ate, at least; Franz supplied us with all the food we needed. Those in the barn had it harder. Some got two portions of bread and margarine while others didn’t get any. It was the same with the coffee.

In Żukowo, four of our group got very ill. They had fallen sick on the way, but in Żukowo their temperature rose to 40 C [104 F] and stayed there. Later it turned out to be typhus.

The healthy ones got in formation to march while the sickly ones remained in the barn. To care for them, the S.S. doctor of philosophy stayed behind; that very day he moved them into warm, private cottages. He continued to nurse them as best he could.

We were very sad to part with this S.S., but he was needed more by the sick than the healthy.

Moving out of Żukowo, we plunged into a snowdrift – and didn't emerge for a long time.

LV

THROUGH THE KASHUBIAN LANDS

Living under custody of Franz was like being in the bosom of our Lord. Oh, it was good, but it was also dangerous; his bosom could be a bit coarse. There could be no doubt that Franz was a miraculous man, but he was also satanic, capable of robbing or even killing you at any moment. To us, it was almost incomprehensible that he hadn't done so already; had he been satisfied with Vlodek's and Vlodek's contribution, taken out of our things? By now, though, all that was long ago. And with our S. S. friend left behind in Żukowo, our prestige suffered a drastic decline, while Franz's S.S. brother-in-law remained near at hand.

But if Franz could take such good care of himself, why couldn't we? How were we inferior to him? Having deliberated on the matter, we decided to strike out on our own. We began by pooling our worldly goods in a sort of mutual fund of food, ciga-

rettes, gloves, clothing. Then we sent a delegation to Bully Bratke, which described to our leader how we had been robbed, our bags slashed, ourselves cut to the bone – while piling Lithuanian sausage and smoked pork on his table.

“Hm...” says Bully Bratke, “but don’t you have any smokes?”

“Yes Sir, indeed we do!” And Bully Bratke gets a hundred cigarettes.

And Bratke the Bull is transformed, he becomes a docile calf.

“Hm...” he says, “from now on you can all go in a pack at the head of the column in a separate group. You won’t have to mix with the others. You’ll also sleep separately.”

And Bratke the calf kept his word, though he often needed prompting.

A whole new life began for us. The rest of the column slept in barns as before, but we were usually in schoolhouses on straw. Some of the schools were cold, but in others we built fires and dried our shoes and clothes.

Franz shook his head, amazed that we’d managed to make do without his help. But we had it even better than he imagined.

To guard us at night, Calf Bratke appointed two unusual S.S., the Lithuanian Šešelga, and the Polish escort of runaways. They let us leave our quarters and hunt for food in town; they got tired of accompanying us, and let us roam free. Anyway, they often had their own business to take care of.

We selected several of the more witty and resourceful men from our group to go into a village or town to beg for food. These men were wonderful, they did their jobs like pros. It’s true that occasionally they’d trade someone’s shoes or underwear in town for liquor and get drunk, but they were gifted at the art of developing liaisons in short order with the local Kashubian women;

an hour after making their acquaintance, the good ladies would be bringing us hot soup and bread. In the morning, the women bade us farewell with tears in their eyes. They'd even try to kiss our delegates, our begging-specialists – but we'd pull these wily geniuses back by the collar so we wouldn't get in trouble with the S.S. guards.

The Kashubian people became very near and dear to us, for a number of very good reasons.

Every family in the area we passed through had had at least one member in Stutthof; some had had many more. The Kashubians couldn't even visit our entire column, and there were many columns on different roads, so it was unlikely they'd find their blood relative among us, who might in any case have been tortured to death long ago... The Kashubians sympathized with our hardships – we were like substitutes for their own loved ones.

In one Kashubian town, we were given a church school for lodgings, presided over by a German pastor. Seeing us, the man grabbed his spouse and kids and sped out of the building. Our S.S. could scarcely catch up with him.

“You're out of your mind,” yelled the agitated clergyman. “Forty convicts and only two guards? They'll slaughter us all in our beds!”

The S.S. did his best to explain that we weren't bandits and didn't butcher people.

“Look,” he told him, “we're walking around without weapons, right? We left both the weapons and the convicts in the school...”

The poor pastor was completely dumfounded. Leaving his family at a distance for safety, the pastor returned trembling to the school. “But maybe they really are bandits!” he argued. “Why else would the government hold them in a concentration camp?”

The newspapers say they've got nothing but criminals and murderers in there!"

Returning, the pastor found our men in his yard splitting logs and stacking them in the shed; it was cold and the men wanted to get warm.

The good pastor was amazed, he was thrilled. He hurried off to fetch his family. Meanwhile, visitors dropped in and served up bread and warm soup.

This improved situation of ours, which we owed solely to the cigarettes and bacon our families had sent during the summer and which Bratke and company were now devouring, did not come to us at our fellow-prisoners' expense. Had we been worse off, the others' lot would have been no easier. They still would have gone hungry and died along the way – and we with them.

We would have been the first to fall, in fact. Most of the other prisoners had once been muscular men, having done physical labor all their lives. I had spent thirty-five years behind a desk. My powers of endurance could not compare to theirs.

Along the way, a reform in the order of march was effected. Those prisoners already too weak to walk on their own power out of the barn were piled into wagons – and nothing horrible was done to them. Indeed, various services were rendered them.

But those who weakened en route and couldn't stay on their feet, these continued to be shot without hesitation. Every roadside was seeded with corpses. Kashubian mothers who had waited four years for their sons to return found them too late, in a ditch spouting blood.

But the snow, the snow in this Kashubian land!

The prisoners still walked in the middle of the road while the S.S. waded through drifts waist deep.

“At least for once it’s better being a convict than an S.S.,” I teased one Latvian S.S. soldier. “We’re always on the road, but you, where are you wading?”

“Sure,” retorted the angry attendant, “but I still wouldn’t trade places with you...”

“You know, dear neighbor,” I agreed, “there’s no way I would trade places with you, either.” He glanced at me with longing eyes; we understood each other perfectly.

We didn’t get much time to shoot the breeze. The so-called Kashubian “Swiss Alps”, though not very tall, rose steadily before us, day after day. To a healthy person in summertime, it might have been a pleasant walk, but for us, in midwinter, the crossing was horrendous.

Snow was knee deep, waist deep, drifting and freezing. In short order your nose is chapped, eyes are iced, feet are bloodied. People starve, become exhausted, fall. In sixteen days of travel, the authorities distributed bread only three or four times, no more than three or four hundred grams of it each time; and there was the occasional half liter of weak coffee, or a bit of soup offered by a generous farm woman.

As we pass through a village, men are not to be seen – they’ve all been mobilized or arrested. Women stand along the road with loaves of bread, sandwiches, sometimes even cake. They stand and wait in a sort of abruptly petrified anguish. With bleak, awed eyes they search our lines. Our appearance is terrifying to them. Bones. Blue faces. Barely alive. Wobbling alone with the dogs at our heels, heads down, tongues hanging out. Staggering, sobbing for breath...

The women, turned to stone in their anguish, search for kin in the lines of convicts, for a son, a brother, a husband, a father... In our column, a half kilometer long, the relatives do not show

up. Maybe they're in another group... Maybe they dropped in the snow along the way. And maybe they're long gone.

The women frozen in their horror can't stand it. They begin screaming, they smother in tears. They throw their bundles to the crowd of passing beggars. The S.S. curses, cudgels them aside. The convicts, hungry wolves, rip a crust of bread one from the other. Now there's disorder in the lines. A crush. Clamor, confusion, wild cursing. A revolver discharges one time, then again – one convict, then another is down. The living totter over the dead. The S.S. kicks the corpses aside to find eternal rest in a ditch.

The scene is repeated in village after village. Food thrown by the women in despair, keeps the convicts alive another day.

“Stutthof has moved! Stutthof is coming!” This news had spread like lightning across Kashubia. People travelled from secluded villages to gather on the roadside. S.S. curses no longer frightened them. They stood by the road and anguish turned them to stone, live monuments in the great graveyard of Europe...

Finally, it became clear that we were being driven into a district city of Lębork, northwest of Gdynia – a Polish–German border town before the war. For several years, a detachment of Stutthof convicts had worked there servicing a school for lower ranking S.S. officers that had since become defunct. Apparently this school's buildings would now serve as our evacuation camp; this was where the camp's treasures were being taken.

We could feel the end of the journey approaching at last! The torture would finally end! We'd get to eat and wash, find a warm shelter and rest... The glimmer of hope poured energy into mutilated bodies. Crooked cripples seemed to suddenly straighten. Faces concave from starvation were lit here and there

with a smile... To stretch out the last bits of strength – maybe we'd somehow reach our goal!

By now my legs were swollen and frozen stiff as planks. Such pains had crept into my shoulders that I could barely manage to drag on my coat. Just a thin, raggedy coat – but it cut so sharply into my shoulders!

Drenched and frozen. I'm on the verge of weeping. My heart threatens to go on strike, and green and red circles float before my eyes. I can't stand it, but I have to stand it – I don't like the idea of dropping dead in a ditch with a bullet in the back of my head.

Surviving on the sweet promise of shelter and sleep, we sway down the highway, straight towards Lębork. We're descending slowly from the hills, and the sun shines, spangling the snow. We'll make it – what the hell!

At dusk a horseman overtakes us. He's blubbery as a bacon hog astride his light bay trotter.

"You can't go on the highway," he announces to Bratke. "It's reserved for Army traffic. We don't want you underfoot..."

Bratke bellows. His revolver cracks the calm evening air. He orders us to turn around.

We have to backtrack six kilometers uphill, turn off the highway and go eleven more kilometers to reach the nearest shelter.

The convicts droop like mown sedges. The mood of optimism is suddenly gone, energy seeps away.

Evening shadows already cling to the branches of the fir trees; soon night will unfurl over the snow. Clouds accumulate; gray and dark. Snow starts to fall, starts to fall harder.

Snow gets in your eyes, glues them shut. Panting, you inhale a mouthful of snow. And the pace keeps picking up. At the head of the column Bully Bratke sets the tempo; bringing up the rear

is his assistant, S.S. Tech Sergeant Marholz, whose specialty throughout the journey was helping the weary hurry home with a bullet. And so we march, Bully Bratke bellowing ahead, Murderer Marholz firing behind.

Walking back up the highway, we pass the corpses of our friends. Lord, how many are laid to rest along the way!

Marholz has been working hard. He's cheerful still, as he brings up the rear. He keeps firing away, even more often than before.

Turning off the highway, we dive into the drifts again. We have to climb a hill in deep snow. Even the S.S. men are puffing, stumbling from fatigue. Marholz doesn't shoot them, just kicks them and chews them out.

How did I end up in the last row of the column? I didn't even notice it happening. My eyes see green. Head is spinning. Feet won't obey. I can't catch my breath... I've lagged even behind the cripples...

I open my eyes a slit – I've already fallen, I'm lying down. Marholz kicks me with both feet – probably that's what woke me – and stretches his arm out towards me. I'm amazed that the revolver shines so brightly at night. I understand nothing.

Just at that moment, out of nowhere, appears my friend Jonas, the Prot from Biržai – and he shouts at me in full throat: "Professor, are you mad? Get up right now!" I've scarcely had time to glance at him but already he's dragged me by the scruff of the neck into the middle of the road.

"Rickety rabble!" Marholz grumbles, turning aside to finish off some weary soul with no one to grab him by the scruff.

Already Jonas and someone else have propped me on my feet, tugged me forward and thrust me into the midst of the crowd where Jackal Marholz won't notice me. Suddenly Šešelga ap-

pears, our S. S. friend from Lithuania, bustling from one invalid to the next, dishing out gulps of coffee mixed with cognac. He gives me a good belt of the stuff.

I rummage in my pocket for a piece of chocolate my family sent during the summer. I saved it for months and I savor it now, the most difficult moment in my life.

All this works on me so well that soon I can clomp through the drifts by myself. But my dear friend Jonas won't let me out of his sight. Every time I sway a bit, he jumps up roaring as if he's been scalded:

"Professor, don't be insane! Don't fall!" At last we hobble into the village where we're to sleep, and crowd into a tiny church. The crush is fantastic. Dead tired people drop on the spot. I faint again but good folks bring me to a bench, sit me down and once more pour something into my throat. Again I feel as if I've come back from the dead.

