Amor fati
De aanhankelijkheid aan het levenslot
Zeven opstellen over Bergen-Belsen

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Contents

Preface  5
Scharführer X  6
The Kapo  10
The Bitch  16
Under the linden  22
Because of a sentence  30
The last train  36
Amor fati  45
even when they are in their enemies' land,  
I shall not reject them...  

Leviticus XXVI: 44
Preface

In response to many requests, the following articles, written more or less by chance and independently of one another, which appeared in De Groene Amsterdammer, are re-published here altogether.

We acceded to the requests in the belief that dissemination of knowledge about facts, conditions, and moods in the concentration camps is important for understanding society’s problems. That many should have preceded me does not detract from this. All accounts by contemporaries who personally experienced the events are inevitably subjective and the present work is no exception. However, based on different subjective accounts, it is possible to form an objective opinion. Such an opinion is important not only for dealing with the German people, but also, and indeed in the first place, for the development of our own future. If knowledge of what took place should contribute to providing insight into what man is capable of and to what he might be driven when one is not vigilant, much will have been gained.¹ This insight alone can prepare us for certain unavoidable decisions.

November 1946

Translator’s Note

In an attempt to make the essays more accessible to English readers the translator has added a number of explanatory footnotes for which he assumes full responsibility.

Jack Santcross

¹ “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” (Translator’s note, source uncertain)
Joseph Kramer, the commandant of Bergen-Belsen, together with a number of men and women of his commando are currently standing trial and all kinds of questions are flaring up that had already occurred to many of us. The fact is, one cannot look dispassionately at a person’s picture in a newspaper when one has been one of his victims, or remain unmoved on reading about the offences that he and his aids are charged with when one has personally witnessed them being committed in all their gruesomeness.

Yet, they are not the offences, not what happened, that one remembers most clearly. Rather, they are individual moments which, for some incomprehensible reason, remain unforgettable. We remember the past as close-ups. For example, a sergeant (Scharführer in the language of the Nazis) smiling as he cycles through a field of emaciated naked corpses. Similarly, I remember the facial expression of a lieutenant, a tall young man who had come to visit the camp in the company of a red lapelled uniform containing a general. The expression was one of bliss, of radiating awareness of power, of recklessness, as he raised himself tall above the groups of grubby, hungry women, shyly inquisitive children, and shabby looking men, who, half afraid, half pent-up with rage, doffed their caps. 'Here we rule'—the countenance seemed to say—'sovereign, far from the road, far from anyone’s gaze or interference, over wretchedness that pleases us, over sickness and death that we have brought about and that must now pay us homage like loyal servants.'

I recall a hastily cleared hut of the Altersheim where, after first having been robbed of their last piece of bread, dying elderly women had been flung to the ground from the top tier of three-tier bunk beds (by Häftlinge, moreover!) and where, amidst a chaos of pots, dishes, mugs, fragments of glass, soiled clothes, partly decayed shoes, torn rags, mildewed suitcases, disintegrated rucksacks and heaps of stinking filth, an old granny, bare from the waist down, lay dying. A couple of S.S. officers had come to take stock. They laughed; they were satisfied. 'Die Sache hat geklappt.'

The things they did, those Nazis, and for which they are now standing trial, they did with joy and with shameless sensuality. There was not a hint of the slightest wavering or doubt, let alone of recoiling from the ultimate and the worst. There was not even the slightest hint of unconcern or indifference. They went all the way. There was a ruthless growing cruelty and an attendant sense of pleasure. Everywhere and at all times there was the bitter sneer of malicious pleasure at the wretched misery beneath them, under their immaculately polished boots. Just occasionally, one might hear a common soldier mutter, 'Junge, junge, das is doch ooch a Mensch'. It was an exception, though. Everyone of rank, starting with the Scharführer, who was almost the only one with whom the prisoners came in

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2 Joseph Kramer and forty-four others were tried in Lüneburg by a British Military Court between September and November 1945.
3 Old people’s home, a hut or part of a hut, set aside for the elderly.
4 Prisoners, often non-Jews, such as political or criminal prisoners.
5 Everything was in order.
6 Boy, oh boy, but that is also a human being!
contact, chuckled and revelled ever more. And the greater the cruelty, the greater their pleasure, and they drove each other and themselves to outdo cruelty with even greater cruelty, to torment, to poison the lives of Jews and Häftlinge. And there, where hundreds, later thousands and tens of thousand, wasted away and died of hunger, exhaustion, lice, typhus and dysentery, they rejoiced.

We kept thinking 'it cannot get worse', and then it did get worse after all. For the Germans there were never enough corpses.

How could it have happened? How can people sink to such baseness, especially people who belonged to a nation that not so very long before had not been devoid of culture?

To reply that we are dealing with criminals is a qualification, not an explanation, to which we might even resign ourselves were it to concern a few individuals. However, it is not about a few individuals, or even a few dozen, but about a national core of hundreds of thousand, perhaps of millions of people, if not the majority of a great nation. Above all, let us bear in mind that the matter cannot be resolved with hatred and abuse, with reprisals and punishment, which we do not wish to discuss here. It is most important that we should understand what kind of a person he was, that Joseph Kramer, or Scharführer Heinz, or Fritz, or Rau, or Lübbe, or Sturmführer X or N, because it is not he who is being judged, but us.

Is he a German and is he unthinkable elsewhere? Or, given the right circumstances, could he or someone like him be found everywhere?

I fear we are all too ready to ascribe a German monopoly to him. By itself, that is quite understandable. First, because by doing so we cleanse ourselves. When we say he is a German, we mean that we do not believe ourselves capable of degenerating to the same extent. Besides, we do not understand him or the senseless and pointless cruelties that he committed. It follows that it is difficult for us to accept something to be universally human if we do not understand it. We understand only those qualities, drives, passions, forces, and weaknesses that in one way or another, even if only dormant, exist in ourselves. That is why we are able to follow the literature of peoples and times completely alien to our own. That, too, is why we can translate. That is why international relations are universally possible. About Joseph Kramer and the S.S. man X on the other hand we understand nothing. It is like facing a madman who lives in an entirely different world. Consequently, we conclude that he must be fundamentally different from us.

But just supposing that we could understand something about him. Supposing that we tried to penetrate his essentially impenetrable character, not to defend him – which is far from our thoughts – but for our own sake and for the sake of our integrity? We may have to force ourselves to it, but it might prove worthwhile.

I am not a psychiatrist and cannot go beyond the impression of a layman, who, even if he were beaten to the ground, would not lose interest in his opponent, knowing that such an interest is a prerequisite for striking back effectively at an appropriate moment. That is why this impression may not be entirely unimportant.

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7 Lieutenant S.S.
This impression, then, is that one cannot equate Scharführer X with an ordinary criminal. Of course, some of them are criminals. There are those, for whom the S.S. provided the opportunity to commit every kind of crime with impunity, to derive a good living from it, and even to gain honour with it. The vast majority is different though.

Scharführer X is ... a nothing. He is a void. He was credited with idealism. He has none. He was said to have opinions. He is devoid of them. The least one expected to find in him was patriotism or national enthusiasm. He is devoid of any trace of them.

He has a stomach, a heart, lungs, intestines, kidneys, and is most particular that they should function properly. His food and drink are therefore sacred to him. For the rest, he is a thing. Empty.

Many a political party speculated on this emptiness and enjoyed a temporary success with it, but the National Socialist party did it consistently. It was itself created out of nothing, and the more so its S.S.

For he who has no convictions, who does not know what he wants, and also lacks the necessary intelligence with which to acquire knowledge, and in fact wants only that he should not want anything, and who cannot find the courage to understand anything, that man, so afraid in the dark and afraid in the light, who loves the twilight in which to bob up and down on the shallow, muddy ditch-water of his feelings – or of whatever he calls his feelings and which is generally little more than a sensual prickle – that immature child that never loses its childhood fears, that duffer, that quite ‘ordinary man’, what else can he do with his frightened, suspicious, timid, and faint-hearted soul in the bustle of the world but to allow himself to become mesmerised by the spotlights of a constantly resurgent thuggery, sometimes of emperors, sometimes of revolutionaries?

Is he bad, this quite ‘ordinary man’? Of course, he is not. Is he good? No, not that either. He is neither, yet both simultaneously. He is a little cruel to a fly and sentimental to a mouse. And now they have told him that he is strong, and strength is ‘when you are not afraid of blood’, and now he is not afraid. That is to say, he is terribly afraid, which is precisely why he lashes out. He is afraid of his fear and calls it courage.

He also has an ideal. He would like to spend his Sundays sitting on his balcony, in his shirtsleeves and collarless, listening to the radio, and feeding a small lump of sugar to his canary. And because man longs for variety, he would also like to go paddling sometimes. However, they told him he is a German and that Germany is great, and they talked about ‘honour’. So now he toots along in the brass band, and as he is just as incapable as his comrades of understanding anything of the entire business, they all toot away at their loudest. And to conceal that they are trembling children, they pitchfork each other to act manly. But not like just any man, in an off-the-peg suit, but in a uniform.

There is yet another difficulty. Man is never quite so ordinary, so empty, and so doubly blank that he does not have a conscience, and that conscience speaks. It speaks with a voice from the past that he remembers from his childhood catechism, ‘Cain, Cain, where is your brother Abel?’ And that voice must be stifled else all will be lost: courage and fatherland, brass band and uniform.

Woe, woe, woe brother Abel, when that voice has to be stifled. You shall pay for that.
Thus, the first drop of blood gave way to one cruelty after another, ever greater, ever fiercer. People had predicted that Scharführer X would have no conscience. If only that were true, then he might not have become so cruel.

It all sprung from nothing. Because at the start there was no conviction, but a lack of conviction, and this lack fed a constantly growing uncertainty that always had to be covered up then with an ever growing sham certainty. The infection had begun.

He was quite incapable of acting differently, that Sturmführer N or Scharführer X. He was a golem, an empty thing with power derived from others, one who could be left quietly to himself now because there was no holding him back any longer from his urge to destroy. Because if he allowed himself to be restrained, or were to waver for even a moment, he would collapse in a heap, which his instinct for self-preservation resisted.

That is how Sturmführer N or Scharführer X, toilet trained so late in childhood, so afraid as a boy, so average as a schoolboy, and so ‘ordinary’ as a man, gradually and before he knew what was happening, became a mass murderer. That is how he finally appeared before the executioner, who throughout history has always awaited every tyrant.

Is this all exclusively German? In part it probably is, to the extent that circumstances and historical development may have created a certain predisposition thereto in Germany.

But what about the rest, though?

Are there not everywhere many more people without conviction, and something that is far worse – incapable of holding any conviction – than one at first imagines, even among the so-called convinced? Is there not far more appetite for persecution and suffering than one is aware of?

And conscience, does it always work in the desired direction and not all too often perversely?

And the gods, do they not have a terrible thirst everywhere?
The Kapo

One fine winter’s day, very early in the morning, before the daily work roll-call, when it was still quite dark, Joseph Kramer, the commandant, left his warm room and entered the camp in person. He came, roared and conquered. Then, when he and his fine shiny grey leather overcoat had disappeared into the thick mist, as if absorbed by it, an entire cloud of Scharführer continued to roar.

Palace revolution! The autonomy that had existed in the camp until then had been swept away. The Ältestenrat with Judenälteste and all, although as innocent as a newborn babe, had nevertheless suffered a severe loss of authority, although it had never amounted to much. They had been dismissed on the spot, wished to hell and burdened with more damnation than the devil himself could possibly have had at his disposal. For this the Judenälteste and his most trusty henchmen had slaved away for many months, often from before sunrise until late at night, and had chuckled dienstefrig at every sordid joke told by every uniform. For this, he had trotted höchstgehorsam like a panting dog behind every pair of pedalling boots to receive his orders. For this, he had suffered the mire of every imaginable humiliation that was poured over him while standing stiffly to attention! Of course, it was done for the sake of the community, but also for a spoonful of soup and an extra slice of bread, and sometimes for a little more, too.

‘Die Schweinerei soll aus sein!’ Die Schweinerei was aus. A new Schweinerei was arriving: that of the Kapos.

The barbed wire fence opened, caps were doffed, and in they came. Ahead was the Kapo of Kapos, a man of about forty-five years, a short, squat, almost hunchbacked figure, supporting a far too large bald head and a pale expressionless face. Behind him followed five or six murderers, each holding a huge truncheon and a veritable lust in his eyes and around his mouth to get started. They were all extremely well dressed, almost bordering on the chic. The moment they came in sight one suspected that they had not acquired all these clothes by honest means. It was – certainly if one considered the conditions in the camp – somewhat excessive, too neat, too clean. They all wore immaculate boots, but on their back, the sign of shame: sewn on their dark coat was – again with rather exaggerated care – a multicoloured piece of cloth. From this one could tell that they – they too – were prisoners, and this tempered their swagger a little.