It appears our group will no longer enjoy separate lodgings. Marholz stands at the church door, revolver in hand – he refuses to let anyone even speak to him. He shoves the revolver at those who get too close... But even Marholz's heart's not made of steel. With a bribe from our mutual fund of a hundred cigarettes, plus a slab of bacon and a pair of wool socks, he releases our block from the jammed church and guides us to separate accommodations.

In the street we're overtaken by a flock of Polish women carrying large dishes of pea soup. They'd hauled it to the church to give to Polish convicts, but the S.S. beat them with sticks and drove them out. The women didn't even get near the prisoners.

The soup is hot and the Polish women's deep compassion, an indescribably endearing sympathy, falls to us – may their unknown names be praised!

We sleep in a pub run by a female Polish activist of some local renown – and she is so good to us, treats us like family!

Whenever we chanced to meet Poles or were sheltered by them for the night, we experienced truly heartfelt warmth and support, which only these poor laboring folks could give us. We were greeted and accepted like close family – like beloved brothers, in the holiest sense of the word “family”!

When we lodged with Germans, it was a completely different story. To Germans we were merely convicts, enemies of the Third Reich. They didn’t see us as human. Even a cup of coffee wasn’t easy to get out of them – and we had to pay a profiteer’s prices. There was no point in even talking about a slice of bread. And as it turned out, we were sent for shelter only to the most prosperous Germans, local Nazi Party innkeepers...

But even among the Germans – those who were dirt poor – there were some kind hearts, some consolation offered... And they themselves had it very hard!

LVI

MÜLLER, THAT CURSED CHATTERBOX

I can go no further. My feet are swollen, my heart throbs madly and my temperature is going up. But my friend Vytautas, the athlete, is in even worse shape – his temperature is 39.5 C [103.1 F]! It's fourteen more kilometers to Lębork. How can the two of us possibly make it!

My friend Vytautas has a beautiful pair of tall boots.

"What the devil," he says, "I'd give them away if someone would drive us!"

Farmers of the Third Reich were more than willing to hitch up their horses for a payoff like that. Bully Bratke let us hire one, and into the wagon climbed Vytautas and I and one more older from our group, a former captain, a real sea wolf, now just another decrepit cripple. Our other friends piled as many of their bags as fit onto the wagon. As escort, Bratke gave us S. S. Tech

Sergeant Müller from Hannover, a hooknosed old guy of about fifty who was inconceivably, implausibly garrulous... But at least we've got a ride! We're even puffing on our pipes. Müller chatters with the driver nonstop about girls, ignoring us completely.

In the next village we catch up to another column from Stutthof, one which left before we did. Large wagons used normally for hauling manure line the streets – but now they're overflowing with white mashed potatoes! With large ladles, officials dole out servings for the prisoners. With a portion of mashed potatoes under your belt, you could walk all day!

This column was better provided for. Having seen it, Bratke also began to organize food for his prisoners; up to now his thick head hadn't been able to comprehend that convicts will get hungry, that it's not from laziness that they drop in the ditches...

At a crossroad a few kilometers further on, a flustered official waves us down and declares that he's got orders forbidding prisoner columns to enter Łębork via the highway. Prisoners have to travel on little side-roads, he says, and suggests Müller do the same. But Müller doesn't go for this suggestion.

"*Scheisse!* Shit! I'm damned if I'll go slog on some footpath when we could breeze right through on a level highway!" And on we go, past the spluttering official.

Further on, we overtake Englishmen and Frenchmen in army uniforms. They're heading in the direction of Łębork and brandishing small sticks. They have no guards, no nothing.

"Comrades, where are you off to?" we ask them.

"Home, home!" They're happily smiling. Müller sucks his pipe, almost drooling with envy.

Closer to Łębork, some kind of raggedy Mongolians are digging ditches. A chicken could easily hop over such ditches – and these jokers are expecting to hold off tanks.

Three kilometers before Lębork, we at last approach the S.S. school which was to have been the end of our journey, on which we had pinned the hope of our lives. The farmer dumps us by the fence with our stuff and drives off in the rain. Müller leaves us to go look for this famous camp – and an hour later he returns with the news that in fact there’s no camp here. There are no accommodations at all, for that matter. The S.S. school has been replaced by a Latvian S.S. Junker school¹, run by German S.S. tech sergeants. German trucks, cars, horse wagons, baby buggies stream past us and into the compound; they’re German civilians and soldiers, fleeing with all their worldly goods. It looks like they’ve come a long way, from the other side of Gdansk at least. With so many Germans crowding in, of course there could be no room for us.

To get out of the rain, at least, Müller herds us into a guard-house where young Latvian S.S. soldiers are on duty. The Latvians stare at us like we’re hardened criminals, not even offering a seat to the sick. They apparently think we’ll try to rob them blind. Only after several hours does it become clear to them that we’re not bandits – indeed, in our very column marched some former Latvian statesmen. The young men’s mouths drop open in amazement; they offer a seat and coffee.

Towards dusk our Müller returns with bad news. “There’s definitely no room for a camp – our column won’t even be coming here. They’ve probably already gone ahead to Lębork. We’ll go in, too, and look for them.”

“But Sergeant,” Vytautas and I shout at once, “we’re sick! How are we going to walk all day on empty stomachs?”

“It doesn’t matter. March! You’ll eat tomorrow.”

“But what will we do with the bags? Our friends lugged them all this way... This is all they have...”

“Let them go to hell,” Müller offers. “All of Germany is going to the devil and no one gives a damn – and here you are mourning these stinking sacks! March, march, march!”

“But look, this is the column leader’s bundle and it’ll get lost too,” I tell him.

“Okay, take that one. Carry it!”

Swearing, we plop our bags on our backs, leaving the rest by the fence in the rain. The cursed chatterbox Müller makes me carry the bundle of Marholz the killer.

Walking is very hard. I have a double load, and Vytautas’ fever is up around 40 C [104 F]. But Vytautas is still stronger than I am – he helps me carry the bundle of the devil Marholz. We sway on the road and swear at Müller, hoping he’ll choke on his hiccups and croak. And he’s constantly elaborating his doctrine: “March-march-march!”

“Go to hell!” I can’t restrain myself and swear right in his face.

“What? What did you say?” Müller’s amazed. “Just go to hell!” Vytautas spells it out. Müller just roars with laughter. “Soon we’ll be in Łębork.” In the city, Müller accosts the first person he sees: “Look, I’m leading convicts here from Stutthof. They’re good men; they don’t steal and they don’t slaughter people. The devil only knows why they put them in camp. Do you know where the column from Stutthof went?”

The citizen shrugs his shoulders; naturally, he knows nothing about it. Müller next accosts a hag and sermonizes to her the same way:

“Look, I’m leading convicts here from Stutthof. They’re good men; they don’t steal and they don’t slaughter people. The devil only knows why they put them in camp. Do you know where the column from Stutthof went?”

The hag shrugs her shoulders; naturally she knows nothing, either.

Müller pushes around the city. Whenever he catches up to some old woman, some cop, some pedestrian, some dumbbell, he chatters the same thing over and over.

He has to present our entire history to each one. He flutters his hands around the wenches as he babbles, running his finger under their chins. "I'm an old soldier. Everything will be okay." Bending under our loads, we have to wait for this idiotic blabbermouth to wind up his chatter. He believes that we're quite content: after all, he's advertising to everyone that we don't steal and don't slaughter people!

"Take us to a jail or to the police!" Vytautas yells, no longer restraining his anger. "We'll be extinct before long if this moron keeps it up."

"What? To the police? Of course, the police. I, too, had thought of the police. March to the police! March, march!"

But to the first old crone he sees, once again Müller croons his song:

"Look, I'm leading convicts here from Stutthof. They're good men; they don't steal and they don't slaughter people. The devil only knows why they put them in camp. I drove with them on a wagon, while the rest of the column went on foot. I don't know where they went; only the devils know. And you, my dear, do you by any chance know where police headquarters are located?"

The crone points the way but Müller doesn't believe her. Finding another biddy, he says again:

"Look, I'm leading two convicts here from Stutthof. They don't steal and they don't slaughter people..."

"Oh Lord, my Lord! When will you croak, you moron from hell!"

At police headquarters, after reciting to every official in sight that we don't slaughter people, he makes his way to the headquarters secretary. Chatting with him a good half hour, Müller comes over to us with a triumphant smile:

"Our column went to the camp of the State's Labor Service, the RAD, near the village of Godentow. That's where we're going. So march, march!"

"And where is this?" we ask amazed.

"Eight or ten kilometers. Not far."

"Go to hell! I'm not moving from here!" swears Vytautas, and lies down lengthwise in the corridor – he doesn't fit crosswise. I stretch out beside him.

Müller stomps around us and chatters: "March-march!" and doesn't believe his own words.

"We're not moving from here!"

"Oh, come on, now, just march!"

"*Scheisse!*" Vytautas tells him, and faces the wall. He refuses to say another word to this idiot.

Unable to do a thing with us himself, Müller calls over the secretary, a fat old German fellow.

"Get out! You can't stay here!" he amiably urges.

"Where will we go?" we yell from the floor. "We're sick! We can't walk! If you won't let us sleep right here, put us in jail!"

"But we can't even put you in jail..."

"Well, do whatever you want... We're not budging from here! Or else, give us a wagon. We might just make it in a wagon."

"I'd gladly give you one but I don't have one. I don't have anything. I don't even have a wagon for German women and children, so I really don't have anything for you."

"That's why you're a cop, so you can get these things. You've dragged us all the way from Lithuania. You owe us a wagon, at least..."

“Now, did I drag you? Why am I guilty?”

“And why are we guilty?.. Even if we did walk out of the city, assuming we could walk, that is, we’d fall and Müller would shoot us.” At this point we referred to him as Müller, plain and simple. “So why the devil should we go to the trouble when he can do the same thing right here? Müller, hurry up and shoot, by thunder!”

Müller chuckles, “Ha-ha-ha. When did I ever try to shoot you?”

“That’s all we need from you now, you maniac!”

The secretary attempts to cajole us. There’s a farming village just over a kilometer away. He’ll give Müller a note with which he can requisition a wagon to take us further.

Müller chuckles, “Ha-ha-ha. We’ll even get a ride!”

The policeman asks this of us kindly. And who’s going to argue, when you’re a convict! We walk quietly through town, led by a cop especially sent so Müller won’t be blabbing the whole way. Outside of town, though, we’re left again with this moron. When we reach the village, it’s the same madness – he has to blurt out our whole history to everyone.

We’re wading through water up to our ankles – there’s been a sudden thaw and hard rain. We’re stumbling in the dark from cottage to cottage. No one will give us a wagon. Every farmer’s afraid that Müller will take the wagon, drive off and never return it. What can we do with such a blabbermouth! The farmers give various excuses and turn us down, and Müller, such a good-hearted fellow, doesn’t press them very hard. And so we don’t get the wagon.

The farmers direct us to the village mayor, who lives yet a few more kilometers further on. Finding him at night is just one more lousy joke.

We curse Müller with the foulest oaths we can muster. He merely chuckles, “Ha-ha-ha.”

“I’m an old soldier. Everything will be okay.”

Finally we locate the mayor. He even gives us two slices of bread and a cup of coffee apiece.

And a wagon! We’re riding at last.

The RAD camp isn’t far – but no one there has heard anything about our column. The place is empty, but they won’t let us stay. “Why should we? You might butcher us! Beat it.”

When we return, the mayor is furious. In giving us the wagon, he did his duty to the letter. Now he refuses to engage in further talks; he chases us out of his yard. We’re ready to powder his snout with our fists – we’ve run out of words for him...

We’d gladly send this Müller straight to the devil, but now he’s become necessary to us! We’re sick, without documents, without money, in a strange land. Where would we go without Müller? We’d be captured and hung as runaways. Besides, when word got back to our block that we’d escaped, the others would be made to suffer.

Dispatching Müller from cottage to cottage, we do at last get shelter in the village. Vytautas’s temperature has now topped 40 C [104 F] but he’s holding out heroically, cursing a blue streak. The next day Müller makes up his mind to march us straight back to the Lębork police – in daytime Müller’s braver, he starts giving orders again. We try to convince him to at least phone them first – maybe we won’t have to go back there after all.