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8 Sergeant.
9 Council of elders. (Ältestenrat and Judenälteste belong to a terminology and hierarchy invented by the Nazis and imposed as some form of self-administration on Jews in camps and ghettos).
10 Senior Jew.
11 Dutifully.
12 Most obediently.
13 This abomination must end! (For the Germans, anything to do with their prisoners was a Schweinerei).
14 A prisoner, often a criminal, who is appointed to wield authority over his fellow prisoners and thereby becomes a member of the camp staff. (After Kramer’s arrival, the Star camp was turned into a true concentration camp with its standard internal administration, i.e. with Kapos instead of a Jewish self-administration.)
They looked well fed, healthy, and strong, and immediately our hungry stomachs began to grumble with the envy of the dispossessed: ‘They have eaten.’ Precisely because they had eaten, they immediately commanded a certain measure of respect: that mysterious respect the hungry have for the sated.

It had nothing to do with them, though. It belonged to the ways of the Germans who knew the importance of paying attention to detail. A Kapo is a prisoner appointed as foreman, as warden, as herdsman of his fellow prisoners. Sometimes also as a spy, but for that special orders are often superfluous. The good Kapo, knowing what is expected of him, becomes that of his own accord. For the most part he has to pass on the pressure that the Nazi wants to exert on his victims. His wages consist of better accommodation, enough food, the right to lay first claim to the clothes of the dead or – providing it is done unobtrusively – to steal them in some other way. The technical term for this is organisieren. Moreover, he shares in the priceless good fortune of being permitted to beat, as hard and as often as he wants to, without fear of being struck back. Not only is he allowed to give orders, he has to do so. Protest is niedergeschmettert.\(^{15}\) That is how he is bought, and how a privileged class is formed among the army of prisoners, thereby ensuring that the possibility of unanimous resistance is not only nipped in the bud, but also prevented from even arising. The Germans knew that something lives in many people that despite all the hatred would submit to and acknowledge privilege. In any event, it suited their system, which comprised a consequent speculation about the servant, about the slave in man.

Our Kapos had to assume the responsibilities of the dismissed Ältestenrat: the distribution of food and its supervision. They also had to supervise the huts and the hypothetical hygiene in the camp as well as the rounding up of camp inmates for daily roll-call, holding the preliminary roll-call so that the Scharführer might conserve his energy and only have to inspect, and ‘combing’ the camp for the composition of Arbeitscommandos.\(^{16}\)

The Kapos fulfilled their duty to perfection.

The corruption that had crept in, unavoidable though maddening in the prevailing circumstances was being replaced with all kinds of bombast about Gerechtigkeit\(^ {17}\) with a new and even worse corruption. A small number of privileged individuals were being dispensed with for the benefit of other even more privileged individuals. In short, it did not take long before the treadmill had resumed turning as before, to the satisfaction of some and the vexation of others. The more so because the Kapos were quite incapable of the practical work with all its details – just like the Scharführer, in fact. Consequently, it came about that although they chased the people, preferably the sick, out of their beds, and feigned the greatest zeal in the presence of the Germans, the real work they left mostly to the Jews. This led to the return of a kind of autonomy after all, whereby the Kapos decided to act as the master, (that is to say, as servants who in turn have their servants). They would walk through the huts with great show and uproar, smashing their truncheons on tables, benches and cupboards, or, when it suited them, on the backs and heads of those whose submissiveness and diligence –
rightly or wrongly – they had cause to doubt. Now and then one could also hear
the roaring of some thief or other who had stolen a piece of bread for which he
was being given the infamous Prügel. By the Kapos, of course.

Nevertheless, they did not hit as hard as they had been ordered to do. The Kapos
were men of various nationalities, often Poles, who had spent years – sometimes
ten years or longer – in concentration camps, exclusively with men, where they
had learnt the ropes the hard way. In Bergen-Belsen they found what they had yearned for all those years and which had troubled their dreams: woman. How did she get there?

In the terminology of the Nazis, Bergen-Belsen – in as far as it concerns the
compound under discussion here at least – was not a true concentration camp.
Initially it was an Austauschlager, that is to say, all kinds of people were
concentrated there who it was expected could be exchanged for German nationals
living abroad. Later, when Austausch became mostly an illusion and when other
groups with whom they did not know what to do with were also brought to
Bergen-Belsen, the Germans designated the camp an Aufenthaltslager.
However, it was and remained a Vorzugslager, a relative but far from fictitious
concept, despite the fact that the camp was in many respects, especially towards
the end, far worse than other camps.

It had significant advantages of which the most important was that families
were not wrenched asunder. That only happened when the top leaders in Berlin
had decided that a particular group no longer qualified for Vorzugsbehandlung.
At such times a so-called ‘bad’ transport would depart and those who worked
outside the camp could see how men and women had to go in different directions,
to an unknown and unimaginable destination from which they would not return.
On these occasions, they could also witness the elevating sight of mothers giving
their children a parting kiss. Those were more or less the subtleties of German
idealism.

Anyway, Bergen-Belsen was a mixed camp, but despite that, there was hardly
any eroticism, not out of moral or prudish considerations, but because of hunger
and weakness. Men and women had forgotten that they were of a different sex and
this gave the whole a somewhat eerie aspect. They walked past each other,
neutral, like living, rattling skeletons. The Kapos, though, were well fed.

What did they do when they saw women? They did what the birds do in
springtime: they displayed themselves. There was something to be conquered
again, a long forgotten natural function! However, they could not conquer with
hands that were too bloody. Consequently, in spite of themselves, they restrained
themselves a little.

A piece of bread or sausage, a little sugar or margarine, all delicacies that the
Kapos could obtain, did the rest. And then? Do we ever know what two people
say to each other when they are alone? At the time, we also did not know. We saw
that there were women for whom the choice between making love or dying was

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18 Beatings.
19 Camp for exchange prisoners.
20 Detention camp.
21 Camp for privileged prisoners.
22 Privileged treatment.
not too difficult. Undoubtedly there must also have been instances of genuine love.

One can think whatever one wants about these relationships between men who fell not far short of being murderers and women who prostituted themselves with their bitterest persecutors and the persecutors of those closest to them, but it had an extraordinary outcome. A certain degree of moderation, not to say softening, took place. Tensions seemed to have been discharged. A certain capacity for understanding the needs of the moment came about, and the Kapos who – as we learned later – had been sent to beat as many of us to death as possible, and who were not the kind of men to shy away from such an act, did not do it. On the contrary, we heard from their leader, who – as far as we could ascertain – had some kind of property crime on his conscience, a note of sympathy, and we detected an attempt to help us. Although this did not prevent him and his mob from resorting to violent and wild brutalities the moment he was not strictly obeyed or imagined being opposed.

Yes, the Germans knew what they were doing when they introduced the concept of Blutschande, when they declared it a crime against the nation and laid down the most rigorous punishment for contravention of the racial laws. Without it they would have gone no further than the historic pogrom, of which yearning after women was one of the most important if latent motives, and which, if the yearning had been satisfied, would have lasted no more than a few days before expiring. They understood this wild, primitive desire for the alien and persecuted woman, and the better they understood it and the stronger it burned inside them, the fiercer they sought to suppress it. Under the false slogan of ‘pure blood’, the yearning after alien, or what was felt to be alien blood had to be kept smouldering. It was not allowed to be killed off, but had to be driven back into the dark recesses of the soul, where it would create discontent that could be converted into permanent blind hatred. That is why the Scharführer were ordered to guard the naked women while they showered, and they did it with the most shameless indifference. Befehl ist Befehl.

It was all calculated, and if not calculated but intuitive politics, then it was so much the worse. Precisely because the slogan was false, it was elevated to a truth. There was also something else in the camp that fascinated the Kapo: gold. Most people still had a wedding ring, a pin or a broach, forbidden objects of course, and hidden in or under a mattress. The Kapo saw the end of the war approaching, and with it, dire need. An active trade sprung up with all that belonged thereto: market prices, exchange rates, and middlemen. A sizeable wedding ring would fetch between four and six rations of bread, and a ration of bread was a three centimetres thick slice. The trade became a matter of life or death, and the Kapo, who had made common cause with the prisoner against the Germans, had a vested interest in his life.

However, with all that, despite having found a little calm in his heart, he did not find us ready to accept him yet. He is one of the most remarkable and most distinct figures in the tableau of the company of National Socialists and if we are

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23 National Socialist racial laws prohibited – amongst other things – sexual relations between ‘Aryans’ and Jews on the grounds of it ‘disgracing the race’.

24 Orders are orders.
at all concerned about the future we should forget him no more than anyone else. We encountered him everywhere, among Jews and among *Häftlinge*,25 inside and outside the camps. He was not always bloodthirsty, and his criterion does not lie in cruelty. We need to look elsewhere for that.

In his work, every person has a choice between two courses of action, irrespective of whether he is a labourer, an artist, a businessman or a politician. He can choose to follow his own interests, that is one course, or he can choose to follow the cause he wishes to serve. The Kapo is the person who at all times seeks to follow his own interests.

Of course, he has always existed and will continue to exist. But National Socialism, which always found a use for the negative in its opponents, brought him out in full relief, brought him forth, hired him and exploited him until he began to believe that he was being useful.

Community work of a practical kind was difficult and mostly impossible in the camps. The Germans had ruled all that out for the sake of the effect of the persecution. Consequently, many a person with the ability and inclination for such work was already eliminated even before hunger had robbed him of his last strength. Those who remained were often those who in their work for the community always try to seek advantage for themselves or a means to be noticed. These were the Kapos, the foremen, the organisers.

They were not National Socialists. On the contrary, they belonged to the victims of National Socialism. Consequently, the Nazis, who could not make them their friends, made them at least into their enemy’s enemy. They achieved this with a few goodies and a little power, which was cheap enough. The goodies consisted of a little food that they took from the rations of the others, and the power, too, was paid for by the others. In addition, whenever there were a few cigarettes, the Kapos came first.

They accepted it all and were quite pleased with themselves. As active individuals, which to be considered for Kapo, they had to be by nature, they now had something to do and fuss about again. Moreover, if – as was the case with the Kapo of Kapos in Bergen-Belsen – they possessed a little organisational talent, it could sometimes help them to obtain employment.

How marvellous, what joy to be allowed to be a little more than others, not to have to stand like a wretch in the queue of wretches but in front or alongside of it. To be allowed to line the wretches up in *Fünferreihen*,26 to be allowed to count the slaves. To be allowed to order *Vordermann, Seitenrichtung! Links-zwei-drei-vier!*27 and when a Scharführer arrived, ‘*Mützen-ab!*’28 Such joy to be allowed to allocate the rotten forced labour, to be allowed to show favour to the one with a place near the fire, and to send another out in the rain so that he might feel your power. Else, what is the point of having power? They not only kick you, but allow you to kick, too, and so you are somebody. And to be able to extend favours as you wish, to make the one grateful to you by serving him the thick of the swede soup and to avenge yourself on another by giving him just the liquid! To be allowed to shout when the Scharführer is around so that he should know that you have understood how it must be done. Where it concerns punishment, to be able to

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25 Political prisoners.
26 Columns of five.
27 Front-rank man, eyes to the side! Left-two-three-four!
28 Caps off!
pass the odium on, onto the punished and to be able to justify all this to yourself and to your conscience with the service you are doing to the community; and to use the ‘responsibility’ you carry as an excuse for your cheeks gradually filling out again!

Give the Kapo a truncheon and his chest will swell out. With that marshal’s baton of human baseness he will demonstrate of what he is capable.

Even so, the Kapo will claim that he is not serving the Nazis. He will fool himself and you that he is doing it all for the common good. He serves himself.

Just look at that tall lout, who at every suspected dereliction of duty beats blood out of the mouth and ears of his fellow men, or at that other one, that short, fat one, who cannot get enough of his own authority. They say that they want to avert the threatening collective punishments of which the Germans are so fond. It is not true. The one has found a scapegoat for his own wretchedness and the other knows no other means by which to keep himself afloat in this sea of injustice and humiliation. Contrary to an oft-held illusion, suffering has once again forgotten to ennoble.

The German laughs a little; he knows it and is satisfied. The fruits are his.

The fruits are the dead whose cause of death the doctor describes in his official report as Kreislaufschwäche. In English it translates as ‘poor circulation.’

The Kapo likes it not a bit, and this time he means what he says. He is not such a dyed in the wool villain yet as his bosses. Still, what do you expect? After all, he, too, wants to make it to the end...

They all belong to a distant past now, do they not, all those characters from the National Socialist period?

Not so distant, not really. One can point them out, amongst boards of management, associations, government bodies, in offices and factories, among officials, the military, social workers and organisers, those who would, and those who would not have become a Kapo in a concentration camp.
The Bitch

Hundreds of times we saw her walking along the streets of almost every town in Europe, practically and adequately uniformed against mud and snow. Who was she, what did she want, what was her job? She always bore an aggrieved expression but I do not know whether she was afraid of an imminent assault or disappointed that it never happened. Perhaps both. There was no contact between her and the population as there was with the men of the S.S. though this did not make her any more welcome. Irrespective of whether she was called Selma, Agnes, Inge or Grethe, she remained an anonymous figure that one talked about with a wink behind the palm of one’s hand. All one knew about her was that she was a woman, hidden in a uniform, and in a certain sense exposed by it, in fact. With a great deal of contempt, a little curiosity, and all kinds of conjecture and suspicion, the lads called her ‘the Bitch’.

In Amsterdam she was like a fish out of water, in Bergen-Belsen she was in her element. True, even there she did not flounder with joy, but at least she swam in a sphere of her own. She belonged there, just like the rats and the bugs, and she was no stranger when she appeared for the first time.

They called her ‘blonde Irmy’, but the reason for that was not clear. She was not so much blonde, as brownish, quite ordinary, and banal even. The fact that she was not pretty, was not her fault, although she was not really ugly like that other bitch, our very own Fräulein Schlottke, with her dirty yellow fanatic’s head, who will remain fixed in our memories like a nightmare come alive in the daytime. She, at least, had turned to stone, frozen probably by a perverse loneliness, an empty parchment bag, an ideal hiding place for the devil that possessed her. Above her presumed breast, she wore a blood red insignia, a sign of merit for her contribution to the Entjudung Europas. Fräulein Schlottke was a witch, devoid of feeling or emotion, who administered and organised its delivery to the East. There was just a slight trembling around her upper lip, something resembling saintly satisfaction, whenever she saw the despair that she had caused to flare up among women as they were separated from their men and among children as they were separated from their mothers. Children whom she hated because she had none of her own and happiness that she destroyed because she did not know what it was. Fräulein Schlottke was vindictive.

Blonde Irmy, on the other hand, was married with a child. Evil tongues alleged that marriage and birth had not followed in the order preferred by the Civil Code. Of course, we could not verify this, but the rumour was enough to give the child the solid Germanic name of ‘Zuschnellda’. Blonde Irmy also had another child, a one or two-year-old boy, brought into the world to get her out of the mess. Her husband had been away at the front for years already and she herself had told us that he was a pilot, but she may have lied about that in the belief that it sounded more interesting. One day, when husband...
and wife were both on leave they discussed who could get her out of the service, which she detested. Nobody could do that except perhaps an unborn child. Thus, the child had to be born, but it was born in vain, for when it was a fortnight old, they recalled her. We heard the story from her very own lips.

Zuschnellelda and the born-in-vain were taken to a farmer in the country where they would be safe from bombs. Two kinds of bombs existed for Irmy, sacred ones and foul ones, and in this, she was not alone in the world. Sacred bombs were bombs destined for foreign children, and foul ones were those that landed on one’s own roof. Naturally, Irmy meant protection against the ‘foul’ bombs, the British ones. Gemeinheit!\(^{31}\) She returned to work. Blockführerin\(^{32}\) in the camps. Eighteen hours a day. Free use of whip and revolver, on the understanding that hitting – in our compound at least – was officially prohibited.

The then commandant, Kramer’s predecessor, a fat and lustful man, a hotelier by profession, who, going by a tattooed anchor on his hand, had also been to sea, had his peculiarities. For example, he would pat the neck of his horse and feed it sugar lumps preferably when surrounded by hungry prisoners so that their mouths would water.

We had to make our bunks wie Schachtel Streichhölzer,\(^{33}\) that is to say, square, without bumps or dents, without wrinkles on top. Whatever lay underneath them was not his responsibility, whether they were wet shoes lying mouldering there, or dirty linen stinking away there, or lice having a ball there, providing that on entering the huts one could see straight along them with a single glance. And blonde Irmy was in charge. For just imagine if Moshe Cucumber had left a wrinkle in his blankets! Providence would never forgive the Führer for it and Germany would lose the war.

Blonde Irmy did her bit so that Germany should win the war. Followed Dienstefrig\(^{34}\) by the Lagerälteste\(^{35}\) and the hut leaders, she would run through the huts. She would pull blankets off from wherever she thought fit. Notieren.\(^{36}\) That meant punishment. If an old woman had been unable to wait because of dysentery and had fled from her bed without tidying the blankets according to regulations, she would pay for it with her weekly pat of butter. However, even less of a misdemeanour than that was needed to be punished. Even if the bed was smoothed out like a tablecloth, often the blanket would still be pulled off. Each day there had to be ten, twenty or thirty victims. Notieren! Why should it matter to blonde Irmy how the beds were made? It was all for the sake of the report. Moreover, she was afraid of the Olle\(^{37}\), just like Selma and Agnes, Inge and Grethe. The Olle was fat and not a very easy person to get on with. He also had a wide bed of which they were equally afraid.

‘Glaubt Ihr das ich mich für die Juden eine Zigarre hole? Bah!\(^{38}\) A Zigarre is High German for a ‘dressing-down’. Fear for the Zigarre influenced world history.
It cost us hundreds of pats of butter. That in turn meant hundreds of seconds closer to the end for hundreds of people.

Yes, *Betten wie Streichholzschachteln*\(^39\) For the sake of these and similar world problems, entire divisions of S.S. men were mobilised year after year. Men like tree trunks, straight in body and limb, whose only concern while their fatherland was dying was to torment and bait defenceless men, women and children – whether they were asleep or awake – and to embitter their lives with every imaginable and unimaginable pettifoggery. To enable these men to be available for this useful work, workers from all over Europe had to be recruited. And the work was really useful to them. In any event, ‘beds like matchboxes’ and similar ideals were enough to escape from a warfront that hungered after soldiers. These same escaped divisions are the ones that are beginning to complain about the *Dolchstoß*\(^40\) again.

For blonde Irmy, pulling off blankets was not entirely fruitless either. She knew from experience that many a desirable object might turn up that way. For example, an electric torch or chess set. Irmy would pocket it. And seeing that according to National Socialist law it was not the thief who was guilty but the victim, the latter would be punished for the theft; withholding of one or two rations of butter.

Blonde Irmy could do more than check beds. She could beat, and how!

One day I saw her in action between the huts working on a lanky youth of about fifteen who had emptied a tin of dirty water in the road. Her two hands rained down on his cheeks in a blind rage, pent-up for who knows how long, and for who knows what reason. The boy hardly moved. His only reaction was to try to protect his head with his arms. It was of little use. Blonde Irmy demonstrated her skill. The victim neither shouted nor cried even. His father had died, his mother was at death’s door, a sister had been admitted to hospital with pulmonary tuberculosis, and the youngest child was either wandering about somewhere or playing in the mud, unsupervised, unkempt, with a snotty nose, ragged, an open and oversized shoe on one foot, and a shredded slipper on the other. Try crying about it. One cannot even begin to do so. If one had then asked the boy: ‘How are you?’ he would have answered: ‘I’m hungry.’ For several minutes, blonde Irmy was like a blind fury.

That, historian of the future, was how it was every day in the heart of Europe, around the middle of the twentieth century. In the background of such a tableau, paint in only a garbage truck full of naked, emaciated corpses.

Above all, though, try to depict the blonde Irmy accurately. For she was capable of doing very much more than beating. She might go to the orphanage (we really did have an orphanage) to play and laugh with the children. She would tease them; she would take them for walks. She would bring them a piece of chocolate. She would dry their tears and blow their noses. She would stroke their cheeks.

Right in the midst of the misery, a child was born somewhere in the hospital hut by the light of the stump of a candle. Do not be surprised. It was not the first time that a Jewish boy was born in a stable. His mother managed to care for him

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\(^{39}\) Beds like matchboxes.

\(^{40}\) Treason. (*Dolchstoß* was the name for the myth that Germany had been ‘stabbed in the back’ by domestic opponents to the government at the end of the Great War and had thus lost the war not in military combat but because of treason).
so well that he looked like the spoiled grandchild of millionaire grandparents. Not only was he always clean, but he was also covered with a sheet that had a hand-stitched seam and a lace edging that his mother had crocheted herself. Such an ordinary woman, who, amidst all that filth, amidst all that selfishness, bickering and fighting over a spoonful of soup, hunger, illnesses and death, had not lost the ordinary instincts of a young mother for a child somewhere in a happy country in a heated room. The child responded to this with a pink face and played with his hands just like healthy children living in a world filled with peace. He really was an adorable child, and blonde Irmy found him irresistible. The women placed him so that she could not avoid seeing him when she entered the hut and it happened that she would forget about blankets, reports, and torches, and withholding margarine. At such times she would express herself in what were for National Socialism classic terms: ‘If you’re all to be gassed or shot, I’ll save this little one.’ It was meant to comfort, and meant sincerely. Did she know what she was saying, this daughter of Pharaoh? It was not the first time that a Jewish boy was saved, and not without its consequences. She talked with the women as women do. About pieces of material, cotton dresses, panties and suspenders, buttons and eyelets, about children and about things that are mentioned only in cryptic terms, or about which one thinks while appearing to be talking about something else. She boasted about having spent seven years in France, as a spy. Herrliche Zeit.

A seamstress in the camp sewed afternoon dresses for her, pinned and fitted, and blonde Irmy was subdued.

Her conversations might start with a crying bout, ‘Ach ich kann Euer Elend hier nicht mehr ertragen.’ The tears were real, but they were not for us. Of course, beyond the barbed wire that surrounded us things happened that we neither knew nor were allowed to know about. Perhaps her husband had been wounded or long awaited news about the children had failed to arrive. Who knows? It could also have been the start of a drunkard’s remorse. Feigned pity seems unlikely though.

‘Peterchen,’ the Olle had said – the commandant called her Peterchen and she was proud of it – ‘Peterchen, du sollst keine Steckrüben essen.’ Steckrüben were our daily fodder. And if the Olle wanted to protect her from that, it denoted a combination of flirting and national programme. And of course, as Blockführerin you cannot keep such matters from other women.

It is just as well that the commandant did not know that Irmy could be mollified by a child. If he had, she would have had to eat Steckrüben, and not a few either. She would also have resigned herself to it, because she would certainly have thought it right.

Man is whimsical, even when brought into line. And why not? He has two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears, and two nostrils, why should he not also have two souls? A right soul and a left soul, and why should the right soul know what the left soul is doing?

Whenever blonde Irmy had chatted enough, she would say, ‘So, jetzt geh’ ich mal ein bißchen prügeln im Frauenlager.’

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41 Wonderful time.
42 Oh! I can’t bear to suffer your misery here any longer.
43 Name of endearment for Petra or Patricia.
44 Petra, you shouldn’t eat swedes.
45 Now I’ll go and do a bit of beating in the women’s compound.
Her deed was as good as her word. Next to ours was a compound of tents filled with Polish women and women transported from Polish concentration camps. There were also Dutch women among them who, in an unobserved moment, would shout messages to us through the barbed wire fence, and from whom we learnt that the inferno had layers that went much deeper than our layer.

Irmy would descend into it, and when she resurfaced and returned to our huts, she would complain bitterly: Her arms ached so much from the beatings! The Polish women, she would say, had no Kultur.46

That is what she was like, our Bitch. What is she like now? Where is she, what is she doing?

It is not idle curiosity about a truly unimportant creature that gives rise to this question, but every time we read about present day Germany, the thought arises, ‘tua res agitur.’ 47 For those who use their intelligence, this thought is more powerful than other thoughts, and leaves little room for satisfaction over the destruction, hunger and chaos brought about.

As far as is known, blonde Irmy did not stand trial. She should not be confused with Irma Grese, whom we did not know in Bergen-Belsen and whose particular hunting ground seems to have lain more in the neighbourhood of Auschwitz. Some members of the S.S. were shot dead when the camps were entered. Of the many hundreds of thousands of guilty persons, so far only a few dozen have been brought to account. Probably it could not have been otherwise. Many of them walk about freely and it is not improbable that blonde Irmy, too, has got off scot-free.

And we – who have got off scot-free like them, though in a different way – are perhaps allowed to fantasise a little. I am imagining that she is wandering about somewhere amongst the heaps of rubble of a destroyed town or a partly destroyed village, some distance away from her children, divorced or estranged from her husband. She will probably have hooked some Tommy or other Allied soldier or sergeant, because she was not so very ugly. She is peddling cigarettes.

She and the Tommy do not understand each other too well, but they are two people who each need to replenish. Language comes by itself then.

He has heard and read many terrible things about the camps, and one evening when he discovers that she, too, has been there, asks, ‘What was it like there? Are they true, all those dreadful stories? You didn’t behave yourselves very well there.’

Blonde Irmy becomes angry. ‘What did you say, didn’t behave well? I did everything for those people there. Although I was with the S.S., I was never a Nazi. I wanted to have nothing to do with it. I did everything possible to get out of it. But nothing helped. I gave birth, and when the baby was a fortnight old, I had to rejoin my unit. It was terrible! They were pigs, those Jews. It was impossible to discipline them. They just threw their dirty water into the road. Then, the beds! Whatever you told them, it was complete disorder! Every day I had to pull ten, twenty or thirty blankets off, that’s how untidy it was. Had I looked really closely, there would have been fifty or a hundred. You should have seen ours, though! They were immaculate. Besides, the riches those people had, they had the most beautiful chess sets. The people there were not badly off. They had their children...
with them, whereas I had to take mine to a farmer. And their appearance! You should have seen them. Babies with rosy cheeks! And the women had nothing to do. I had to work eighteen hours a day, whereas they could crochet edgings on sheets. And the food? Do we have it so much better now? There were lots of Steckrüben, but they were delicious. I must have asked the commandant a hundred times if I could also have some, just once. He was a really good-natured man, such a jolly fat German. He always called me Peterchen. However, I didn’t get any Steckrüben to eat. I have to say though, that sometimes, if you did something for them, the people could be really appreciative. This dress, I’m wearing, they made it for me. That speaks chapters. And now they’re making propaganda against us.