“No, no, no!” Müller is in open rebellion. “I won’t call. We have to walk. I know. I’m an old soldier.” In fact the boob doesn’t know how to use a phone...

Barely alive, we sway back to Lębork. The city is full of fugitives and refugees. Nazis in brown uniforms are pulling men

from the wagons and standing them in formation – organizing Hitler’s notorious *Volkesturm*². The women left in the wagons scream and weep, wiping their noses on the hems of their skirts. Müller, that blasted blabbermouth, cranks up like an old katarinka barrel organ with each and every new biddy he meets.

“Look, I’m leading two convicts... They don’t slaughter people...”

The secretary of police headquarters meets us like a bull seeing red.

“You again! Get out of here. Out! I told you to go to the RAD camp! That’s the place for you. Now, out!”

When we explain that we went there already, he raises his hands in resignation. He doesn’t know anything, there’s nothing more he can do...

“I won’t let you in jail! Out! Out!”

“Then give us another escort,” Vytautas fumes. “I’m not going back with this idiot Müller.”

Müller chuckles, “Ha-ha-ha,” apparently satisfied that Vytautas has called him an idiot in public.

We don’t get another escort. We’re thrown out of police headquarters with Müller. On the way back to the RAD camp we have to deal with that same Müller again – but now we take him in hand. In the city, we don’t let him get close to any crones.

“Müller, you bastard, come away from there! Don’t waste time!” We tug on him, and he comes along.

On the outskirts of town, we requisition a wagon on our own.

A German woman is driving back from the city and we grab her:

“Aunty, look, there’s two of us, and back there, you see, is the damn chatterbox Müller...”

Without waiting for a response, we stop the horse, climb into the wagon and sit Müller down next to the woman. Müller

obeys, he's more than happy to sit next to a wench. Immediately he's tittle-tattling his story:

"Look, I'm leading two convicts... They don't slaughter people..."

At the RAD camp, we get the same greeting we got at police headquarters.

"Oh no you don't! Get out of here! Out!"

Müller is hiding from us behind a post. Poking his head out, he beckons me with a crooked finger.

"I'm an old soldier. Everything will be okay."

Leaving Müller behind his post, we discuss what the devil we ought to do next. The guards finally get on the phone and report that if we go on four more kilometers to the town of Łęczyca, we'll find our column there.

"So, didn't I say we'd find it?" Müller is so pleased with himself. "Give me some tobacco for my pipe..."

"Here," I tell him, "stuff your damn pipe, just stay out of our business."

The two of us requisition another wagon along the way in what has become our habitual manner and we drive Müller to Łęczyca. Our column is actually expected here! Müller is completely content, grinning ear to ear:

"I'm an old soldier. I told you everything would come out right!"

LVII

WHAT A LIFE!

In the town of Łęczyca, we were reunited with our column and continued travelling for another two days, but it was an entirely different sort of journey.

The first sign of change came in Łęczyca, where Bully Bratke drove a group of German refugees out of a school and turned it over to us. The Germans grumbled:

“We’re full-blooded Germans and we found this place first – now you’re kicking us out for some convicts?”

“Right! Out!” bellowed Bratke, giving chase. Bully Bratke seemed to have gone mad. That same day he ordered the Germans of Łęczyca to make soup, pea and potato, with sausage – his convicts were hungry! The Germans cooked and carried it, and Bratke dished it out to all. Later when we marched through German villages, we always got soup. Bratke even ordered it ahead

of time, by phone, so the Germans greeted us on arrival with full vats. For two days, Bratke did not shoot the weary, but requisitioned wagons to drive them. No one but the devil could guess what had gotten into the man!

In the Łęczyca schoolhouse, Bratke requisitioned a heated hall for us and shoved his S.S. men into a cold room. The S.S. stormed and swore, stripping off their wet clothes in there! Visitors to our comfy hall included the town mayor and his assistant, who greeted us kindly and asked if we needed anything. Could he help us in some way?! Next morning he politely saw us off, as if we had been his guests!

We no longer understood a thing. We felt each other out, exploring:

“What the devil! Have we suddenly become people again?” We sauntered through the town of Łęczyca, ignoring the S.S. and police. Whoever felt like strolling, strolled wherever he wanted. Our begging-specialists in the meantime got together with a group of local German gals. We barely had time to take a breath before these dames were dragging soup to us. The hall was full of them – it was like a Saturday night social. One is pouring her homemade soup, another ladles out her own – we don’t even know which one to take. These gals were all right, no question about it – it was just too bad that my legs were swollen and my temperature was a couple of degrees above normal. My friend Vytautas was up to near 40.5 C [104.9 F] but he swallowed his food like a boa constrictor.

Müller, the cursed chatterbox, turned into an obedient lamb.

We tell Müller to do this and to do that and Müller goes ahead and does what we ask, as if it were part of his official duties.

“Müller, don’t be a pain, get away or you’ll get punched in the nose!”

Müller chuckles, “Ha-ha-ha. Give me some pipe tobacco.”

And here we had him, and all the S.S.! Everyone of them had run out of tobacco – didn’t have so much as a pinch. We still had some. They were now in our hands!

We quit smoking and pooled all our tobacco to keep the S.S. at bay. No one permits the S.S. officials to stuff their own pipes; we measure out a pinch of tobacco on their palms, half a pipeful at a time at most. They bow low and thank us. Now we can curse them as we please – they’re still content. They’re afraid that next time they won’t get even half a pipeful.

Finally they led us to the goal of this whole journey – a small dilapidated RAD camp called Gęs, ‘goose’ in German, adjacent to the village of the same name. It wasn’t far from the sea – about twelve kilometers south of the fishing port of Leba.

The camp itself was small and shabby, nestled against a good-size hill and bordered on the other side by a huge impassable swamp. The barracks were seedy and squalid as rabbit hutches – or no, too mangy even for that.

At the beginning of this journey, there had been 1,600 men in our column; barely half remained. Some had scattered along the way, others were shot. But even with such dwindling numbers, it was still very hard to fit everyone in the Gęs barracks. The crush was fantastic!

Franz, the cossack leader of the true bandit faction, had already organized lodgings. He took over a whole end of a small barrack, posted sentries armed with clubs and refused entrance to anyone else. The rest of us could make do elsewhere!

And how are we inferior to Franz? Couldn’t we organize something for ourselves?

While still in Stutthof, several members of our group had managed to get their watches and gold pens back from Mayer,

claiming these things were necessary for them to do their work in camp. One of these watches now ended up in Bully Bratke's palm – and the mad Bully Bratke was again transformed into a suckling calf. He even located a little windblown shack at the very edge of camp, a toolshed, tiny and tattered. But it did have a stove.

“Here's your shelter,” Bratke told us. “It's separate. No one will rip you off. Go get some straw, and set it up however you want.”

To have a separate shelter, even one so raggedy, was still a very big deal!

We brought in straw. We stole half a bag of coal to heat the stove. Worktables and shelves we broke up for firewood. We lit the stove – it's so comfortable to bask in front of a fire, stretched out in the straw! The only drawback was that we had nothing to cook. Nothing at all. No one else had anything, either. They gave us nothing – we could live however we liked!

Another hundred of our cigarettes went into Bratke's pocket. He agreed to give us an attendant and to allow three of our men to go begging in the villages nearby. The beggars came back with some things, but not much. German farmers lived around there, and they were convinced that all convicts were murderers. Why should they give us food? There was no point even trying to talk with them. With the women, though, it was possible to win small favors with a show of gallantry, when the men weren't looking. But after three days, this source of food was cut off.

Franz also organized expeditions into the villages, but he behaved somewhat differently. He and his brother-in-law didn't beg, they simply grabbed what they needed, and even some things they didn't need. The German farmers began to yell to higher authorities in Lębork. The command came back: “Don't let

prisoners roam around – we won't have them pillaging and spreading disease.”

Put out of business as a bandit, Franz started organizing a commercial operation. His brother-in-law acted as his agent in the village. He invited us to invest with him in a deal to buy a cow and a bull for meat, and of course we did. But when the alleged beef was brought to camp, it always seemed to look more like an old bandy-legged nag than anything bovine. And where the nag's meat went to, only Franz and the devils knew, but from this whole business we got only the hooves. Not that hooves are such a bad thing in themselves, but they're not exactly edible...

May nine thunderbolts obliterate that blasted Franz! It's no good doing business with a bandit's bandit.

Another brigand full of initiative, and backed up by a gang, monopolized the camp's single well. If you want water, give something to the gang. You give, you get. You don't give, there's no water: he and his gang are “repairing” the pump. If you insist, they'll chase you with bludgeons.

But once again Bratke surprised us. Suddenly he started handing out food!

We got half a liter of soup a day: unsalted water with two tiny unpeeled potatoes bobbing, looking embarrassed. Nothing more. That's it. Pan's empty.

Eventually the authorities started bringing in bread, too, from Lębork. They passed out 250 to 300 grams of bread once a week. Sometimes even twice!

Bratke commenced buying dying nags from neighboring farmers. The nags were skinned and their hides tossed into the soup – enough for a tiny morsel each, just for seasoning, you might say. Horsemeat steaks and potatoes went to Franz and the other gangs

who occupied the kitchen. The rest of us got only the swill in which the potatoes were boiled, with a few scraps of horsemeat floating in it. The horses' muscle fibers were so elongated and deformed that they resembled the bristles on an old boar. We got this great treat once a day, cooked without a trace of salt – there was only enough salt for Franz and his gangs. With victuals like these, everyone's bowels went bad without exception; the whole camp was groaning. Starvation reached such a level that when Franz and his gangs tossed out the guts of a slaughtered nag, the convicts ripped and clawed each other in their haste to pounce on the pile and to swallow the whole mess raw, uncleaned – along with their foul contents! Epidemics spread in camp...

Vytautas's temperature hovers around 40 C [104 F]. Two more patients are just as sick. I, too, can scarcely move. My feet no longer listen to me – the devil only knows what happened to them. Actually they look okay – they're not overly swollen and they don't hurt – they just have this tendency to fall asleep, and then it feels like ants are crawling up them. It's nothing special, but when I stand up, they fold as if there were no bones inside. I'm not even up and I'm already falling – but hell, there's nothing to be done about it.

In our shed lived the column's doctor, a Pole from Gdansk named **Witkowski**, who had been in camp five years. He was a very dear, kind and gentle man. But he could barely manage to stay on his feet and he had no medical kit – he hadn't been allowed to take a thing from Stutthof.

He didn't say a word about our friends lying there sweating out high fevers. He shook his head and stayed quiet. They had something like typhoid fever. If Witkowski had reported this to the authorities, our friends would have been tossed in the "hospital", which more closely resembled a corpse warehouse. They

would have quickly died in there – in our shed, they stayed alive. And no one else got infected.

This doctor Witkowski was a good man; may he live in health himself!

Occasionally an S.S. member or two would drop by our shed to bum some tobacco or just bitch in a friendly way about sundry sore subjects. Sometimes one would bring a dash of salt – they themselves didn't have any more. Even Marholz would come to visit, affable as you please!

Meanwhile, Bully Bratke was becoming a philosopher. He'd bring news from the front, news that was very unfavorable for him. He told us that if the front got too close, he'd abandon the whole camp and race straight to the harbor of Leba, taking only us with him. There he'd stick a revolver under the nose of a fisherman and we'd all head straight to Sweden. But this wasn't happening yet so Bratke brought a German farmer from the town of Geş and allowed us to barter with him.

That farmer actually did fetch at least five centners [250 kilograms] of potatoes and several loaves of bread. But then he skinned us out of a couple of good watches, new shoes, and a motor with hoses for pumping water that we'd found in our shed. He took the loot and never showed his face again; he claimed that his wife wouldn't let him visit anymore. The snake swindled us as if we were pups. And you should have seen the quality of those watches! And the shoes, and that motor: you could keep it under your bed, hang it on a boat, stick it in a well – and it would keep humming! A mere five centners of potatoes for all that? That farmer was a devil, not a dealer.

Our S.S. Šešelga kept scurrying through the neighboring villages, looking for anything we could use. Whatever he managed to scrounge up, he brought to us. In his travels he met an

“Ansiedler”, a colonist from Lithuania who wore a brown Nazi uniform, considered himself a pure-bred German and refused to help the Lithuanians – out of principle. He felt starvation was what Lithuanians deserved!