The Polish women, on the other hand, were animals. Not a trace of Kultur. To understand it, you need to have seen with your own eyes how they used to attack the food, all at the same time. My arm used to ache from having to keep them apart. That’s how bad it used to be.’

The Tommy rubs his chin. A little shyly, he dares to ask: ‘Did you also have to beat sometimes?’

‘Ich? Mensch, das war verboten!’

Irmy had got excited, and the flush in her cheeks makes her not unattractive.

He gives her a cigarette: a Capstan, which she adores. She also knows the French. She always got on well with them. She spent seven weeks in France once. Herrliche Zeit. But all that business about the camps, das ist nicht wahr!

Irmy believes what she says. She is not even pretending, and that is the worst of all.

The Tommy’s thoughts had already turned elsewhere.

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48 Me? We weren’t allowed to!
49 Wonderful time.
50 it’s not true!
Under the linden

There was no linden. There was not even a blade of grass. Bergen-Belsen, like other concentration camps, was a burned down clearing, far from the road, with a number of greyish-green huts on it, built in straight lines. Some were built of stone and had served as stables in their heyday and others were of wood. Most of them had subsided, were dilapidated, had badly covered roofs and were draughty. Some of the roofs were in such a poor state that they let the rain in, causing the top bunks to be unusable and the floor to be covered in pools of water.

The ground in the camp is barren. In winter it consists of mud or ice, and in summer of sand, dust, and grit. Not a single worm wriggles through it, no butterfly flutters there and no dragonfly flies there. No sparrow comes looking for a seed there, no bird thinks of perching somewhere on a pole or a plank or of saying 'tweet, good morning.' Beyond the barbed wire, though, past a second barbed wire fence, someone is growing curly kale or vegetables for the S.S. Further along, near the usually out-of-bounds huts of these exalted gentlemen of the commando, attempts have been made to lay out a flower bed, and very occasionally we manage to steal a violet or a marigold from there.

A concentration camp is above all else ugly, pathetically ugly. It is not rational like a prison, but fantastically ugly, designed by an artistic scoundrel. Anyway, there is no linden there.

A first reaction to all this ugliness is hatred, but many also have feelings of mutual responsibility. There are egocentric and non-egocentric people within the barbed wire enclosure, just as there are outside of it. There are those who have the misfortune of not being able to step outside of themselves because they were not made that way. There are other, radiant, helpful, self-sacrificing people, who can do that. Sometimes one sees a lone figure crossing the empty muster ground - a human being like a melody. Distress is never so great for there not to be someone, a doctor, a nurse, a hut leader or even a foreman, who continues to care, to toil, and to stand up for his or her people. Eventually we had a Judenältester\(^{51}\) to whom we are all much indebted.

However, everything in the camp is under the curse of persecution. Many people are gathered together, but the absence of an organically developed community makes them lonely and turns everything they do – however noble or base – into a fragment.

Mothers care for their children, families remain close together, and there are even groups which for reasons of nationality or language, sometimes for the sake of an idea, show signs of solidarity. The family, the group, or the fragment is lonely then, and a family or group selfishness appears which is usually of a greater intensity than individual selfishness.

All this is the objective consequence of the conditions in which we find ourselves, which no one can alter in any way, of which most people are unaware.

\(^{51}\) Senior Jew.
and with which they therefore reproach each other. Many a person becomes filled with an unreasonable resentment that is none other than the unbearable experience of loneliness. Moreover, this resentment grows in intensity not only in relation to how one experiences the loneliness, but also in relation to how one copes with it, and is the cause of it, and is therefore disappointed in oneself. There is also theft, as there is everywhere where there is hunger and death. However, man steals not for reasons of hunger alone. He also steals because of loneliness and homesickness, because of a combination of reactions and emotions for which his language has no words and his intelligence has no understanding – that is, in so far that he steals at all. But the ordinary normal person, even though he is not so very virtuous and rather sparing with his neighbourly love, and rather sparing with self-sacrifice and rather greedy when there is something to be had, is reserved where it concerns another person’s property. He does not steal; he would rather die. Yet, for us it was a matter of life itself and the risk of discovery extremely small.

Of course, one noticed a certain degree of change taking place, especially among the youth who after all tend to be less inhibited and suffer more from hunger and homesickness. Nevertheless, as elsewhere, the number of thieves remained small, though more than elsewhere, they constituted a heavy burden.

This was because we lived crowded together in overfull warehouses of people where at best there was a permanent gloom and hours of complete darkness in which people were unable to recognise one another and could not tell who entered or left. It was like that from the start, but gradually conditions became increasingly cramped. The available space, fit for five or six thousand people at most, eventually held ten times that number. Bergen-Belsen became the concentration camp for the concentration camps evacuated in the East.

One merely needed to stretch out one’s hand to grab something: a mug, a sock, a shoe, a cap, a pair of trousers, or the desperately coveted bread that lay carefully hidden under the blankets and of which several days’ rations were distributed at a time. I do not know how many hands were stretched out, but much was grabbed.

We had to do something about it. We disposed of a Bünker, a cell, which was not much worse than a cell in a normal police station, and the Lagerälteste was empowered to punish. The camp, however, did not accept his police powers and demanded a professional and unbiased judicial administration. We established a court whose findings would serve as recommendations to him. However, in accordance with the principles of leadership, which had also been introduced in the camps, he retained full legal powers. With one exception, he upheld the recommendations.

The establishment and organisation of the court took place internally and in secret, as we did not know how the Germans would react to the idea. For in essence, judgements by judges conflicts with their sense of justice, and whatever they permitted practically in this respect was a concession to the past and to a never quite silent conscience that was fobbed off, as if with a dummy, with a form from the past.

Consequently, the court holds its sittings in the evening by the light of a single candle, or, when none is available, in the dark, therefore literally: without respect

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52 Camp elder, senior prisoner of the camp.
of persons. Its activities become known though. The Lagerälteste, being the person responsible, trembles but soon he starts to smile.

For the fat commandant thinks that it is a great idea! Wunderbar. He understands the situation. 'Wo tausende Leute zusammen sitzen muss mal was passieren!' But... his ancient German heart opens up. Justice must be done in public, on the village green.

'Unter der Linde, hören Sie, unter der Linde!'

There is no linden.

'Am Appellplatz, Sie Idiot. Ich komme selbst!'

The fat scoundrel is not such an ancient German with his linden as he makes out to be. Once more, the völkische principle is deception. He wants to be in control.

The Judenälteste may smile; the judges are horrified. What will remain of their independence under the control of the S.S., and will one conflict of conscience not follow another? However, the commandant promises complete freedom and strict respect for every judgement. He kept his word. Why should he not have done so? Whenever he felt like overindulging himself, he simply bypassed the court.

Consequently, the court, too, remained less than it was anywhere else in the world, a fragment.

However, fragment or no fragment, there they sat the three of them on the wide, empty muster ground that was nothing but a large expanse of nothingness, under the linden, that did not exist. Three judges, three wise, large bald lawyers’ heads, three Jews: on the left was a Yugoslav, in the middle a German as president, and on his right a Dutchman. The Yugoslav, a gentle, pure soul, who was separated from his wife and children, something that bore down heavily on him, cannot understand that he, a Balkan, should be taken seriously by his European colleagues and cannot rid himself of the thought that he was sitting there merely for show. For as long as I knew him, the Dutchman, in his so-called official capacity, was irritated to the extreme by the president, and the latter never failed to use a flowery sentence where a simple word would have sufficed. All three of them were first-rate lawyers and unimpeachable men, which they had proven that with many years of practice.

The public prosecutor, with the much too grandiose title of procurator-general, a title that befits his job like a toga on a skeleton, sits at the side. Thinking of him reminds me of that beautiful verse by the immortal Heinrich Heine:

Schad’ daß ich ihn nicht küssen kann,
Denn ich bin selber dieser gute Mann.

The sun burns mercilessly, as if it disapproved of the entire performance and wanted to scorch it. It is right, more so than the large crowd of prisoners that has gathered to enjoy the first public trial in Bergen-Belsen. It is Sunday afternoon,
the first free afternoon and the first diversion for many months. The S.S. has turned out in the shape of its most exalted representatives. They will sit there all afternoon, listening and sweating, the collars of their uniform unbuttoned, filled with suspense at the prospect of pulling a fast one on us.

A serious case is being heard. To combat the theft of bread a little, the hut leaders had designated a cupboard where the inmates could deposit their bread rations for safekeeping. Of course, such cupboards are kept locked, and the defendant is accused of having broken into such a cupboard in the night and of having stolen from it. He denies it.

Ten or twelve witnesses for the prosecution have been summoned and two for the defence. The accused has a defence lawyer who used to be one of Germany’s most distinguished lawyers.

It is a strange session, though, at which such a case is heard! Instead of their robes of office, judges, prosecutor, and lawyer are clad in their tatters and all are just as hungry as the thief is. They have felt the same temptations as he has felt and know the value of a piece of bread just as well as he does. Where else in the world can one find this?

Where else can one find a president or a procurator-general who at night sleeps in the bed adjoining the bed of a villain who has just stood trial at night? It is not to be recommended though, not so much in the interest of the law, but because it is so awkward with the blankets.

The investigation commences and it transpires from the witnesses’ statements that the accused had been caught at dead of night in a passage between beds where he had no business to be, in a strange disguise and with a pair of blue sunglasses on his nose. Close to the spot where he was caught they had found a piece of bread wrapped in a cloth that had lain in the cupboard. The padlock must have been forced with the help of a towel that the man had been wearing around his neck. There was more like that, and for all these things the accused man gives the strangest and most incredible explanations. The witnesses for the defence came to testify that in the past they had known him as a prominent commercial agent of good reputation, a man who was sensitive to other people’s needs, who in their opinion was incapable of the kind of deed of which he now stood accused.

A first-rate plea for the defence follows, the kind of plea, which precisely because of the hopelessness of the case, is extremely captivating. In the presence of the S.S., it called for courage.

Seeing how we can never complain nowadays, we had agreed to use this case as a chance opportunity to expose the more than miserable food provision. We could have saved ourselves the trouble, and should have known what kind of impression all this would make. The S.S. delighted in the tragedy being performed before their eyes and considered it an honour to have been the cause of it. Nur nicht schwach werden.¹⁰⁰ they advised.

The bench retires to the judge’s chambers, that is to say, to a spot under the burning sun, adjacent to the latrines. They return to the linden and the president delivers a long speech. There are numerous thefts and only a few can be cleared up. In the interest of the camp inmates, and in view of the seriousness of the case, the guilty man is sentenced to four weeks Bünker: twice a week on bread and water.

¹⁰⁰ Just don’t give in.
Approval and criticism follow. It is all a little more prickly than one is accustomed to when there is no barbed wire, but the sentence does not fail in its effect. For eight, ten, twelve days not a single theft is reported and already the procurator-general begins to fear having to sign on for the dole, but then the fun starts all over again.

The condemned man himself is in the bunker and whines incessantly that he is innocent. Each day he begs for pardon, fencing with his Braut,61 whom he left behind in Holland, the Braut, whom he hopes to see again. Nevertheless, he has to serve out his sentence and returns to the camp apparently unharmed. Of course, they cold-shoulder him there, because for once one can give vent to one’s hatred here with unbiased justification. And when such an opportunity presents itself, it must not to be missed.

After a while – perhaps two months later – the same man is caught again in an other hut at dead of night, again disguised, again wearing a towel, and again a cupboard is forced open and again bread is stolen, which again is found close by him. Again he stubbornly maintains his innocence, and according to the preliminary investigation, there is again not the slightest doubt of his guilt.

I try to get him to confess. It is all that might still help him a little. It is in vain, though. However, a few days later he returns of his own accord, drops to his knees, hides his head in his arms, and commences to cry. A full confession follows. He cannot bear it any longer...

‘What can’t you bear any longer?’
‘That I lied.’

He is not too concerned about the thefts. But ‘that I should have lied, oh, oh, that I should have lied...!’

There he lies, nothing but a rag, and he starts to talk of his Braut again. The Braut, whom he left behind in Holland and whom he hopes to see again. Is there no limit to the depth of man’s humiliation then?

I despise him and am sickened by all this, by our entire existence. Who will stoop over this wreck, raise it up, and say something that will set him free? How can one tolerate the fragment, such a loneliness as that of a wretch among wretches, how can such a fragment tolerate itself? ‘You were prepared to forgive me for having stolen, but now that I’ve lied, nothing remains between us any longer.’

The procurator-general begins to understand the wrong he himself has committed. Am I a clergyman, though, or a therapist? I am the procurator-general and I shall summon him and again demand that he be punished, and I will say: ‘For the second time this man has burgled in the night.’

‘What’s the man babbling on about with his Braut?’ asks the president, who happens to be present.

‘Why is there no one to reply ‘Because there’s a remedy for sorrow, only one remedy.’ He senses that, the scamp, and that’s what he’s begging for. That remedy is bodily warmth.’

Again, we are sitting under the linden, the three large, wise heads of the judges and to the side, the man with the much too grandiose title. There is much less

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61 Fiancée.
interest. It is a weekday, and because he has confessed, there is no further excitement in the case. The Germans are absent. The weather is bad. The non-existent linden has been moved to the corner of a hut.