The Poles of the region began arriving with carts full of produce for their relatives and countrymen. They brought good stuff, but we no longer had anything but a few potatoes.

Then at a small estate bordering the camp, Šešelga found a Lithuanian laborer from Kretinga. The laborer and his family had been forcibly removed from Lithuania. The man worked for the landowner as hostler and suffered greatly from his employer’s rapacity. Though in a very tough spot himself, this laborer came to our aid. He did as much as anyone to keep us alive.

The hostler began stealing food from the landowner’s horses. He pinched most of the flour intended for them and his wife baked bread for us, which Šešelga brought to us. There wasn’t much bread to go around – about forty men lived in our hut! – but we did all get a bite or two each day, for about four weeks! This really meant a lot. For the sick, Šešelga sometimes even delivered a stolen cookie, a sip of milk, an egg... Not much. But what else could we do!

LVIII

LATVIAN AFFAIRS

There was a sizable group of Latvian prisoners at Gęs, as well as some Latvian S.S. members. Several Latvians lived in our block, including a number of formerly prominent public figures.

Šešelga was the sole Lithuanian S.S., and he alone looked after us, running about with his tongue hanging out, tugging and toting back whatever he managed to find. There were several Latvian S.S. men, but they didn't lift a finger. Our Latvian friends at last could stand it no longer and castigated their S.S. compatriots:

“What do you think is going on here? Times are tough, we're starving to death. And what are you now? German serfs, or what?”

The Latvian S.S. response was to squeal on Šešelga for his exertions on our behalf. Bully Bratke forbade Šešelga to leave camp and assigned him to the guard house for several days. Now

we were really up against it – our only tie to the world had been cut. We had no outside support at all.

Because no natural barrier surrounded the greater part of the Gęs Camp, a hedge of S.S. guards stood there day and night; security was looser by day, tighter by night. At night the guards were cold and bored, so they invented various games.

One German S.S. who was hungry for homage got it into his head to stand in the foul outhouse at midnight. This establishment was in continuous use owing to the universal incidence of bowel disorders. As some cripple groped in the dark for a place to relieve himself, the S.S. crept up in the shadows and bashed him in the head.

“Raggedy trash! Remove your cap in front of me!” he roared. Those exiting this place, he ushered out the same way. How this poor S.S. labored all night! But at least it was a change of routine.

In time we all knew to watch out for this guard, but no one could see him in the dark. And in the stench, you couldn’t even smell a German S.S.!

One night when the Latvian S.S. formed the hedge around camp, the Latvians in our block negotiated with them to be released from camp for a night. The plan was to make a raid on the neighboring landowner’s potato field. The expedition was prepared with all the seriousness of a trek to the North Pole, but it was only partly successful. There was a frost and the ground was frozen. We didn’t have an ax to cut through the ice; anyway it would have been too noisy to chop. We had to tear at the ice with our bare hands. Not much ice could be scraped off with fingernails. And there were many alarms and interruptions – the German S.S. roamed about with their dogs and fired revolvers at random in the dark. Still, we came back with three bags of potatoes – a lot better than nothing. Long live Latvia!

The Latvian S.S. began bringing in more food for their countrymen – it turned out the S.S. were real Latvians after all. But that didn't help us much. All they would carry for us Lithuanians were letters.

About this time the sixth column of Stutthof convicts finally arrived, led by S.S. Tech Sergeant **Andrašek**. The prisoners called this Croation "Marshal" for his relentlessly warlike attitude. The name was apt. He marched about with a big stick, and he didn't use it for a crutch, either.

This Marshal was an intense democrat. Catching some hungry, petty thief in his column, he'd draw his whole crowd into formation.

"Look. I caught a thief," shouts Marshal. "What should I do with him?"

"Let him have it! Give him a licking!" yells back some bully from the ranks.

That's all Marshall needs. Marshal gets to work. He's clobbering with a club and lambasting with his boots. His work completed, Marshal shouts:

"Did I do it justly and well?"

"Wonderful! And that's the God's truth!" someone answers from the crowd.

But if anyone dared to say otherwise! Marshal's club is still sound – there's gunpowder in the old man's breech yet!

Marshal thrashed his convicts even more brutally than Bratke, but he did have more order in his column, as could readily be seen:

Marshal's column was comprised of Polish and Latvian prisoners. Arriving in Gęs, the Poles refused to live under one roof with the Latvians. They claimed that during the column's train ride from Stutthof to Gdansk, in that dreadful crush, the Latvians

butchered and smothered ninety Poles to death. The Latvians denied it – the Poles suffocated by themselves, they said, and as far as who butchered who, it was still a big question. Truth in such matters is hard to decipher. The authorities didn't even attempt an investigation. What did they care, anyway? Ninety corpses dumped from the wagon makes it easier on the wagon. And now they wouldn't need shooting...

But there was still the problem of the live Poles refusing to live with the Latvians. The Marshal dealt with it – he simply separated them. And he didn't let them fight too much. Occasionally, out of boredom, he brought them together for a skirmish, but he kept himself out of the fray and made sure neither side got stomped too badly. He was a just man, this Croatian Marshal!

The camp's Latvians became notorious for a very peculiar trait, rarely observed elsewhere. They were basically healthy men, well built and strong like farmers, but back in Stutthof, they, too, got sick sometimes. Their response in such cases was strange. A Latvian would get a touch of bronchitis or flu, something another person would just sneeze at – and he'd decide he was going to die from it. This was very different from the typical Russian response, for example. A Russian, even one sick with something as bad as typhus, would take any old pills and recover. He wouldn't care one way or another about the contents of the pill, so long as it was a pill – you could treat a sick Russian with zinc or pomade, the man was just as likely to get well. But the Latvians took their illnesses more seriously. A Latvian, having worked his influenza up to a fever of 38 C [100 4 F], would sigh deeply and declare:

“It's bad. Now I'm going to die. I'd say in about three days...”
And the snake would hold true to his word! When a Latvian said:

“It’s bad,” even if he was afflicted with some trivia, he’d still die even if you stuffed him with hundreds of pills. It was impossible to understand how they managed to comply with their set timetable – but they complied. If a Latvian told you he was dying, he wouldn’t deceive you. About such matters the Latvians didn’t kid around.

The same thing happened in our own shed in the Geş camp. Residing with us was a university professor from Riga, Konstantins Čakste, son of Latvia’s first president. He was a sturdy man, a real athlete, always good humored, well disposed and intelligent – all in all, a fine colleague.

Suddenly he gets ill. His temperature rises to 38.2 C [100.8 F].

“It’s bad,” says Konstantins. “Now I’m going to die.”

“Konstantins, don’t be ridiculous!”

“But I’m telling you the truth, I will die. In three days.”

Who’s going to believe him?! Konstantins is such a sensible man – and now he’s going to die over nothing? Shame on you, Konstantins.

“Look at my friend Vytautas,” I say. “For three weeks now he’s been lying with a temperature of 40.3 C [104.6 F] – and he’s not dying. He’s puffing away on his pipe and swearing more foully than when he was well...”

Konstantins won’t be convinced. He’s going to die – and that’s the end!

We’re amiably talking to him, and we’re starting to banter, and we’re appealing to his sound mind, yet he continues on his one track:

“I’m going to die. For real. In about three days...”

Towards evening, he’s begun to make good on his promise. From time to time he loses consciousness, comes to and passes out again. When he’s awake, he’s telling his friends his last will

and testament. And again he faints away. He eats nothing, understands no one. During the night he's hallucinating. The next day and the following night, he's in the throes of some strange convulsions. His face is twisted. His hands trace circles in the air. His feet pedal as if he were riding a bike. He doesn't regain consciousness...

And then what? Exactly three days after his promise, Konstantins died – of some strange, unknown, unintelligible disease.

To bury Konstantins, we bribed Bratke for several small privileges. We set up a wake in a drafty loft. We stood as honor guards. The Latvian S.S. entered and stood tensed. We dug a grave on a hill under birch trees, but we couldn't come up with a coffin; we had to settle for a swiped sheet of tar paper. Unbeknownst to Bratke, we also put in a bottle with a piece of paper inside, signed by all of us who had buried our dear Konstantins.

After the funeral, the authorities got concerned:

“And where are Konstantins' gold teeth? Don't tell me you devils buried him with gold teeth?”

Witnesses appeared who testified that Konstantins' teeth had been extracted by a Frenchman in charge of the corpses. The Frenchman, under interrogation, bellowed that he didn't steal any teeth, that others had yanked them out. In a further inquiry, those others yelled that they had plenty of their own teeth, that they'd neither seen nor heard anything about Konstantins' teeth...

Truth proving undiscoverable on this earth, it had to be sought down below. The authorities directed us to dig up Konstantins' corpse – to check his teeth...

When the front moved closer, Bratke and Marshal agreed that they'd move away further with the healthy prisoners and leave the several hundred sick ones behind in Gęs under the

protection of three Latvian S.S. men, with instructions to withdraw when the Red Army got within ten kilometers of camp. We, genuine invalids and fakers alike, acquiesced in this scheme, for we had a plan of our own – as soon as Bratke and Marshal marched out, all of us would take off on our own routes – wherever anyone wanted to go.

But Bratke's resolutions and our counter-resolutions were suddenly turned head over heels...

LIX

LAST GASPS

Our little enclave in the Geş camp is now as anguished as the nags waiting to be slaughtered for our soup.

And what good is such soup, anyway! It's only edible with eyes closed. Among the unpeeled potatoes waft some unidentifiable brown threads, woolen and wormy in texture. The kitchen assures us that these certainly aren't threads but what were once the muscles of a horse. Maybe they were muscles, who can say – it's just that they splay so hideously. The moment they touch the sides of the cup, they have a tendency to adhere, and when they do this the aluminum rusts at that spot. Our stomachs rust no worse than aluminum. After swallowing a few of these knotted threads, the bowels go wild, as if one had cholera...

A vat with this soup is brought out. It's so repulsive that merely looking at it makes the nostrils flare with disgust and sets

the stomach heaving. But we're all so terribly hungry! The devil take it – it doesn't matter! I'll manage to swallow it somehow.

But even this slop is meager in quantity, we get about half a liter once a day, nothing more. Folks are weakening. Folks are cursing. Folks are dying as if they'd been paid to do it, to relieve Bully Bratke from having to worry about them.

If we have to stay here any longer, it's clear we'll die off like flies in a threshing barn. No one will survive. Something has got to be done!

That's easy enough to say. But what can you do when you have no more strength!

There was no work to do at the little camp in Geş, except for tending to that cursed kitchen and heating the premises. We tore down all the uninhabited shacks. The corpses and those near death could spend a night or two in a draft – it was all the same to them. We ripped out all the inside partitions; we shredded the roofs and burned everything. The stronger ones went to the woods to chop firewood. That was all the work there was, but it was plenty; there weren't many men left strong enough to walk into the forest and pull on a saw. The others crawled around like cockroaches gone crazy. They dug in the manure pile looking for food. They stood in lines at the outhouse holding their bellies. They lay curled up – some under a roof, some on straw, some in the snow, as if they were sunbathing on a sand beach.

Twice weekly a wagon requisitioned from the farmers was sent to Leşbork to haul back food – the S.S. still wanted to eat. The rusty threads of an old hack's muscles didn't suit their stomachs.

To get our block representative close to that wagon was an exquisitely delicate diplomatic feat. Luckily for us, that cursed chatterbox Müller was sometimes assigned to drive it.

Lębork was a mess. The city was crammed full of men, women, children, some on foot, some in vehicles, laden with all sorts of treasures and trash. The German Army was almost nonexistent. A bowlegged old-timer hunched along; a truck loaded with invalids roared by; a rider leading several hungry horses trotted past. For a city near the front, the martial mood was notable for its absence.

Many refugees from East Prussia had arrived in the area. The S.S. had given all farmers orders to pack their belongings and head west. Those who didn't want to go, the S.S. shot on the spot. By the time East Prussian farmers entered Lębork, the Red Army had reached the Oder River; the road for movement further west was severed. Indeed, Pomeranian farmers had already started travelling east from the Oder. So with East Prussians moving west and Pomeranians east, two streams of exiles collided.

There was no place to put horses and no fodder available. The fugitives unharnessed their horses, led them to the city gates and swatted them, so much as to say: Goodbye and good luck, live and do what you can – there's nothing more I can do for you.

These homeless horses roamed in herds on the outskirts of Lębork. Bratke would catch a few and butcher them in camp, then send the authorities a bill claiming so much was paid for a gray nag, so much more for a dapple...

The brave soldiers of the Third Reich also captured these loose horses in the fields, tied them one to the other and rode into Lębork.

This cavalry had a melancholy appearance! But there was no other in sight, and no other army either. At every intersection, though, stood the brown garbed Nazi Party officials, adorned

with Party insignia, ready to grab any man, especially war refugees and fugitives, and press him into service. Some uniformed German functionary, a railroader or a mailman strolls by and the brown clad men grab him by the neck and drag him off to join the famous Volkssturm. When they'd gotten a group together, each man was given a rifle and driven to the front. This mobilization was conducted with such precision that it seemed to have been planned beforehand – a long time ago...

Arriving in Lębork to get food for the S.S., Müller, cursed chatterbox, greets the first wench he sees and pokes her with a finger:

“I’m from the Gęs Camp. This guy travelling with me is a convict from Stutthof, but he’s a good man. He doesn’t steal or slaughter people... By the way, aunty, would you know by chance where they give out food to the S.S.?”

The aunty shrugs her shoulders. Naturally, she knows nothing.

Running into a second biddy, then a third, Müller keeps singing the same old song.

During the time it takes to get through the city with such a fool, you could go completely berserk. Our block’s representative, the one who didn’t steal or slaughter people, lost his patience and jumped out of the wagon– just went his own way, without saying anything to Müller. But no sooner had he turned the corner than a brown garbed official with a Party emblem nabbed him with a strong hand on his neck:

“What’s your hurry, sweetheart? I wonder what your documents look like!”

“I don’t have any documents,” answers our man.

“Oh, so that’s how it stands. No documents, sweetheart? Perhaps you won’t mind a stroll with me to the police station?”

“I’m not going anywhere. I don’t have time.”

“Oh, you don’t say! He’s walking around with no documents but he doesn’t have time to stop at the police station! You’re an interesting specimen, you know that? I’ve never come across anyone quite like you...”

“I don’t have time to talk to you... Can’t you see I’m not a German?”

“I see. He’s not a German in wartime, he has no papers, he’s pressed for time... What kind of bird are you? What’s going on in your mind, man?”

“I’m a convict. From Stutthof...”

“What? What did you say? I didn’t get that. Repeat it one more time...”

“I came here with Müller. He’s over there, around the corner. He stayed behind, on the other street. You see him? Of course, you can’t see through that building, but he’s really there, right now, chatting with a crone...”

“Ah... ah... so that’s it... You’re a convict... from Stutthof... I’m sorry to bother you... Very sorry...”

The official raises his arm in the Hitlerian manner, clicks his heels together – and bids farewell to our block representative. Thunder only knows what made him act this way. It was rather strange: uniformed German officials were being nabbed, while here a foreign convict, without any documents, is merely detained – and even receives an apology! Who ever heard of such a thing?!

Our representative was truly a diplomatic virtuoso. With no documents and no money, not even a pfennig, and no previous acquaintances in the city, he yet managed to organize a considerable amount of food in Lębork. It’s true that en route, Müller, the cursed chatterbox, took half of this food away, but there was still some left for us: bread, and margarine, and cheese, and

sugar, and salt and other good things... He was one hell of a diplomat, no?

But then Bratke got a sudden command from Mayer: send two bookkeepers and a warehouse tradesman to Łęborg; the men sent were our most eloquent masters of the beggar's art, our top organizers. Despondent, we saw them off. Without them, we were sure we'd be goners.

"Hush, brothers, don't cry," they tell us. "We won't forget you!"

And they didn't! May they always go in good health!

The city of Łęborg was heaving its last gasps. Everyone wanted to flee the city, to get away from the approaching front, but no one knew where to go. The economy went haywire; earthly treasures lost their value; no one knew if they'd be around to enjoy them tomorrow.

Mayer had settled in Łęborg; Commandant Hoppe and Chemnitz were still in Stutthof, where the camp had filled up again. The S.S. was bringing its most prized possessions there: prisoners from Magdeburg, Torun, Bydgoszcz, Königsberg and other jails. Once again Stutthof had more than 12,000 prisoners. In Łęborg, Mayer had only a couple of S.S. tech sergeants, a few S.S. soldiers and several hundred prisoners. His wealth in laborers wasn't great, but he was sitting on top of all of Stutthof's evacuated wealth – stuff belonging to prisoners, the S.S. and higher authorities. Most importantly, he also had food larders.

The prisoners working in Mayer's establishment were entirely independent. They disposed of the riches as they pleased, like pigs in a tub of bagel dough. Chemnitz came to Łęborg once in search of his evacuated goods. He located his chest without difficulty. It was wonderfully made, elegant, with all sorts of artistic detail. Julius Schwartzbart himself had built it, with innumerable secret compartments.

Chemnitz opens the chest, pulls the lid back, smiles crookedly and throws it in a corner.

"Scheisse!" snorts Chemnitz, then snorts no more.

The sad truth is that the chest was now worthless, crammed full of rags and brickbats, with not even a whiff of treasure. Not one item of value remained. The thieves hadn't overlooked a thing...

Who stole it all? Nobody. It vanished – and that's the end. Chemnitz didn't even look for a culprit. He knew perfectly well that he wouldn't find one. The job had been masterfully done.

It was the same story with everything else – including the food supplies.

Our men in Łębork lived marvelously well. They had plenty of liquor, snacks and smokes. They outfitted themselves with suits of English cloth. They organized a wonderful radio – they could listen to any station they wished. They weren't controlled by anyone.

And they began to supply us, too – but transportation, naturally, was difficult to arrange. A tremendous number of bribes had to be passed out to the insatiable S.S. It was lucky that material for these bribes could be so easily obtained in the government warehouses; at least half of the valuables sent to us were stolen by other S.S. who didn't get bribes. Even so, remnants reached us. So much made it through that I, who had spent the past four weeks unable to stand, rolling on the straw beside the stove, could now easily cross the yard under my own power. I even managed half hour walks!

During this time, tension in camp continued to mount.

We heard frequent explosions in the distance. Airplanes swooped past camp, not high up but just overhead. Impressive illuminations accompanied by emphatic detonations erupted at

night over Gdynia, sixty kilometers away. It seemed that not only our meager barracks trembled, but the very earth itself.

One morning, a German officer rides into camp – on horseback. The most crippled of our cripples are ordered forthwith to climb a hill and dig trenches. They dig the trenches on the rim of the hill that overlooks our barracks.

Evidently the Germans are preparing for battle.

And what the hell! If they fight here, not even splinters will be left of our barracks. Who will gather up our bones? This really is not a good situation...

Cannon blasts sound closer and closer. By the sound of it, they're not far at all: there, just beyond the forest, you can hear them blasting away...

Bully Bratke has turned into a mad wolf. Round the clock he's sending one messenger after another to Leżbork – the telephone is already out of order – asking for instructions and permission to evacuate from Geś... but they all return empty-handed. Mayer is unavailable, and no one else knows anything. Blood-shot Bratke no longer speaks, but growls furiously and bares wolfish teeth.

At dinnertime on March 10, the neighboring town begins to burn. It's on a hill only five or six kilometers away, easily visible across the open swamp.

It's burning and crackling – crackling and burning! Flames break out first here, then there. Then from across the marsh we see large black blobs rolling down the road.

They roar and belch and foul the air with smoke...

Tanks, tanks! By the devil, they're tanks!

LX

THE GRIM NIGHT

With the tanks blasting away just four kilometers from camp, Bratke shrieked like a locomotive whistle, bellowed, blustered, and at last began to chug.

“Whoever’s alive, close ranks! Right now! Dead and near-dead, you can stay here. Everybody else march! Get going!”

Those who could stand, stood. It all happened so suddenly that it was impossible to make a considered decision about which group to cast one’s lot with, the living or the dead. The trenches dug into the rim of the hill made the decision even harder. Were they planning to fight there, or just leave the ditches for the rats to take a bath in? If a skirmish was on the agenda, the camp would obviously be blown to smithereens – and there wasn’t so much as a tree trunk for cover. There was another point to consider – what might Bratke do to the sick before leaving? Not

many with a choice were willing to gamble. Whoever could manage to stand, closed ranks.

In the rush, though, Bratke forgot to count the number of cripples left behind with the corpses and how many live ones he was taking with him. Once a man stood, Bratke insisted he stay in formation. Bratke harnessed a nag to a wagon for himself, a nag caught in the fields; it had been intended to stew in our soup, but now it had to tow a wagon piled high with the belongings of Bratke and other distinguished S.S. personnel.

Bratke gave orders that if and when he dropped flat on the snow, we were all to do the same. On that note, we stumbled out of camp.

A narrow, winding path rose between hills. We no longer saw the belching tanks and they could no longer see us.

At the crest of the hill, we wavered into the village of Geş. There we encountered a large, blubbery, purebred ram with half its wool sheared off and half intact, poised with comic dignity in the middle of the road – for all the world like some S.S. notable reviewing the troops.

“Baaa!” cried the ram after inspecting our column; then it skedaddled through the fence.

Further on, entire flocks of sheep crept like ghosts without a resting place. They bleated and wagged their tails, looking very confused. Hens clambered on the fences, no longer obeying the rooster. Very somber and worried pigs waddled from one cottage to the next, snuffing and snorting like spies. One jostled another’s loins, causing the latter to squeal and waddle rapidly onward. In the yards and on the roads along the fences, cows posed in contemplation. There was such a melancholy longing in their eyes, it was heartbreaking even to glance at them.

There's livestock aplenty all around – but not a single human in sight. If only some hundred year old granny would appear, the heart might relax a bit; it's well known that woman is the best medicine for all heart ailments and somber thoughts... But not even a bedraggled biddy can be seen. Don't tell me that they, too, have all been drafted into the Volkssturm? I see! So this is the root of the ineffable melancholy emanating from the cows! Their udders are full to bursting, and no one left to milk them...

We waded through the sodden sod fields into a forest where we found the path; we swayed on over hills and down grassy slopes. Beyond this forest is a field; beyond that field is another forest; after that, what's this, another field...

We headed towards the town of Lęczyca, where five weeks ago we'd spent the night and chatted so comfortably with German girls. From there it's ten kilometers to Lębork.

The tanks were left far back somewhere, behind the hills and forests, perhaps rolling off in some other direction. Their echoes had long since ceased.

Now it's quiet all around, as calm as if the war had never been. Occasionally we come upon corpses of executed convicts, and S.S. goading gangs of decrepit prisoners; where they came from, where they're going, no one has any idea. The S.S. are herding them, and that's it. Maybe these brave soldiers of the Reich were using the convicts as camouflage to cover their own flight and keep themselves safe from the clutches of the Volkssturm, until they could make good their own getaway into the woods or down in some cellar.

And as we march along, Marholz is with us. This expert marksman nonpareil has already done away with three hundred prisoners or so, all by himself. Now he's jolly, he's pulling cute pranks.

In a field, he captured a misanthropic looking nag, dapple gray, clambered up and rode along, minus reins or harness. The nag was a born fatalist, apparently – it didn't care one way or another.

Marholz urges it on, lashes its sides with a switch, chums at its flanks with both feet... And the nag pays no attention. It slogs along with head hung down, not altering its gait a jot.

"Now, how am I worse than Napoleon!" crows Marholz.

"Oh! You're the real Führer!"

"Heil, Hitler!" yells some cutthroat.

The whole column chuckles.

"Marshal of the mounted S.S. guards!" someone mocks. The crowd reels onward.

Following Marholz's example, the more resourceful prisoners began nabbing nags. Now even the paragon of bandits, Franz, and his pupils in crime are riding; the block chief, a former runaway, is riding; the kitchen capo of Gęs, the notorious pickpocket Szymzak is riding too...

Bratke alone, walking with revolver in hand, is gloomy as a storm cloud. Just yesterday he'd stopped in at our block, asked for tobacco and complained to us with touching sorrow that he knew nothing about the fate of his family. He complained about this to us, who due to the kindness of the S.S. had for months or even years heard nothing of our families. For two years we'd danced to the hellish tune of the S.S.– but this had never occurred to Bratke. He was thoroughly convinced we had no feelings whatsoever...