Our burglar fails to turn up. News arrives from the hospital: he is dead.

Really? We knew he was ill, but he had given a strong impression of malingering. Was it that bad? Did he manage to say anything?

‘Yes,’ comes the reply, ‘he said Scheiße.’

‘Scheiße? That’s a curse, a curse...’

‘No, Mr President, it’s a terrible prayer.’

‘Next case,’ says the president.

When the president says, ‘Next case,’ it is as if the clock is striking, as if one hears History itself stumbling on the stairs.

The next case is a case of the president versus the procurator-general. A complaint has been entered against a woman who had taken three rations of bread from a neighbour at table and was caught immediately after the deed. The entire camp knows about it and cries shame. It is a woman who was once of high standing. People insist that she should be punished.

‘The case must be prosecuted,’ argues the president.

‘No, I know that woman. She doesn’t steal. She says she thought the bread was hers.’

‘It’s just an excuse. Her own bread was found in her suitcase.’

‘She says she doesn’t know how it got there.’

‘She put it there herself.’

‘I, too, believe that, but perhaps she had forgotten. That woman did not steal intentionally. She may have been confused or a little muddled.’

‘The camp doesn’t understand that. It calls that class justice. The authority of the court is at stake.’

We decide to refer the matter for a second opinion to a psychiatrist. A detailed report follows.

Conclusion: In all probability, it was a case of Fehlhandlung caused by hunger. I am unable to translate that fine word. Perhaps one ought to say ‘unconscious mistake.’ Anyway, I do not prosecute. I do not feel like it. The president has to accept it. He smiles derisively.

Then, after a few weeks, there is a second complaint. In an unobserved moment the woman had removed someone else’s pan of food from the stove and had poured its contents into her own pan. It turns into a serious case, there is little doubt about the facts, and the procurator-general tweaks his ear: naive idiot, you fell for that.

‘This time you will prosecute, won’t you?’ asks the president.

‘Let’s wait a few days.’

In those few days, the woman helps the procurator-general out of the impasse. She dies.

‘It’s just as well we didn’t prosecute that woman,’ the president sighs, and everyone agrees with him.

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62 Shit
‘Wanting to judge too much is not good,’ someone says. ‘We don’t need to do everything. Some of it can be left to the Good Lord.’

Someone else then raises his eyebrows in surprise and asks, ‘Religion?’

‘Yes, Mr President, paganism, under the linden.’

‘Next case.’

A boy of about fourteen comes shuffling under the linden. He has stolen all kinds of things, wherever he could find them. He is mentally retarded, though. His father and mother work in the shoes, that is to say, like most of the prisoners, they have to unstitch old worn-out shoes, collected throughout Germany, and cut out the reusable pieces of leather. They do that fourteen hours a day. It is dirty work, but useful. The Scharführer himself explained it to us minutely.

‘Seht Ihr, wir Deutsche sind Habenixe. Und Ihr, Saujuden, sollt uns reich machen. Deshalb sollt Ihr mal tüchtig arbeiten lernen. Ihr Lumpenpack! Verstanden?’

‘Jawohl, Herr Scharführer, hat ja in der Zeitung gestanden.’

‘Richtig, in der Zeitung.’

In this way, because of the needs of the Germany economy, a scruffy boy wanders all day through the squalid huts, searching for something to eat. Should he happen to find something, he quickly stuffs it into his mouth. Then when he is caught he denies it at first but after half an hour owns up to it. On his return in the evening, his exhausted father has just enough strength left to give the boy a hiding and punish him by withholding his food. Because everything the boy steals, the parents have to repay, of course. The boy goes to bed crying, promises twenty times over that he will not do it again but the next day continues to steal.

He is not the only boy who steals, there are others; but because he is retarded, ugly, and rather misshapen, he is the first to attract attention. Consequently, he is often blamed when someone else did the stealing. After half an hour, he always owns up. Sometimes, when we investigate the case carefully, it transpires that he made a false confession. And why not? That way people stopped bothering him.

As no one knows what to do with such a boy in Bergen-Belsen, it is left to the court to decide. However, who will reproach the court for being at its wits’ end, too? In the end, it is decided to do with the boy what has so often been done in vain with other criminal youths: he is given a mentor.

The mentor is a friendly and good-natured man, who in his earlier life had handled many probation cases. Thus, the boy’s father is pleased, his mother is pleased, the court is pleased, and the boy himself is also pleased, of course. Because now he has a Sir, and the other boys, who always bully him so much, do not have a Sir. Then the mentor is put on transport and is gassed somewhere, and then the boy no longer has a mentor and he steals and goes to bed crying, and no one is pleased any more.

The boy is placed under the supervision of another mentor. That mentor is hungry, though, and dies.

63 ‘You see, we Germans are have-nots. And you filthy Jews are going to help us become rich. That’s why you will learn to work hard. You ragbags! Understood?’
64 ‘Yes Mr Sergeant, it said so in the newspaper.’
65 ‘Correct, in the newspaper.’
Nevertheless, the boy no longer receives a hiding from his father and mother in the evenings, and he no longer goes to bed crying. For his mother is dying, and when his mother is dead, his father dies, and then there follows a period in which there is not a single complaint about the boy any more. He no longer roams through the huts, is no longer ejected from anywhere, and the other boys no longer bully him. The boy is ill.

The procurator-general goes to look for him and finds him somewhere in the semidarkness, at the back of a hut. ‘Well, my boy, how goes it?’ The question is superfluous. I can see it at once.

He raises his head, looks at me with his hollow, far too large eyes and asks, ‘Haven’t you got a piece of swede for me?’

For a long time, there has been no bread. Nevertheless, his neighbours have tucked their blankets tightly between the bed planks, for there is always something to steal. After all, the boy is a well-known thief for whom one must remain on one’s guard.

After a few days, that too, is no longer necessary. The boy will never steal again.

They all died, the thieves of Bergen-Belsen, and I do not know whether they stole with the grabbing hand of approaching death, or because they became so dispirited by what they felt to be their moral destruction that they could no longer restrain themselves. Only a few thoroughly good-for-nothings among them survived, such through and through rogues, who stole for the sake of stealing, l’art pour l’art, and who will probably continue doing so.

The bunker was closed. Commandant Kramer did not like the Bünker. He had other means. A thief was given Prügel, sixty two-five mighty blows on his backside with a stout truncheon. The non-existent linden, too, fell under those blows, because when the judges could no longer decide the punishment, the court, too, died of Kreislaufschwäche.

The Yugoslav did not see his wife and children again, and no judge could or needed to be irritated by the president any more. They died, and their replacements died, and the lawyers and the witnesses died, and also that lonely figure, who could walk across the muster ground like a melody, stopped being a fragment and died.

Then it became quiet, so quiet in fact, that when one held one’s breath, one could hear the imperturbable voice of the great invisible Judge saying: ‘I’ve forgiven them. Next case.’

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66 Beatings.
67 Poor circulation.
Because of a sentence

Every morning at around ten o’clock, when the prisoners who had remained behind the barbed wire fence had to assemble for roll-call on the large muster ground, the horses would arrive.

It belonged to the programme, or rather, to the stage management. Because a kind of stupor, in part brought on by hunger, in part by a constant fear, sometimes caused us to see events in Bergen-Belsen not as reality any longer but as theatre, or – still more unreal – as shadow pantomime, as cinema. Were we really there, as we were, or was it our shadow that we saw performing there in an all too sinister play? Many a person had left his soul and senses at home together with everything else that had ever been dear to him, and although he recognised himself in the camp, it was like recognising himself in a photograph. What he now calls ‘memory’ is a dialogue between his soul that he left at home, and his shadow that returned. That is why it is so difficult sometimes to explain ‘how it really was’, as difficult as describing a dream accurately.

Something always escapes, not so much a fact, but something of the atmosphere and the oppression. It was cinema, it was shadow pantomime seeing the indistinct shapes of men and women on the borderline between day and night stepping out of the dismal, stuffy huts, into the detested twilight of drizzle and mist. Unsure, hesitating and sleepy, someone can be seen walking as though feeling his way in search of a fleeting greeting from his wife, or because she was bringing him a small piece of bread. Sometimes they avoid each other intentionally to avoid learning the truth about each other. Unwashed or barely washed, shivering in their shabby rags still wet from the previous day, their stomachs filled with just a bite of food that makes them feel even hungrier than they felt before, the shadows shuffle towards each other to fall in for the work details, and all they have to say to each other is a word of dissatisfaction about yesterday’s meagre soup.

It was cinema, watching them march out in rows of five, a Kapo barking ahead, an endless procession of emaciated creatures, a funeral procession bearing an invisible flag of fear for the group of constantly amused Scharführer waiting at the gate to count them. Mützen ab! The men bare their heads. At the rear of the procession, a few hobble along on frozen feet and broken clogs. They cannot walk so fast, and soon they will be kicked for it and be beaten and hurried along.

In some camps, this daily marching took place to the accompaniment of music played by large orchestras composed of prisoners who had been provided with all kinds of instruments. In Bergen-Belsen one heard only strident screeches: ‘Kommando ein und zwanzig: Drei und fünfzig Lagereinsassen. Kommando zwei und zwanzig: Zwei hundred und dreißig Lagereinsassen.’ Each Kapo calls out the number of his party and the number of his slaves. For this and similar services he is paid in cigarettes.

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68 Ca-aps off!
69 Squad number twenty-one; fifty-three prisoners, squad number twenty-two; two hundred and thirty prisoners.
70 Smartly.
Beyond the gates, the S.S. guards with their bloodhounds at the leash, stand waiting. A strip of light appears on the horizon. It’s a new day. A new threat. It is all cinema. It was not taken from life though; it was born of human design.

Similarly it was cinema when a few hours later, at around roll-call time, the horses arrived. They were two large, fat horses, brown in colour, at least in so far as one could still speak of colour in the camp. They proceeded lazily and slowly, straight through the slowly and reluctantly forming square of prisoners. Were they dream horses? Had they perhaps been human beings themselves in a former life and been enchanted and doomed by some wicked enemy? Why had they been banished to the barren, lonely Lüneburger Heide\textsuperscript{71} where the endless compounds of Bergen-Belsen were located? They were a pair of very sad horses.

They pulled a high cart and on top of the cart stood a giant, a Rottenführer (S.S. Lance-Corporal), a colossus of indifference. The horses’ feet stamped on the ground, the wheels crunched over the gravel, the cart and the heavy coffins, with which it was laden, rattled, and still it seemed as if everything moved along silently. Had I not known it to be real, so real that one could weep over it, I would have said that it was fantasy, a vision, something like the myth of the ancient Greeks, which tells us about the banks of the Styx, where the shadows of the unburied hover in a restless swirling, and about Charon the ferryman who carries them across in his boat. Here we experience this, on a muster ground filled with a furious group of prisoners, men, women, children, a Rottenführer, a cart and two large, heavy horses.

Near the hospital – Revier in German – which bordered onto the muster ground, they about turned. The giant said ‘Brr’ and the cart came to a halt. Silently, a couple of shabby looking men unloaded the coffins. The horses had come to fetch the dead.

Then funeral and roll-call took place simultaneously and alongside each other. Once the prisoners had slowly and with difficulty lined up behind one another in columns of five, and the children who romped about, teased each other, threw stones, played tag or were crying and hanging on their mothers skirts, had been brought to rest, and when little Rachel standing in a circle of women had secretly done her piddle, someone shouted ‘Achtung’\textsuperscript{72} and silence fell. Wilhelm, a tall lithe customer, probably a schoolmaster, fully conscious of his position, would arrive into that silence to count the prisoners. Because he did the counting, they called him Wilhelm Tell.\textsuperscript{73} He was one of those powerful men that every country except Germany turns into acceptable people. Or else the red Müller might arrive, a fat homosexual, with a pink pig’s head and a red kerchief around his neck.

If roll-call tallied, it would take one or two hours, if it did not tally, three, four, five, or six hours. Alternatively, they would repeat it, two or three times in one day, sometimes until late into the evening.

No one was ever able to understand the practical purpose of these roll-calls that undermined so many prisoners. Escape from the camp was quite impossible and

\textsuperscript{71} Lüneburg Heath.

\textsuperscript{72} Attention!

\textsuperscript{73} Because the verb to count in Dutch is ‘tellen’. William Tell
therefore never took place or was even attempted. The Germans knew this just as well as we did, so their counting was not some kind of audit.

Roll-call was primarily a deliberate daily torment... Though for the S.S., I believe, it was also something more than that and it is as well to know it. They counted their prey like a miser counting his money, with sensuous rapture and excitement. Roll-call was their sacred act, an inebriation with an unquenchable thirst on the magnitude of their power. To say that roll-call had a religious meaning for them and that the muster ground was their temple is not being metaphorical.

The horses waited alongside that temple. Our compound in Bergen-Belsen was a Vorzugsplatz. One of the privileges we enjoyed was that the dead, unlike those in the adjoining compound, were not tossed naked onto a cart but were taken to the crematorium in a coffin, which would always return empty again. The ceremonial of washing and dressing the corpses was not prohibited and was therefore carried out with the utmost dedication and devotion until we had no more strength left, not even for that.

Another privilege was that the camp was a family camp and that the next of kin of the deceased were entitled to accompany them as far as the gate.