At dusk we dropped in on one village, then another. Here there were plenty of people left. One is hurriedly slaughtering a pig, another is shearing sheep, still another is repairing a wagon. Everyone is sullen and scowling – uncooperative in the extreme.

Army wagons stand in the street, conerroof, with horses unharnessed. Soldiers loiter in bunches, sucking on their cigarettes. They look over our column, shake their heads, say nothing. Occasionally someone darts from our column into a group of soldiers, shouting:

“Help me! Don’t betray me!”

The soldiers surround the runaway in a circle. With cleated shoes, they repulse the S.S. who’s come to retrieve the runaway. They aren’t going to turn him in.

Our valiant cavalry ended its triumphant trip in a rather inglorious fashion. Having lost all conception of discipline, the nags lay down in puddles one by one, with their riders still astride. The riders swore and kicked at their nags, wiped mud from their clothes and resentfully resumed pedestrian status.

Like the nags my heart began to go on strike. What could I expect? I’d spent four weeks rolling on straw, half paralyzed, and now I’d suddenly leapt up and embarked on a forced march.

In fact the heart was just one part of the problem. You can always walk with your eyes closed, automatically, like the nags who drift in the fields. Worse was that my legs began to hurt, in both the soles and the joints. At first it was tolerable, but by dusk the joints stung so badly that it was torture touching a foot to the earth.

The journey was even more difficult at night. We climbed a hill, entered a forest and again found ourselves floundering in snowdrifts.

Now the roads are full of people: on foot, in vehicles, in various wagons. They’re going in all directions – no one knows who’s running where or from whom they’re running. War machines are crashing and rumbling past in all directions. Trucks. Machine guns. Cannons. Tanks. If only they’d all go in one direction! Now

they're careening every which way – it makes it very difficult to walk. On the flounder, from snowbank to snowbank...

My legs, my poor legs! I raise one foot off the ground and I just don't want to put it back down! As soon as I put weight on it, the leg feels as if all the bones were cracking.

In the sky over Gdynia, all hell breaks loose. Airplanes whine and boom as they swoop. Falling bombs squeal and smash the earth so hard that the snow-covered path trembles. Red spheres flash on the horizon. An explosion's echo drums deafeningly. Antiaircraft guns buzz and belch; hundreds of soap fragments spurt flaming across the sky, shrouded with a flimsy veil of smoke. This hellish mix of color and racket congeals into a kind of hideous red jam, screeching, howling, heaving horribly – some madman seems to be daubing the stuff all over the cracked City Celestial. A small star occasionally flickers through the mess, peeking like a minnow with its head out of water, then slips back behind diaphanous clouds.

Several kilometers before *Lęczycza*, the road is clogged. I tumble into a ditch and prepare to bed down in a snowbank. Before my eyes float red and green circles; the earth is climbing on top of the sky; someone is stuffing the heavenly jam into a coffee cup with a ladle that's larger than my head. Cold sweat pours from my forehead down my cheeks and mouth and chin, disappearing somewhere in the crevices of my coat. Snow – so soft...

Only a fool would keep walking on a night like this. What the hell, it's all one to me...

"Professor, have you gone mad? Why are you lying down?" My friends grab me by the scruff and lug me from the ditch. "They'll shoot you there!"

"Leave me alone," I mutter. "So they shoot me – so big deal... I'm okay right here..."

“Don’t be crazy! Get a hold of yourself! Look, Łęczyca is right around the corner! We’ll get shelter there!” My friends scold me and try to stand me on my feet.

I don’t want to stand. Why should I? The earth itself is drawing me down. My friends are holding me up, trying to prop me with sticks. And they themselves are exhausted eternally. They’re cursing me the best they know how – but they won’t let me go.

They dig into my armpits, lean my head on their shoulders and drag me along. My legs barely move – they slide like a sled. Fortunately we’re on a downward slope several kilometers long, heading right for the center of Łęczyca. My friends haul me in turns, but I no longer communicate with them. I’m in a world of my own creation. Somebody has glued my eyes shut with that celestial jam. A demonic red mist surrounds me – I can no longer see my friends. White cherries are blossoming in this mist. Real ones, not the decorative kind. What in hell are they doing on the snow? They’re blooming, they’re swaying. White petals are falling, tinged rosy-blue at the edges. Chunks of red jam cling to the branches of the cherry trees – the same type of jam that was spread on bread in the camp blocks. The jam is dripping to earth from the branches...

“Wake up, by thunder! We’re in Łęczyca!” a friend scolds me.

“Ah-what? Is that so?” I must have been asleep while sliding down the hill with my head lolling on a friend’s shoulder!

My friends stuff my throat full of snow and I feel better. I’m no longer dizzy, my heart has stopped pounding – but my legs, these cursed legs! They’re burning like fire. I can’t touch the ground...

We can’t find lodgings in Łęczyca. The whole place is suffused with people. It’s late now, nearly midnight. We have to go

a couple more kilometers to a village en route to Lębork – there for sure we'll get a place to sleep...

We have to keep on walking – there's no choice. I no longer feel the urge to lie in the snow. I'm attempting to stand upright. I'm trying to stride – but it's hard to do this. I topple to the side like a sheaf of oats. I'm no longer dreaming; I'm fully conscious; but I can't do anything about my legs. The most I can do – and I keep on doing it – is swallow snow. My friends take turns pulling me...

Entering the village of Godentow, we run into a group of convict Jewesses from Stutthof, about two or three hundred of them. They had been working in Lębork. Towards evening, the authorities called them in and declared:

“You're no longer needed in Lębork. Go where you want...”

They weren't given documents or any food – they were simply kicked out of camp. So now they were travelling in a pack, without any guards, looking for a place to stay in Lęczycza where we had just been turned away...

Our Bully Bratke realized that there was no reason left for us to go to Lębork – if the Jewesses had been chased out, the authorities must be in very poor shape indeed.

LXI

FREEDOM ALONG THE FENCE

Bratke, dazed and drooping, herds the whole column into the courtyard of what had once been a count's estate in Godentow. He lines us up along the fence in the courtyard outside the mansion. But Bratke hasn't found us shelter. The whole mansion, the granaries, the barns are all occupied by German refugees, S.S. and Volkssturm members.

Actually Bratke isn't trying too hard. The Jewesses, arriving on their own, without benefit of Bratkes, have crawled onto the straw of a threshing floor and made themselves at home. There's plenty of room next to them, but Bratke leaves us in the courtyard to sleep on the snow.

It's absurd to think about any kind of meal. There isn't even any good snow to suck on. The top layer is trampled and dirty; deeper the snow is muddy from the soil. With tremendous effort you scrape together a chunk you can swallow...

The Jewesses are already free. They lie on the straw of the threshing floor with no sentry watching over them, snoring as they please. We're on the snow, guarded by dogs and S.S.

We're still better off than the S.S., though. We can stretch out on the snow while they have to stomp around with their guns, knives and dogs...

After midnight, snow starts falling. It's very pleasant: now we have something covering us. A blanket of snow is nothing to sneer at: rye seedlings won't freeze beneath one.

But the devil takes a hand in the business; after a couple of hours the snow turns to rain. At first it's relatively gentle, falling, but soon it's completely out of hand, pouring down like mad, floods of rain.

Around five, Bratke wakes us. From ten paces he stinks of moonshine; apparently the poor guy never even closed his eyes...

The remnants of our column stir, shaking like dogs dunked in a pool, wringing water from their clothes, schlepping to and fro in their clogs.

I can't get up. During the night, my legs succumbed to the cold and rain. I'm lying along the fence, and that's it. What's left for me to do?

Bratke hitches up his nag to the wagon and draws the column of convicts into formation for yet another trek in an unknown direction, for some unknown reason. The idea of remaining prone along the fence puts me in a rather grisly mood.

Bratke could shoot me on his way out – he's done as much many times before – and now he's drunk as he drags himself around, and he's got his revolver in hand. In any case the courtyard of the count's estate is right at the intersection of two major roads – a battle here appears inevitable. In such a case, I'd be smeared into little bits of sausage all along the fence.

Through various intermediaries, I implore Bully Bratke to take me into his wagon and drive me a couple of kilometers away from here – then he could throw me out in any village we come to... But Bratke is intractable, he doesn't want to hear about it. He stalks around with revolver in hand, snarling and growling.

And it's lucky for me he didn't take me in his wagon; that last day he shot every one of the listless and laggard without hesitation. Naturally he would have bumped me off, too.

Lying there beside the fence, one question preoccupied me. Would Bratke do me in where I lay? He wouldn't just leave a live convict behind! But he paid no attention to me, apparently convinced I would croak anyway. My friends were clearly of the same mind, avoiding even a glance in my direction so I wouldn't start asking them favors. In any case, they couldn't help me at this point. They themselves were weary, shaky, starved – the question of their own survival was very obscure. One, then another, nodded to me from a distance. The nods meant, "Goodbye – until we meet again..." They didn't actually add: "...in the bosom of Abraham," but this was obviously what they thought. Only one, my dear friend Jonas, ran up to me, hugged me, kissed me...

"When you get to Abraham, maybe you could put in a good word for me? Even if I'm a Prot, I wasn't such a bad guy after all..."

"Oh! My dear friend – if I had a soul like yours, I, too, would agree to be a Prot..."

Šešelga brought me a messtin of water he'd drawn from the well – he performed the last rites, so to say. He had nothing left to give, but I no longer needed anything. I had dirty snow, and he brought me water!

So now the column marches away, swaying between the lines of S.S., escorted by the dogs.

Time passes. I've been left behind. Lying by the fence in the muddy snow – it's not the greatest feeling, somehow. I'm soaking wet. I can't walk, or even rise. I'm an alien to everyone, now – useless to one and all. I'm in a strange place, which might at any moment become a battlefield. And there's not even a remote chance of getting aid... Maybe I really will have to talk to Abraham soon about this question of the Prots...

But look at this! At the other end of the fence I see my old and dear acquaintance **Paul Nielsen**, the Dane – and he sees me, and he's crawling this way.

Once he'd been a celebrated statesman in the Danish Communist Party. He'd been in Stutthof for a year and a half. During a recent night march, a truck had run over his foot – now he, too, could no longer arise. Bratke had left him alive along the fence, as he'd left me.

A young Latvian lad creeps near, too. He'd been in Stutthof a year; he spoke only Latvian, and even that language he used sparingly. Now he had pleurisy with a high fever and could no longer walk. He'd hidden under a fir tree, evading Bratke's gaze.

After him old potbellied Grünwald approaches. A German who'd once been a Social Democrat, he'd stuck to selling tobacco under the Nazis; after the attempt on Hitler's life, he'd landed in camp for no particular reason. Lots of other politically dubious Germans were sent to camps about this time.

Look at this! Now we are four – and misery does love company.

Grünwald is the strongest among us; he'd simply grown too lazy to go further and decided to stay and await further developments.

From some shelter emerges a band of Volkssturm, about thirty gnarled oldsters with rifles on their shoulders. They're a sorry

sight – they can barely lift their guns. It would be interesting to see what happened if they were ever compelled to fire the things.

These senior citizens stagger through the yard; runaways clamber out to hitch their wagons. One or two military officers turn up. A few flocks of S.S. are milling about.

How to flee this damnable courtyard! If we can just drag ourselves a few kilometers away...

Now a block chief, a runaway, comes in sight; he's slipped away from Bratke's column. Riding one horse and leading another, he's searching for a wagon to steal. He promises to drive us, but naturally doesn't – he's vanished like a frog in a pond. The German fugitives also refuse to take us – we might slaughter them...

The courtyard is emptying fast. One wagon after another departs. Lodgers pour out of the count's mansion; the countess herself drives off, taking her ancient, paralyzed granny. The mansion is now nearly deserted.

A French prisoner of war turns up. He had worked at the estate himself. He tells us the mansion's empty, now, and notes that we'd be better off inside than lying in the mud; and since we can't walk, he carries us indoors, gently lays us on the straw – the place is full of straw others slept on – and he leaves to find a horse and wagon to carry him all the way home to France.

Now the courtyard is barren except for a few loitering German gendarmes. We are not out of danger, it seems – they are searching the premises, chasing out anyone still lingering about. One of their prime functions is to finish off people like us. Where are we going to hide from these devils?