Thus, it happened daily that while the red Müller or Wilhelm Tell were counting, a few mourners would line up behind the cart and horses. Must I depict a dance macabre now? Our painters represent death as a skeleton with a large sickle. All I can see is Rottenführer Charon with a cigarette between his lips and the two mournful, enchanted horses in front of him. A murmur spread through the columns on the muster ground, ‘How many today?’ One person says something to another, a few words about the dead, half funeral oration, and half gossip. Again, the invisible flag of fear flies above everyone’s head.

‘Schweigen! Appell!’

They are afraid of the horses. Today they collected a child that was born in Westerbork and died in Bergen-Belsen. What has this child seen in its short life, and what impressions does it carry away in its still unawakened consciousness about the short span between the eternity into which it had not yet been born and the eternity into which it has transferred? It died, but can its indictment ever die? My God, even if we are all guilty, this child was innocent.

The horses have fetched a man who had loved his wife and who was in the prime of his life. With her hand resting on the cart, she walks dreamily along with bowed head and her tears fall on the sacred muster ground. When she returns she will join the endless army of widows in this world and be as lonely as they are. In future she will seek her bed at night without joy, and in the morning there will no longer be anyone to say: ‘Good morning, did you sleep well?’

The horses have fetched a mother for whom someone was waiting somewhere on earth, and a son, and a scholar, and so many, many more.

Each time the mourners followed the horses across the muster ground and along the narrow path alongside the huts to where the barbed wire ended. From there they followed the horses with their eyes, until they had disappeared somewhere in the distance. There was much crying on that spot near the barbed

74 Camp for privileged prisoners.
75 Silence! Roll-call!
wire and every day, while the red Müller and Wilhelm Tell were counting, a man would stand silently saying an old prayer. And each day a few would say it with him:

‘Praised and hallowed be His great Name.’

Then, when one began to think about it – and there were people in the camp who could think extremely well, especially when they had to work hard – one was surprised sometimes at the differences that existed between people. It was just as if one noticed it for the first time.

Labi had also said that to me once, but in his own way. Labi was a schoolmaster just like Wilhelm Tell, but he came from Benghazi. When the Germans had victoriously defeated their enemy in North Africa, they did what they had done elsewhere and dragged along with them the groups of Jews that they encountered in Tobruk, Benghazi, Tripoli, and in other towns, first to camps in Italy and then to Poland. They shared the same fate as everyone else. However, those Jews among them who, through some hocus-pocus of international law, held the British nationality (or at least a British passport), they carted off to Bergen-Belsen. Consequently, one day, to everyone’s surprise, a couple of transports arrived comprising several hundred people who looked as if they had been carried off by general Titus in 70 A.D. from devastated Jerusalem.

That is exactly how they appeared. The sun that had shone down on them, and the air that had surrounded them, had preserved them. They wore the same kind of clothes as their forefathers had worn, they had the same bearing, the same manners and customs, and although it might have changed a little, they literally held the same belief. Now, that belief instructed them not to eat certain kinds of food.

Is it a wonder then that Labi, their schoolmaster, a young and most God-fearing man, should despise the camp food? Occasionally, a piece of horsemeat would float in the soup, and eating horsemeat is prohibited.

Indeed, these prohibitions apply generally, but never in circumstances where their observance would endanger life or health. Naturally, such circumstances existed in the camp, and all dietary laws had therefore been withdrawn. Indeed, religious opinion held that their observance was forbidden precisely because of the threat to life.

It applied to Europe, it applied to Africa, but it did not apply to a schoolmaster who had just arrived from burning hot Jerusalem. Labi lives according to the law and was in no doubt. Death or no death, he does not eat horsemeat.

Off course, one person wants to arrive bearing a laurel wreath as a sign of heroism, and another, coming from a more rationalistic world, says ‘this is not heroism, it is fear, or at least it is superstition, a taboo.’ A third says ‘it is a compulsive notion.’ We know from experience that one has to eat in order to live. Labi, however, belongs to those people who brush experience aside and believes that by not eating something he can mollify the Deity and remain alive for precisely that reason. A fourth says: ‘What does Labi say?’

Someone asks him. Because Labi is a man like a lily, and it would be a great pity if the horses were to come to fetch Labi, too. Labi must be persuaded to eat the soup. Of course, immediately after he arrived he had set up a school for his North African children. The school is so picturesque and his children so handsome and
Labi so odd, that the commandant lets him have his way, even though every kind of education was strictly forbidden and could only be carried out illegally, (and with extreme difficulty!)

Labi had also taught his children to sing Hebrew songs.

The people of Israel live,
The people of Israel live.

The commandant and the S.S. looked on, understood not a single syllable of it, of course, and thought it was marvellous. Indeed, it was charming to hear those youngsters with their hoarse, false voices bleat out what all Jewish children in all the camps in Europe sang:

Hail us, hail us!
How dear our fate,
How beautiful our heritage,
Hail us, hail us!

No, Labi could not be criticised for anything, providing he ate the soup.

‘Labi, why won’t you eat some soup?’
But Labi turns his head away.

‘Labi, if you don’t eat, the horses will come to fetch you.’
Whereupon Labi whispers, with an eternal melancholy and seriousness, like an acknowledgement to himself ‘Because there’s a difference between clean and unclean!’

However much one may oppose Labi and his obduracy, the only fitting response to such a sentence, is silence. Because taboo or no taboo, obsession or faith in God, courage or superstition, neither the schoolmaster Wilhelm Tell nor the red Müller are capable of saying anything similar. Nor can Goebbels with his propaganda, and least of all the Führer aller Germanen.

There is a difference between clean and unclean and we know, even though Labi himself may not know it, that it is not about soup or horsemeat, which Labi rejects only as an ultimate symbol, but about the first sentence of human civilisation. The recognition that some things are allowed, and others that are not allowed.

It was because of that first sentence, uttered long ago by the Jewish nation – or at least for that reason, too – that Adolf Hitler hated, persecuted, and killed them. He was not the first to do so, nor will he be the last.

There are no clean or unclean people, at least, not in principle. There are no chosen nations. However, there are those who know of a dividing line between what is and what is not permitted, and others who not only do not know it, but who do not want to know it either.

Between them, there exists no peace.

I do not know what happened to Labi. He was put on transport, and I fear that one day the brown horses that every morning walked everywhere, in all the camps throughout Europe, came to fetch him too. Because someone who does not even eat the soup in a camp, has no chance at all.
But if they did come to fetch Labi, something of him, the schoolmaster from Benghazi, will nevertheless have remained behind, a sentence. That sentence is more powerful than the horses of Death and the Rottenführer Charon with his cart. It is what sustained many a person. It is the counterforce that fought the invisible battle, invisible, but no less important than that of weapons.

And because it was all like that, it is possible that – slaves or no slaves – no one in fact had subjected himself, although every one in his own way: that an old man, who had longed to see his children again, could resign himself to the fact that the horses would fetch him, knowing that he was an enemy of his enemies, because he had tried to live according to that sentence; or that a young woman who did not believe in anything and had never believed anything, had smuggled a small bible with her when the S.S. sent her to the bunker because of some trifling matter, not to seek comfort in it, but, filled with resistance, to look for that sentence; or that another poor woman who that morning had walked behind the cart on which her husband was lying and who had poured out her tears at the end of the barbed wire, had spread a white tablecloth on the table on a Friday evening on which she served her children their food.

Then when they had come to the end of their meal, they began to sing according to ancient custom. A very, very old song, the song of the exiles from Babylon:

Those who sow in tears,
in happiness will reap.
On 8 April 1945, five or six empty trains, each some fifty wagons long, were standing in the station of the small town of Belsen on Luneburg Heath. The station consisted only of a number of platforms, three or four parallel to one another, and a couple more adjoining at an angle. There was no sign of any station building or waiting room. There was also no ticket office or ticket barrier. None of those was needed. The station was the loading and unloading point for the inhabitants of the extensive neighbouring barracks and the series of camps which, by means of the many side roads leading off the main road, and barred by one barrier after another, one barbed wire fence after another, and flanked by all kinds of watchtowers, were accessible only to the chosen. The chosen were prisoners of war, political prisoners, and Jews. None of us knew how many people were concentrated there. Taking all the different groups and sections together, it may have been a hundred thousand.

When a German tells you that he knew nothing of the camps or of the conditions that prevailed there, he may not be lying. However, it does not exonerate him. The question is, whether he could and should have known. Whatever, the S.S. liked secrecy. Perhaps because it instils greater fear than openness does. To let a nation guess and suspect that ‘somewhere, something terrible is happening’ is perhaps a more effective means for a police state to rule by than to tell it the truth. Something else may have played a part as well. When a cat has caught something tasty, it drags it to a corner where it can feast in secret. That, more or less, is how the S.S. dragged its prey to a secret place where it feasted behind closed doors.

The trains on the so-called station of Bergen-Belsen consisted partly of coal wagons. A few were covered with a kind of improvised, tattered tarpaulin. Most were open. When the Russians began to push forward in Poland, prisoners were transported in these wagons for days and nights on end, for weeks on end, through rain, snow, frost, and storm, often without food or water, from east to west. The Germans abandoned everything, except their prey.

The trains on each side of the first platform, on the other hand, were clearly meant as luxury. They were composed of aged, discarded third and fourth-class carriages and old closed goods wagons. Admittedly, many of the windows were broken, but there were traces of repairs having been started. The floors were swept and the toilets clean. After we had occupied these trains for just half a day, it was all one big dunghill.

For the trains were meant for us. Apparently, one fine day, Satan, whom we know from the story of Job, the sufferer, began to get bored with the camps. For however much the wretchedness may grow, as soon as it becomes monotonous, it stops making an impression, and it had indeed become monotonous. Horror’s fantasy had become depleted. Something new was called for, so Satan said, ‘We’ll
put the whole lot on wheels and drive it around the world.’ At that moment the
voice of a Scharführer could be heard, ‘Antreten!’

It was rumoured that the British were about sixty kilometres west of Bergen-
Belsen. The IPA claimed that Hanover had fallen, but the IPA also denied it.

The IPA was the rumour. Rumour was received with derision, and in the
imagination, derision had evoked a Jewish Press Agency and of its initials had
formed a word that immediately gained general popularity in all the camps: IPA.

The IPA spoke daily. It managed to raise or dash our spirits at will. It boasted
about its reliability and laughed at its deception. It debated with itself. The IPA
confirmed its assertions or contradicted itself, and usually did both
simultaneously.

Lately, the IPA has been exceptionally talkative. It talked to everyone it met,
and everyone searched it out. The tension mounted from one day to the next, and
finally from hour to hour. Nobody knew what would happen, but everyone knew
that the end was near...

‘The kitchens are closing. Bremen has fallen. Every three persons will be
issued with a half ration of bread that has to last for two days. They will drive us
into the woods and leave us to our fate. The S.S. is packing its suitcases. They are
burning the archives. We are staying here. The Ältestenrat is negotiating.’ The
IPA rambles on and has free rein because the newspapers that once managed to
reach the camp quite regularly and illegally no longer came. Satan had said:
‘We’re going on a journey.’ The Scharführer shouted, ‘Antreten! Antreten!’

The prediction of the pessimists, as they are called, who know that the cat toys
with the mouse but never lets go, came about. The camp was being evacuated.

Germans are not in the habit of doing something like that without a promise.
They deluded us with the promise of exchange to Switzerland. Had they not done
so, we would still have had hope. However, little by little we had gained sufficient
experience to know that a promise of salvation meant an announcement of doom.
Nevertheless, no one believes in his own doom, instead he maintains the illusion
of salvation until the end of his very last moment. Then, when that moment has
passed, he starts anew, providing he is still able to do so.

Besides, it was beautiful weather on 8 April 1945.

The sick were to be taken to the station in lorries. The healthy had to walk.
However, the distinction between healthy or sick was no longer very clear.

A scramble that became ever more desperate ensued. The evacuation took
more than a day. The strongest, the boldest, secured a place. The weak, the
hesitant, arrived too late. They had to go on foot.

There was little or no food. During the past few weeks, there had been no
bread, or so little, that no one could remember it. Instead, we had been issued with
a few raw swedes and now and then, at irregular intervals, a container of swede
soup arrived which on rare occasions was thickened with a little flour that would
immediately send us into a state of ecstasy then.

The British now claim that the Germans soon may receive fewer calories than
the rations in Bergen-Belsen used to contain. It is quite possible: on paper. I still

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86 S.S. Sergeant.
87 Fall in!
88 Council of elders.
have to meet the first German who had nothing to eat for six days running. In the 
Häftlinge\textsuperscript{79} compound next to ours, it was the order of the day, if not the rule. We 
had it much better. On the last day we even received winter carrots. Granted, they 
were rotten, but they still had edible parts to them. The rotten parts we cut out and 
tossed over the fence to the other prisoners who stood begging for them. However, 
one had to be careful then that the guard did not see it. He would shoot, right on 
target.

Evacuation means fighting, shouting, punching, quarrelling, pushing, and securing 
a place for oneself. For children it means crying and wailing, for mothers 
snapping, for the sick shivering with fever, and for everyone, being herded, 
beaten, and afraid.

We, who must walk, carry our luggage on our backs. We left behind as much 
as possible, but everyone still has a pair of trousers, a shirt, a pair of socks, usually 
inherited from a dead person in the camp, and a book, that he does not want to 
part with under any circumstance. It is all in the rucksack. He has also gathered as 
many swedes and carrots as he could, because he realises that there will be 
nothing to eat. He also does not part with a dish or a pan, a mug, a spoon, or a 
knife. Of course, he also has his blankets to lug along, as many as possible, and a 
pillow. Altogether, it is terribly heavy and in his present condition, almost too 
heavy to hump. Nevertheless, all this is called being bevorzugs.\textsuperscript{80} The other 
prisoners are not troubled by luggage. They have nothing.

Some amongst us are also without anything. They were robbed.

Onwards! Where to? They are clearing the camp. The archives are being taken 
to the crematorium by the cartload, to stoke the fire to burn the corpses. The 
British are advancing.

By the side of the road at the end of the camp, behind barbed wire, a large 
orchestra, composed of Kapos, is playing jazz. It is Sunday. They look healthy 
and clean in freshly laundered blue-striped prison uniform. They play superbly. 
We stop for a moment to listen. When the piece has ended, we applaud, just like 
on the dance floor of a Parisian casino. The conductor bows obligingly, the 
drummer smiles, and the saxophonists tap the moisture from their instruments. 
Then a new piece commences, with a sentimental singer, whose crooning follows 
us.

Onwards! I am losing my rucksack. A polite gentleman, in prison uniform, 
comes to help me. What a favour! ‘Are you German?’ ‘No, Czech, from Prague.’ 
‘Pleased to meet you, from Amsterdam.’ Names are irrelevant. We will never 
meet again, but will certainly never forget each other.

Onwards! They are raising the barriers. We are leaving. Someone next to me is 
talking about the day’s dead, and about tomorrow’s, and the following day’s dead 
who have been left behind. There are good and old friends among them. It is not 
possible to dwell on them, though. They are raising the barriers.

There lies the road and the woods, and a bird is hopping. It is difficult to walk 
on swollen feet and carrying a rucksack on one’s back. No one can keep it up for 
more than ten minutes. However, the soldiers who are guarding us are old and 
stooping men for whom nothing matters any more. The distance to the station is

\textsuperscript{79} Political prisoners.

\textsuperscript{80} Privileged.
six kilometres. We have all day to get there. Everything smells so pleasantly, too. We inhale and sniff the air.

We meet endless convoys of prisoners who are being brought to Bergen-Belsen from the east. Why? Only someone who knows what is Organisation understands that. ‘When the enemy advances from the east, retreat to the west.’ That is Befehl.1 When the enemy advances from the west, retreat to the east – that is also Befehl. That they must meet somewhere no one has thought about. For if one did think about such things, the entire Organisation would be superfluous.

The convoys greet one another: ‘Where are you going?’
‘We don’t know.’
‘Where are we?’
‘In Bergen-Belsen.’
‘What’s the food like?’
‘Marvellous, every day potatoes with goulash.’

We try to give the others some of the things that are too heavy for us. A Scharführer immediately responds to this attempt with a mighty blow of his truncheon. Weg Sie, Sauhund! At least I learnt now why I am carrying a rucksack.

The prisoners have their orchestras. In the middle of the group they carry violins, cellos, basses, drums, timpani, trumpets, bassoons, flutes, copper horns, in short, every imaginable kind of instrument. The group consists of ‘Mussulmen’; those are the worn-out creatures on their final journey. They walk in rows of five, often with linked arms. If they were to let go of each other, they would topple over. The strongest march in front, then the weaker, then the still weaker, then the still much weaker, and stumbling along at the very end, are those who can go no farther. Occasionally, someone grubs with his bony fingers in the cracks between the paving stones in the hope of finding a grain somewhere. Once he has gone by we encounter the corpses. They, of course, are lying in the road, and after the corpses, we meet a new convoy.

How many convoys have passed by like this? When we were still in the camp, people would stream past the barbed wire sometimes for days on end. One beautiful still summer’s evening, Polish women passed by, first labourers, then women carrying bags on their backs, women with prams, and with children. Some of the groups were well dressed; others were as beggarly as we were. They do not speak, do not laugh, or call out, and utter not a sob or lament. Even their footsteps are silent. In the middle is a young child with a small dog on a rope. Our children exclaim, ‘A doggie!’ Where does such a dog come from in a transport of prisoners? What does it live on? Does some child share its last piece of bread with a dog? A woman falls silently to the ground. Quietly the others try to comfort her. Only a Scharführer screeches like a crow in a graveyard, Rasch, Rasch. Weiter! 84

81 an order.
82 S.S. Sergeant.
83 Out of the way, you swine!
84 Quickly, quickly. Keep going!
That is how it is today: one convoy after another. From one of them, I hear my name being called. It is an old acquaintance from an earlier life. Are we dead now?

_Ausgebombt_ German civilians are camping in the woods. There are also French prisoners of war and Russians, pretending to be working. And the closer we get to the station, the more Häftlinge lie in the road. They have reached their final destination.

The luggage is beginning to feel so heavy that we even have to throw away the swedes that we are carrying. We will manage, somehow.

The train is the last train to carry Jews or prisoners from west to east. Hundreds of them went that way. When we arrive, it is already overcrowded. It was to carry two thousand four hundred people in all. Of these two thousand four hundred people, two thousand four hundred have dysentery. Additionally, we have seven hundred people who are sick with typhus, paratyphoid, rickettsia, camp-typhus, spotted fever, and similar diseases. Oedema cases are not included. It is crawling with lice. All this is about to set out on a journey together, around the world.

The sick are lying partly in separate wagons, partly elsewhere on the floor. People fight for a place on the floor in the corridors. There is no water, not one drop.

Rumour has it, though, that there is bread, butter and sausage. Some even saw it with their own eyes. The rations will be handed out the following day. They will have to last for a number of days, although they are the normal rations for one and a half days. It then transpires that the S.S. itself has stolen half of the sausage. They advise us to exercise the greatest restraint as no one knows how long the journey will last and the S.S. says that ‘assumes no responsibility’. I have no idea what it means, but it is always good to say something like that.

Yes, we will restrain ourselves! We swear it to ourselves. We will be strong, really strong, and not succumb to hunger. When the long awaited rations arrive, everything is finished within ten minutes.

It is not so terrible. Alongside the train lies a pile of beetroot and a pile of swedes. We steal as much as we can. It will keep us going for a few days.

Evening falls, night sets in. The sky turns black, then suddenly bright yellow and white and red. We hear bombs falling in the distance. The front is approaching. Sirens. Aeroplanes overhead. The train does not budge; it seems paralysed. Will we be liberated now?

Afterwards the sky turns black again and everything grows still. We decide to go to sleep.

Up till now we had a bunk. But Satan said, ‘We shall travel without bunks.’ We will have to sleep sitting upright, therefore.

Man cannot sleep while seated. He can doze a little. There is no space to lean, either. We are pressed together arm by arm, knee by knee. Next to me on the floor lies a sick woman. The passage between the seats is filled with people, sleeping, sick, and dying. Those who have to go outside step on arms and legs or on a head.

Day breaks. Convoys of prisoners are arriving. Just like yesterday and the day before yesterday. Fifteen political prisoners who had hidden themselves amongst us are caught. Someone betrayed them. Why? Perhaps he was too sleepy. The fifteen are being executed now. Shall we be liberated?

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85 Bombed out.
Once again evening falls; it becomes night again. Everything repeats itself, the fantastic glowing sky followed by black obscurity. We shall have to sleep seated upright again. Suddenly we feel a lurch. We are moving. We will not be liberated.

Onwards! Where to? The IPA says they are taking us to the east front where the Germans will let the Russians shoot the train to pieces. I doubt it. They prefer to do such things themselves and deny others that pleasure. The IPA says we will be set down on a bridge and it will be blown up. The IPA says that we are going to Theresienstadt and from there to Switzerland. The IPA says that we are going to Lübeck and from there to Sweden.

The IPA was to chatter fourteen more days. For fourteen days, Satan had the last train driven through Germany, always several kilometres behind the constantly advancing and constantly evaded front. A train filled with screaming desperation, past devastated towns and villages, past the ruins of Berlin whose walls bore the message, 'Berlin kämpft, arbeitet, und steht', past camouflaged batteries, where the front would be next following day.

By day, we often stopped in a forest or alongside an embankment, seeking as much cover as possible against the airmen who kept finding us and who would then direct their machine guns towards our train, believing it to be a munitions train. All the white shirts, trousers, and towels that we let flutter outside convinced neither the Americans nor the Russians that we were innocent civilians. We had a number of wounded and a few deaths. With every attack, the healthy fled in terror into the fields and the sick awaited their fate.

After two days, we had run out of food. A few times our leaders collected money with which to buy potatoes from the farmers. Nearly everyone still had some illegally held money on him. In the main, though, each person had to beg for his own food.

Begging is a profession. First, it requires sound legs and feet, because if they are swollen and infected one cannot walk far. Besides, owing to having to sleep sitting upright and the constantly growing tiredness, our legs kept swelling, our calves began to cramp, and our knee joints began to stiffen. Second, begging requires caring for one’s appearance. One must not look too wretched, and above all be clean-shaven. An unshaven beggar, namely, has even less credit that an unshaven banker. But how can one shave oneself in a train like ours? Moreover, a beggar needs to know how to deal with his clients. No less than any other profession, begging is a question of talent.

It also has its attractions. I remember seeing a room in a farmhouse. On the right of one wall hangs a portrait of Hitler and on the left a crucifix. There I was with a Magen David on my breast, standing between cross and swastika begging for a piece of bread. Who would want to miss something like that in his life? In front of me the farmer’s wife wears a white scarf on her head. She is out of bread, but does have some milk and even an egg. Perhaps one of us was born for this moment.

The days that we wandered through Germany were, despite everything, wonderful days. The woods were fragrant, the ground was soft with moss, flowers bloomed, and the sky was blue. Above and around us there was war, but war or no war, it was spring, and sick or not sick, free or not free, at least there was no barbed wire. We would fetch a little water in a bowl from a brook or from a pump

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86 Berlin fights, works, and stands.
farther away, build a small oven, light a fire, and cook a meal. Sometimes a swede, sometimes a beetroot, sometimes a few potatoes, and when there was nothing else to be found, the potato peelings that a road worker or soldier had thrown away. It was enough, because it was infinitely better than the food in the camp. Each moment could bring the end. The moment that remained was at least not Bergen-Belsen. Who in the world could prevent one from stretching oneself out on the ground and imagining being on holiday?

The nights that we wandered through Germany were that much worse. Hunger is difficult; lack of sleep drives one mad. As soon as evening falls, everything seems enchanted. Snoozing and dozing is not sleeping but enough for wild dreams. Someone dreams of a large room and a wonderful armchair in which he is seated, and he stands up to stretch his legs and to walk up and down a little. Opposite him, though, a French lady is dozing with her daughter, and of course, he steps on her feet. She swears in French and he does not understand her, and he swears back in spicy Dutch and she does not understand him, but they understand each other’s meaning all the better. Then she kicks him, he gives her a shove, she hits, and when the scuffle ends amidst a little grumbling and sulking, they carry on dozing. In the morning he enquires: ‘Did you sleep all right?’ And she replies, ‘Thank you, not too badly.’ Whereupon they exchange a few compliments and each asks the other if there is anything they can do for them. After all, are they not people of culture who a few days before had applauded in the Casino de Paris?

Every night there is fighting. For the sake of a hallucination. Because someone wants a bed, a bed of all things! As if we are not travelling in a stinking train, as if there are beds. He shall and he must go to bed. With each step he takes he treads on someone who then becomes furious and starts to lash out.

People die. We hardly know who or where. People die of illness, of exhaustion, and of too much company. For, although man may is said to be a social animal, it is not in his nature to sleep in company. He needs a room, or at least a tent or a cave, where he can be alone. Just he and his wife.

By day, we see the dead lying on the bridge between the coaches amidst the filth and the pans of food bubbling away on an open fire. When the train is stationary, they are buried alongside the railway line. The gravediggers get extra food. When there is an air raid alert and the train is about to depart, the dead cannot be buried. The only exception is when a man and a woman place a child in a grave. The Scharführer says, ‘Die Scheißkerle kennen keine Disziplin.’

Next to us, among the Greeks, a child of two is dying. Croup. It takes a long time. People whisper. When it is over, a wild wailing breaks forth. It is not even heartrending any longer. It is no longer possible for one person to feel compassion for another. All he feels is tiredness. He is sleepy.

Onwards! Where to? Are the British coming now at last? Where are they? The farmers are saying that the Russians are fifteen kilometres away and advancing. Why do we not wait then?

The S.S. does not wait. It cannot. It will not let go. It is its own slave. Why let a train that is nothing but a travelling dunghill, a lazaretto full of infection, of acute

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87 Those shit-bags don’t know what discipline is.
danger to the health of one’s own people – an immense danger, in fact – traverse right through one’s country, considering all the difficulties and sacrifices that something like that must involve. What good can that still serve?