We send Grünwald, the German, to deal with them.

And Grünwald pulls the wool over their eyes. He bleats sincerely that though we've lagged behind our column because of

illness, we desperately desire to catch up with them again. Would the gendarmes be so kind as to provide us with transport, that we might rejoin our beloved column and become once more respectable convicts?

The gendarmes appreciate this earnest plea. They approach one wagonload of refugees after another, requesting that they drive us toward our column. No one complies, however. At last the gendarmes tell Grünwald to buzz off – they no longer have time for such trivia. Grünwald can get his own wagon, if he wants one.

And so Grünwald haggles and wrangles, swearing up and down that he yearns only to remain obedient to the authorities and behave like a decent convict! But the fugitives are unmoved by such protestations. They don't know themselves where to go; they don't know where Bratke and his column have gone. Grünwald knows even less about the column's route: it should be towards the sea, more or less, or towards Gdynia, or Gdansk – who knows! So the bartering gets us nowhere.

We dispatch Grünwald to approach the gendarmes one more time; we don't want to lose sight of them. Grünwald returns very apprehensive. The gendarmes have said they've just received orders to leave within twenty minutes.

We have to survive those twenty minutes – and we'll be saved! Where can we disappear for twenty minutes?!

But the gendarmes prove very zealous in carrying out their orders. They don't wait even twenty minutes – they evaporate immediately.

“We're free!” yells Grünwald jumping up and down, belly sloshing from side to side.

Supporting ourselves on broomsticks, we manage to hobble to a small room near the kitchen. It's lined with straw from the

previous night. There's one fair sized window and walls of stone, rather thick. What will be, will be – but it looks a little safer here.

Shots crackle at the crossroads nearby. Something topples. Something howls. Something explodes with a big bang, rattling the windowpanes.

It's quiet again, as though nothing could happen. Suddenly, there's a strange humming and rumbling in the air.

“Look!” yells Grünwald, grabbing his belly. “They're coming!”

We lie on the straw, staring out the window. Yes, they're coming!

Red Army tanks are coming. And coming. Look how many of them!

In a few minutes they're roaring into our courtyard...

EPILOGUE

Following the 1943 defeat of the German Army in Stalingrad, the Germans, who had already occupied Lithuania, tried to draft Lithuanian youth into Germany's S.S. Lithuanians objected, noting that only the legal government of an independent state has the right to mobilize its citizens. The Germans responded with drastic measures, including the abduction of forty-six prominent Lithuanians as hostages. Among these hostages was Balys Sruoga.

According to authenticated German documents, the hostages were accused by the Germans of "...heading the Lithuanian resistance movement, and specifically, instigating against the Reich's Commissar's declaration of mobilization of the Lithuanian nation..." The hostages were placed under the direct command of Heinrich Himmler, and officially labeled Ehrenehdfislinge – "honorary prisoners".

*An account of the subsequent fates of these Lithuanian hostages makes an appropriate epilogue to **Forest of the Gods**, if merely as a tribute to their stoic endurance. Some of the people included in the following pages do not appear individually in Sruoga's memoir.*

*He chose to use only the real names of individuals he believed were deceased at the time of writing. The one exception was Čiuberkis, who Sruoga believed was dead but was in fact alive until 1994. All of these men shared the travails of the Lithuanian prisoners immortalized in *Forest of the Gods*. The dates and fates of these individuals are current to the spring of 2005.*

Bauba, Kazys (1908–1943), killed in Stutthof. Teacher, journalist, specialist in classical languages, high school principal.

Blažys, Vincas (1895–1978), died in Sweden. Colonel in the Lithuanian Army.

Brėdikis, Juozas (1885–1950), died in Lithuania. Certified pharmacist.

Budrys, Ignas (1885–1943), died of typhus in Stutthof. Agronomist and journalist.

Buragas, Petras (1899–1986), arrested by the Russians in Puck, Poland. Having returned from Siberia, he lived and died in Lithuania. Captain in the Lithuanian Army.

Butkus, Vladas (1908–1989), died in Slupsk, Poland. Worked in a bank. Teacher and economist.

Čiuberkis, Jonas (1914–1994), died in Cleveland, Ohio. Journalist.

Darginavičius, Adolfas (1886–1973 or 1974), having returned from Siberia, he lived and died in Lithuania. Engineer.

Darginavičius, Vladas (1910–1982), having returned from Siberia, he lived and died in Lithuania. University student, son of Adolfas.

Germantas [Meškauskas], Pranas (1903–1945), died after the evacuation of Stutthof. Sociologist and journalist. PhD. Leipzig University. During the German occupation in 1944, he was appointed general councillor of education, but was arrested for opposing Nazism and sent to Stutthof.

Grigas, Bronius (1902–1943), died of dysentery in Stutthof. Major in the Lithuanian Army. During the German occupation he was deputy mayor of Vilnius but was arrested for opposing Nazism.

Januševičius, Antanas (1898–1943), died of typhus in Stutthof. Teacher, mathematician, historian and high school principal.

Jurgutis, Vladas (1885–1966), died in Lithuania. Ex-Catholic priest, economist, financial expert. Graduate of the St. Petersburg Theological Academy. Studied economics at the University of Munich and elsewhere in Western Europe. He was a member of the Lithuanian Constituent Assembly, in 1920 the first governor of the Bank of Lithuania, in 1922 appointed Lithuania's minister of finance and foreign affairs, in 1941 Germany's councillor for economics, professor at the universities of Kaunas and Vilnius. While in Stutthof, organized a secret group called "Academia", where he lectured to his friends of misfortune on various academic subjects.

Kantvilas, Aleksandras (1920–1997), lived and died in Tasmania. Drew a series of scenes depicting Stutthof, published in the U. S. by Lithuanian immigrants. Participated in B. Sruoga's secret literary group "Aitvarai".

Kalinauskas, Jonas (1905–1973), died in Poland. Economist.

Kerpė, Petras (1890–1943), died in Stutthof. Lawyer. Graduated from the University of Moscow. Former vice-minister of Lithuanian internal affairs.

Kiškis, Petras (1900–1973 or 1974), returned to Vilnius, Lithuania, and died there. Economist and lawyer.

Kriauciūnas, Mečys (1914–1970), died in Lithuania. Lawyer. In 1965 and 1967 he carried out radio broadcasts about Stutthof and B. Sruoga. His recorded memoirs still exist.

Kučinskas [Kučas], Antanas (1900–1988), died in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Historian, teacher, high school principal. PhD. University of Kaunas. Post graduate work in Grenoble, France and elsewhere. Aside from other historical works, he wrote his memoir: about Stutthof, *Behind the Barbed Wires*, in 1950. Scranton University professor emeritus.

Kuprėnas, Kazys (1915–1988), lived in Canada where he worked in diplomatic relations. Died in the U.S.

Lipniūnas, Alfonsas (1905–1945), died in Puck, Poland. Catholic priest and sociologist. Studied in the Kaunas Theological Seminary and in France, University of Lille. An influential defender of Catholicism during the Russian and German occupations, famous for his patriotic sermons.

Liudzius, Antanas (1905–1983), lived in Toronto, Canada. Lawyer. Notary public for the city of Toronto and the province of Ontario.

Mackevičius, Mečislovas (1906–2004), lived in New Mexico. Lawyer. Studied in Kaunas and Paris. Incarcerated by the Russians in 1940 and appointed minister of justice by the Lithuanian provisional government. During the German occupational government's regime, he served as councillor of justice and taught at the University of Vilnius. Arrested for opposing Nazism. Member of VLIK'as – Supreme Lithuanian Committee of Liberation – in Germany.

Mackonis, Rapolas (1900–January 1982), returned to Lithuania. Journalist. In spring of 1945 he was released from Stutthof, then arrested and imprisoned by the Russians until 1956.

Mačiokas, Mykolas (1899–1950), died in Riga, Latvia. Member of "Aitvarai" literary group. Colonel in the Lithuanian Army. Studied in the Military Academy of Italy. Died in Riga, Latvia.

Malinauskas, Jonas (1908), fate unknown. Lived and worked in Poland. Teacher.

Masaitis, Zigmās (1903–1943), killed in Stutthof. Graduated University of Kaunas, science and mathematics. High school principal.

Masiulis, Petras (1894–1957), returned to Lithuania after Stutthof, was arrested by the Russians and sent to Siberia for 15 years. Returned to Lithuania, where he died. Colonel in the Lithuanian Army.

Meilus, Vytautas (1913), fate unknown. Lived in Toronto, Canada, where he worked in diplomatic relations. Economist. Member of the "Aitvarai" literary group.

Narakas, Juozas (1899–1989), lived and died in Sweden. Aviator and colonel in the Lithuanian Army. Studied in Prague's Military Academy. In 1941, appointed councillor for internal affairs but was arrested for opposing Nazism.

Noreika, Jonas (1910–1947), died in Lithuania, shot by the Russians in Vilnius for organizing partisan groups. Officer in the Lithuanian Army, writer and poet.

Pečeliūnas, Mykolas (1908), lives in Poland. Economist.

Puodžius, Stasys (1896–1943), killed in Stutthof. Major in the Lithuanian Army. Arrested by the bolsheviks in 1919 for participating in the fight for independence. 1940–1943 actively joined forces in the resistance movement.

Puskunigis, Leonas (1910–1994), died in Lithuania. After Stutthof, he was arrested by the Russians and incarcerated in the Torun Screening Camp. Physical education teacher. Returned to Lithuania, he wrote his unpublished memoirs about Stutthof and about B. Sruoga. He presented them in 1965 and 1967 in radio broadcasts.

Rakūnas, Kazys (1900–?), fate unknown. Lived in Poland. Active in the resistance movement. Farmer.

Rimašauskas, Jonas (1920–1972), died in Chicago, Illinois. Once in freedom, he collected material on Lithuanian martyrology but didn't manage to save all of it. Studied at the University of Bonn, Germany. Member of the "Aitvarai" literary group.

Sruoga, Balys (1896–1947), died in Lithuania. Poet, writer, dramatist, critic, theoretician in literature and drama, as well as professor at the universities of Kaunas and Vilnius. Began his higher education in St. Petersburg, continued in Moscow and received his PhD at the University of Munich. Author of 15 drama's, poetry collections, scholarly works and *Forest of the Gods*. In Stutthof, he organized a clandestine workshop called "Aitvarai" to promote the writing of poetry and prose under his tutelage and to teach literature. (In Lithuanian folklore, "Aitvarai" are household spirits or goblins who brings their masters luck and riches.) Barely alive following the evacuation of Stutthof, he was arrested by the Russians, interrogated and tortured in the Torun Screening Camp. Only through tremendous efforts by Lithuania's writers was he returned to Lithuania where, utilizing his notes saved from Stutthof Camp, he wrote *Forest of the Gods* in several months. Unfortunately, the censors would not permit publication because it did not conform to the demands of socialist realism. These memoirs appeared in print only in 1957, ten years after the author's death, in the fifth volume of his collected works. *Forest of the Gods* has been translated into Russian, Polish,

French, Latvian, Estonian, Bulgarian, Czech and Spanish. Currently 17 volumes of his collected works are projected for publication, with Volume 9 already in circulation.

Stanevičius (Staneika), Vytautas (1913–1977), lived in Florida. Lieutenant in the Lithuanian Army. Actively participated in the resistance movement. Member of “Aitvarai” literary group.

Starkus, Antanas (1901–1975), died in the U.S. Pathologist. Graduated from the University of Kaunas, studied in Geneva, Switzerland. Professor at the universities of Kaunas and Vilnius. Heroically aided his friends of misfortune in Stutthof. In attendance at his funeral was one of the Jewesses he saved.

Šernas, Jonas (1910–1978), died in the U.S. An ordinary farmer who arrived in Vilnius to visit his economist brother, Jokūbas, a member of the resistance movement. Of his own volition he turned himself in to the Germans when they came to arrest his brother. His brother had a family while he was a bachelor. From Stutthof he went to Sweden. Through this entire perilous journey, he carried B. Sruoga’s manuscripts entrusted to him by the author which he mailed to the author’s family.

Tumėnas, Algirdas (1909–1943), died in Stutthof. Economist.

Tumėnas, Vytautas (1906–1943), died of typhus in Stutthof. Brother of Algirdas. History teacher.

Valenta, Juozas (1911–1950), returned to Lithuania in 1945, was arrested by the Russians and sent to Siberia. Here he was axed to death by fellow prisoners over a parcel sent from home. A lieutenant in the Lithuanian Army. Taught in a high school.

Valiukevičius, Jurgis (1919–1993), died in California. Humanities student at the University of Kaunas.

Yla, Stasys (1908–1983), lived in the U.S. Catholic priest, writer, poet, head of the department of pastoral theology in the University of Vilnius’ faculty of theology. Wrote his memoirs of Stutthof in *Men and Beasts*, 1951, *A Priest in Stutthof*, 1971, as well as other books.

Žukauskas [Narutis], Pilypas (1920), lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. Certified engineer. Studied at the University of Kaunas. After Stutthof, he attended and graduated from Karlsruhe Technical College in Germany and continued his studies in Stuttgart.

AUŠRINĖ BYLA

EXPLANATORY NOTES

CHAPTER I

¹ Perkūnas (p. 8): The ancient Lithuanian god of thunder.

² Jūratė (p. 8): The Lithuanian goddess of the sea.

³ Laumė (p. 8): A female deity depicted as an earthly being, preferring to dwell in forests or near rivers and lakes.

⁴ Patrimpas (p. 8): A male deity of rivers and springs depicted as wearing a wreath of wheat stalks.

⁵ Polish–German War (p. 9): The Germans invaded Poland Sept. 1–28, 1939, and made it into a general province.

⁶ The famous gulf (p. 9): Gulf of Gdansk.

CHAPTER II

¹ Goncharov (p. 14): Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov (1812–1891) was a leading nineteenth century Russian novelist.

² Oblomov (p. 14): Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov's most important novel. The hero, Oblomov, is perhaps the most famous single character in Russian literature and is a triumph of characterization, being an extreme portrait of laziness and ineffectiveness which has been taken by some as reflecting a typical Russian character trait.

CHAPTER III

¹ Germany's Occupational Government (p. 16): The summer Germany occupied Lithuania in 1941, the Germans constructed their own administration with Commissar General Renteln at the head.

² “We are all guests in this world.” (p. 17): Quote from B. Sruoga’s historical drama, *Milžino Paunksmė* (Shadow of a Giant), p. 112, published by Terra, Chicago, Ill., 1954.

³ *Vaižgantas* [Tumas-Vaižgantas], Juozas (1869–1933) (p. 17): Lithuanian Catholic canon, journalist, activist and writer.

⁴ *Įgula Church* (p. 19): Army garrison church. While Lithuania was occupied by Russia in the nineteenth century, the Russians built a Byzantine style Orthodox church in Kaunas for their army garrison. In days of Lithuanian independence, it became a Catholic church for the Lithuanian Army.

CHAPTER V

¹ *Siegfried* (p. 28): Reference to Richard Wagner’s tetralogy of musical dramas, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Wagner was Hitler’s beloved composer.

CHAPTER VII

¹ *Warsaw Insurgents* (p. 42): In German occupied Warsaw, Polish partisans mounted an insurrection in 1944 and were severely defeated.

CHAPTER XII

¹ *Prot* (p. 76): Shortened from of Protestant, usually taken pejoratively.

² “*Marsz, marsz, Dąbrowski*” (p. 79): Line from the Polish national anthem.

CHAPTER XIV

¹ *Memento mori* (p. 94): Lat. “Remember, that you too will have to die.”

CHAPTER XVI

¹ *Bylina* (p. 104): Russian folk epic or ballad.

¹ Lithuanian–Polish relations (p. 110):

Lithuanian–Polish relations correlate to those of England and Ireland: they had a social, national and political foundation.

The Lithuanian nation made a late entrance into Europe's historical arena in the 13th. century and remained pagan for a long time, resisting the fire and sword brand of Christianity brought by the German Knights. The Great Duchy of Lithuania was forced to form a union with the Polish Kingdom, also at war with the Germans.

In 1387, Lithuania accepted baptism from Rome via Poland. The Polish Church, as well as the union, undermined Lithuania by weakening the economy, destroying its culture and language, polarizing the country and decimating self-reliance.

The united Lithuanian and Polish war maneuvers against common enemies – Germans and the growing Moscow power – knit the leaders and nobility closer together, followed by mixed marriages and a Polish push to colonize the broader, wealthier and better organized Lithuania. In the end, the language and customs were retained only by the peasants, mostly serfs. The noble feudal lords accepted the Polish language and customs but rebelled obstinately against the Poles who sought to make Lithuania into a Polish province.

Finally, in 1795, Russia occupied Lithuania and Poland (a portion of Lithuania was already under German rule). Both these nations, in a united effort, rebelled against the enslaving Russians several times, yet the antagonism between the Polenized nobility and the lower stand increased and peaked in the 19th. century when Lithuania experienced a wave of nationalism. Serfdom was dismantled in 1861 and the lower class began demanding its rights and the dissolution of Polish influence.

Lithuanian independence was regained in 1918. The governing body arose from the former lower class, in Lithuanian hands. Land reform provisions took property from the nobility (leaving each estate 80 hectares), announced Lithuanian as the state language and the former priveleges of the landed gentry were withdrawn. The majority of the disgruntled Lithuanian nobility which had turned Polish, emmigrated to Poland. Poland's dictator, Pilsudski, a descendant of this group, broke treaties and moved in with an army to occupy Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, and a part of the countryside. The Lithuanians could not forgive the Poles for this wrongdoing. The United Nations could not resolve this conflict,

the Poles persecuted the Lithuanians in the occupied portion, while the Lithuanians had their revenge on the Poles in Lithuania. The capital city was regained only in 1939. Much has changed, but the old mistrust remains. Relations are leveled only by extraordinary events as we see in B. Sruoga's "The Forest of the Gods".

CHAPTER XVIII

¹ Spiritus vini (p. 124): Lat. "Spirit of wine".

CHAPTER XXII

¹ Kulak (p. 155): A farmer characterized by Communists as having excessive wealth usually by possession of more than a minimal amount of property.

² Red crosses (p. 157): Insignias worn by all honorary prisoners or Ehrenhäftlinge in German concentration camps. Concentration camp prisoners incarcerated for special reasons which did not fall into any of the regular classifications, such as hostages and the like. This was the official title given the 46 Lithuanian hostages.

CHAPTER XXIII

¹ "Heute wollen wir probieren
Einen neuen Marsch rangieren
O, du schönes Sauerland!" (p. 162)

Today we will attempt
To compose a new march
Oh, you beautiful Sauerland!

CHAPTER XXV

¹ Sancta simplicitas (p. 180): Lat. "Naivite".

CHAPTER XXXI

¹ “Der Angriff” (p. 218): “The Assault”. Nazi newspaper founded by Goebbels, more of a polemical pamphlet than a newspaper and served mostly as a vehicle for Goebbels’s grievances.

² SD. (p. 223): Sicherheitsdienst or Security Service. The intelligence branch of the S.S. under the leadership of Reinhard Heydrich. Composed of what was said to be elite of the elite, the S.D. was responsible for the security of Hitler, the Nazi hierarchy, the National Socialist party, and the Third Reich. The S.D. was linked with the Gestapo for its criminal activities.

CHAPTER XXXIII

¹ Spanish Civil War (p. 236): 1936–1939 resulted in the collapse of republican (Loyalist) government and victory for the Insurgents under General Francisco Franco who thereupon became chief of state.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

¹ La Donna E Mobile (p. 273): Italian aria from Verdi’s opera, *Rigoletto*. The words mean, “Fickle are women fair.”

CHAPTER XLV

¹ Wehrmacht (p. 324): Wehrm or Armed Forces. The official name of the combined Army, Navy, and Air Force in the Third Reich.

CHAPTER XLIX

¹ Walpurgis Night (p. 352): During medieval and Renaissance times, an occasion when witches celebrate a sabbat.

CHAPTER L

¹ “Gold Alone Rules Over Us” (p. 356): Quotation from Goethe’s *Faust*.

CHAPTER LVI

¹ Junker schools (p. 405): Special schools set up by the S. S. to train cadets who could become officers in the organization.

² Volkssturm (p. 411): People’s Army. German home guard in World War II, raised as a last defence in the winter of 1944–1945. The Volkssturm consisted of all able-bodied individuals.

EDITOR'S NOTES

Having just returned from the Stutthof Concentration Camp, working 8–12 hours daily, Sruoga finished his “Forest of the Gods” in an incredibly short time (fall of 1945), but the preparation for the press became very complicated and lengthy.

The manuscript was turned over to the Government Press of Fiction, where it was unmercifully censored and made primitive.

The behind the scenes editing process is no longer possible to trace. The individuals who participated in this shameful and dramatic history can no longer be identified.

But the readied for press typed manuscript has miraculously survived. In 1957, the Lithuanian Literary Institute Library handed the manuscript over to Aleksandras Žirgulyš, who at that time worked at the Government Press of Fiction as editor.

This historical manuscript is incredibly interesting and valuable material for literary scholars. In other words, it is a significant literary document, revealing the Soviet paradox and uncanny ideological atmosphere of that time.

The entire manuscript is covered with various colors of ink and pencils, many areas crossed out, full of various corrections (there are about 300). There are suggestions to cross out entire pages, in some places paragraphs or individual sentences or words. Usually they are places where Sruoga speaks about the people of other nationalities – Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Jews, Kashubians, or where there is a positive note about the German S.S. The censors didn't like Sruoga's sarcasm, the grotesque style of the piece, the ironic characteristics of the participants, thus the phrasing was made more gentle, encroaching on Sruoga's artistic originality, it's essence.

The author voraciously defended the changes, especially the expurgated places, fixing many details in the text itself or in subtitles. His 46 annotations-remarks, also in various colors of ink, are written on small pages which are clipped or pasted on the especially censored pages of the typed manuscript.

Returning the edited manuscript to the editor at that time, Valius Drazdauskas, Sruoga added a letter: “I wrote my remarks on a whole series of crossed out areas. Perhaps in some areas I'll be lucky to convince you are others?”

< > I mean I don't know everything that needs to be known. You know better. You also know my requests. If they will have to be crossed out, what can a poor man like me do. You are a responsible editor, so let your word be the last word. I no longer want to see that damned manuscript, - its aggravated me to the bone. Don't get angry that I sometimes try to defend myself so insistently." (The letter is secured in the M. Mažvydo Library's manuscript section, f. 33, b. 5).

V. Drazdauskas signed the manuscript for printing April 6, 1946, while the censor permission (Glavlitas) to take it to press was received May 15, 1946. Unfortunately, because of the Soviet ideologists of the time, G. Zimanas, J. Žiugžda and others fault, the manuscript didn't make its way to the press.

October 1946, B. Sruoga again writes to V. Drazdauskas: "Honorable Editor and Dear Friend! If "Forest of the Gods" hasn't been turned over to the press, then don't give it – let the devils take it! I'm fed up, – everything and the work itself. I'm so bored with it, that I wouldn't be able to read the proof-sheets. You should take it out of your "repertoire". <...>. In one way or another, now my manuscripts are useful to no one!" (M. Mažvydo Library's manuscript section, f. 33, b. 5).

Because of the government's and the censors' attack and criticisms that it doesn't fit into Soviet reality, Sruoga was afraid that "Forest of the Gods" manuscript might disappear or be confiscated. He gave several typed copies to his closest friends to preserve.

"Forest of the Gods" appeared only in 1957 (10 years after his death) in B. Sruoga's Writings volume 5 with relatively few expurgations and corrections and in 1997, in the newly released Writings volume 4, with no expurgations.

All of the crossed out places, for which the author fought with the censors in 1946 and was unable to defend, are included in this edition. See:

Ch. XIV, p. 94, last 4 paragraphs.

Ch. XVII, p. 116, from the top of the page to the end of the chapter.

Ch. XIX, p. 131, last 2 sentences of last paragraph.

Ch. XXXIV, p. 244, second to the last paragraph.

Ch. XXXIV, p. 245, last sentence of first paragraph.

Ch. XXXVIII, p. 278, last 4 paragraphs.

Ch. XLII, p. 311, last 2 paragraphs.

Donata Linčiuvienė

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FOREST OF THE GODS

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FOREST OF THE GODS

by Balys Sruoga

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