The great tragedy has begun – the tragedy of the wounded hero who is falling, but who, in his downfall, is determined to drag his enemy with him. Even though all is lost, he still keeps his grip around his opponent’s throat. Beautiful, don’t you think? Movingly beautiful! *Sieg Heil!* *Sieg Heil!* Never before has the world heard a more strident death cry. For what else can it mean than, ‘Long live death!’

Now and then a Scharführer, seeing the colossus tottering on his feet of clay, feels a trembling in his knees, becomes afraid, and tries to make amends. However, the real one is transported at the sight of the grievously tumbling, tragic hero. He shall worship him for many centuries to come.

Tomorrow or the day thereafter, the fatherland will be destroyed, yet today he still hits the leader of our wagon about the face with both hands because he had made a mistake in reporting the number of prisoners.

Of what importance is the number of prisoners? After all, they are not giving us anything to eat or drink. Had we not had our own leaders to look after us, we would have perished long ago. Now, right in the wilderness, a ration of bread, a portion of sauerkraut, a pickled gherkin and even a raffle of nine hundred eggs, suddenly appear. Does it all grow on trees?

We keep hearing that we cannot go any farther or turn back. Each time we believe it and each time we go farther.

At times, the tension in the train seeks to discharge itself and someone starts to sing. Someone else continues with the song, which then rolls from wagon to wagon, and for a full hour it seems as if the train is aglow with joy. At such times, people think it has ended and that something is about to happen. There will be an enormous explosion, boom! and then...

Nothing happens. It becomes a commonplace day. It begins to drizzle slightly. The brushwood becomes wet and we cannot even light a fire any more. Then a tiny engine comes along and with deep sighs, pulls us farther. The tiny engine, too, cannot cope any more. We wait.

The landscape is quite monotonous. On our left, is a thin row of trees, on our right, is a thicket. It becomes evening, misty, chilly, and damp. We set out to forage a little in the nearby village and return with some begged food. It is already dark and nothing has happened. There is no sound, either. Not even the quivering of a leaf on a tree. Tonight it is bound to happen. It will thunder, there will be lightning. The train will come under fire, we will lie in the line of fire, soldiers will suddenly jump forth, and we will embrace each another...

Instead, a very feint moon sinks leisurely, and we wait. Far in the distance, a rifle cracks. That is all. A tedious night passes by slowly and very gingerly a pale light appears. We leave the carriage for a breath of fresh air.

In the road stands a man with a yellow face and a yellow moustache. He is dressed in a yellow padded jacket and has a fur hat with earflaps on his head although it has long been summery weather. He wears dirty yellow trousers and brown boots and holds a rifle in his hand. He grins.

88 Hail to Victory!
I thought, where have I seen him before?
He held out his hand and said, ‘tovarisch.’
Someone shouts, and it was just as if the word was being torn from his throat, ‘tovarisch!’ It rolled, and rolled over the fields.
‘Tovarisch’ means ‘comrades.’
Amor fati

After several detours, we are back from Bergen-Belsen and already everything belongs to the past. The memory of it is beginning to fade; a dull spot is forming in my mind. It is hardly surprising. It is not very agreeable always to think of atrocities and to talk about them constantly also has its objections. For it is not true that cruelty only repels. It also attracts. Cruelty is contagious. It is important therefore how one writes about the camps. With this in mind, it is most important that one should not only know what happened, but also try to understand it.

In everyday life the Nazi’s are routinely called names. ‘Scoundrels, criminals, animals, madmen, sadists’ was more or less the general opinion, and has remained so. This name-calling is healthy, and for more than one reason, probably necessary, too. However, it is little more than a reaction to phenomena. It is quite understandable, and everyone is welcome to it. Except that it is not as powerful as people often imagine it to be. When on a summer’s evening, after several years absence and a somewhat extended holiday in Bergen-Belsen – it was a holiday from culture – one happens to be lying in one’s own bed again with no one above or below one, in a real room, with the window open and the wind stirring the curtains, with a clock striking outside, the question will gradually surface: ‘What actually happened?’ Hitler is dead, yet he had promised to destroy me, but here am I listening to a blackbird singing from a branch of a tree in the garden.

Whichever way one looks at it, it remains a remarkable story. A very small tribe, that once lived on a strip of land, far away, on the edge of the desert, survives from one century to the next, powerless and unarmed, while one empire after another falls. In its downfall, it accuses that small tribe each time anew of being the cause of all its calamities and tries to destroy it. And one fine evening, despite the many losses, a chance man from that tribe lies yet again somewhere on a chance spot in the world and thinks. That chance man is not alone. The small tribe has not been destroyed. But the empire has been devoured. That is the outcome.

What can it be? Is it mysterious, is it a supernatural force that governs history? Were it so, it would be better to stop thinking and say ‘it is a miracle.’ But the biggest miracle of all miracles is that miracles do not exist. Rocks always fall down, never up. This discovery is no less miraculous than the opposite would have been. The survival of this small tribe throughout the many persecutions is also no miracle. It is something quite different. It is the profound conviction in the righteousness of its own existence and at the same time, the attachment to its fate: Amor fati.

Whether it is pleasant or dreadful, it has its purpose. It is also inescapable. People have tried. In fact, most of the members of that tribe have done so, especially during the last century. No one who has not himself fought their struggle will ever understand the sacrifices that were made for it. It is impossible. Whether one likes it or not, a common fate exists.

People did not willingly wear the star, for it is not pleasant to be a marked person. And the pride that they relied on was merely a virtue made out of necessity. With hundreds of theories and thousands of inventions people
proclaimed that the tribe did not exist, or at least that they themselves did not belong to it. The reality was – Poland.

Why? Because the enemy knew what most people and most Jews had long since forgotten. That Judaism is a principle. It is an elementary human force, one of the greatest to be born of mankind, and the enemy sought a means by which to annihilate it.

That enemy is the heathen. Throughout time, in every generation, it has aimed for that destruction. It is unthinkable that he should ever abandon it. Hitler was such a heathen, and he too applied himself to it. He said he was an ancient German, and meant it not only in the material sense of descent, but, and indeed principally, in a spiritual sense, too. He wanted to make the universal image of the ancient Germanic people his own. Their ideals were his ideals. Because only with them could he conduct the fight as he imagined the fight ought to be fought. He had aeroplanes built to be manned by Batavi, and the most ingenious instruments of science had to be manned by Canninefates. Sometimes, leaving aside economic and imperialistic motives for a moment, one gets the impression that the entire war was conducted solely, or at least became unavoidable, because Adolf Hitler wanted to drink beer out of Winston Churchill’s skull, and I am not sure that this was not literally true.

For all that, it remains an open question whether he did not do what he had strictly forbidden the Jews to do – falsification of his grandfathers. Because Hitler’s aim was to destroy the civilising factor brought into the world by Judaism and adopted throughout Europe via Christianity. His ideal person was not so much the ancient German but more generally man as he used to be, before he was put under constraint for the first time (at least as far as we are historically aware) by the monotheistic idea. He was quite correct, therefore, in asserting that no greater contrast existed than between National Socialism and Judaism. He was ready to offer his hand to every nation except to the Jewish nation. They are his very words. Quite right! They are entirely reciprocal.

The heathen is not just some person who once lived for thousands of years in these lands and then died and became forgotten. He is by no means simply a religious type either, that is to say, a man with a particular, strongly professed religion, now no longer generally accepted by the civilised world. He is also – something most closely bound up with it – a psychological type. And Christianized or not Christianized, he lives on. He lives in all of us, even in the nobleman who has set himself the task of developing his philanthropic tendencies: even in the clergyman who searches for truth, the aesthete for beauty, and the philosopher for accountability. He also lives in the Jew. However, he seldom acts independently. He prefers to be the ally of some cause or other. He waits like a hireling kept in reserve, until one day a dull ruffle is beaten, one that he remembers from the days of his freedom. It is the signal for him to emerge with his uncontrollable longing for the primeval forest about which he can recount such fine myths. His host listens and submits.

That is what happened in Germany and no less so in other countries in the past. They were not scoundrels, or criminals or madmen, but ordinary people, dragged along by National Socialism, who sometimes resorted to the most barbaric...
crueilities. An appeal was made to their heathenism, which lives in all of us, licentious barbarism, and whenever that squared with their interests, almost all of them sang ‘Heil, Sieg Heil!’

Had Hitler allowed the Jews to sing along, many would have done so. However, he did not allow them to do so, because he did not trust them. He imagined that if man were to dig deep enough into his soul, he would encounter the heathen, his primeval father. But if a Jew were to dig deep into his soul, he would uncover a granite foundation of prophets, laws, and standards.

And as Hitler wanted to do everything forbidden by these prophets, laws, and standards, or demanded the right thereto at least, he crowned the heathen king of the world, and for the sake of propaganda placed a blond wig on his head and painted his eyes blue. In this way – although he could just as easily have been a bushman or a desert nomad – he resembled most closely those who he, Hitler, had imagined had been called upon to rule the world.

His second deed was revenge. The heathen had sold his right of primogeniture and could do nothing about it. With nothing but resentment and disgust he had watched his younger brother (the one who, with remarkable historical intuition, is regularly favoured in the Old Testament) make his appearance and had acknowledged his superiority. The younger one was the Jew, the second stage in the story. What mattered now was to dispose of him, to rob him of all his possessions, and to set himself free again. Not forgetting that völkisch90 thinking is thinking in myths. The feeling of guilt had to be shifted onto others, and so the robbed became the robber, and the victim the oppressor. And at the same time as desiring world domination for oneself, that very desire became an accusation.

It became a terrible revenge. As if all generations of mankind had accumulated their hatred in this single generation of Germans, that is how it burst forth from them. We know what happened. Everything human that had become sacrosanct was crushed. No sick person, no helpless person, no child or orphan was spared. The harvest amounted to six million dead – six million times the myth of fratricide. Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!

And all this was just the beginning. It was the preparation for domination by primitive man, who hates nothing so much as civilisation. ‘Whenever I hear the word culture spoken, I reach for my revolver.’ That was the truth expressed by Germany’s youth. After the Jews, it was to be the turn of the Christians, after the synagogues the churches. Only art would not be exterminated because Göring and his henchmen had adorned themselves with it, just as a Papuan or Zulu chief does with feathers and beads.

Will he remain silent now? It is unlikely. For the heathen lives ineradicably in all of us, and alongside every kind of love, in all of us lives a hatred of culture. Beautiful cathedrals uplift us, but when they collapse, something inside us rejoices. For such long time now we have learned that prudence is the mother of discretion that we are happy when at the fair we can smash everything to smithereens in the breaking-up-the-happy-home booth. We love disasters and wantonness. It is the ruins that most people find hard to tolerate. They are the symbol of repentance. We humans like to build, but are relieved when we can destroy.

90 Ethnic
And because the heathen still exists and always will exist, all those myths that recount about him are all so topical for us. He grows up with us, and whispers to us what he once experienced, a thousand years ago. He recounts how everything came about in a fight between heroes in which the strongest was the victor. And it never occurs to him that the victor might sometimes be mistaken. He never thought of the existence of the Idea, of Unity, of Justice, which rules with absolute power over every king, over every beggar, over every nation, and over every hero. He does not know what accountability for it means; he knows only passion and experience. And he talks about it to passion and experience, and that is why it sounds like music, everything he says, and why it incites.

What matters, is choice. It is most important and not as easy as it sometimes seems to be. Is he a slave, that heathen, or is he a master? How is it with the second or youngest son? Of all the myths, the most beautiful, that is to say, the most loved and most hated at the same time, are those in which he was rejected, in which the choice was made for the first time. Those myths are in the Bible.

He is alive, that heathen. He is eternal, he is the first-born and he is discontented. He will not remain silent, and they, who are the successors of those who first experienced the tensions, when they had to restrain him, will continue to encounter him as the terrible, bloodthirsty avenger.

I am thinking of Bergen-Belsen and I know. We encountered the heathen, and will encounter him again. What are we left with? Amor fati.

We have chosen thoughtfully and with the thoughts of many generations, thoughts of people on the pyres of the Inquisition, in burning synagogues, and under the hoofs of Cossack horses. And the thought is irrevocable. Indeed, the thought is more than irrevocable. It is our fate.

Could we not take it in hand and turn it to some good? By doing something, by changing something in this world?

You tell me, singing blackbird.
Biographical Note

Abel Jacob Herzberg was born in Amsterdam in 1893 and grew up in a non-orthodox but religious home. His father was a broker in uncut diamonds. Around 1880, his parents emigrated from Lithuania to Holland; his mother with her family, and his father by himself. They met in Amsterdam where they got married. Although they had fled from the pogroms against the Jews, his mother remembered with nostalgia her former homeland and the strongly religious Jewish community there. "The essence of the stories my parents told me was that they were Jews. It was a recurring theme. It stood in the foreground. It not only meant that they were foreigners, but that even in their home country they had never been anything but foreigners. Although they came from Russia, and their families had lived there for many centuries, they were not Russians and were never recognised there as such either. That is why they left there." That is what Abel Herzberg wrote to his eight-year-old grandson in letters first published in Dutch in 1964 under the title Brieven aan mijn kleinzoon. Elsewhere he wrote, '1908, I was not fifteen yet, a Zionist congress was being held in the Arts and Sciences Hall in The Hague. My parents went there and took me with them. There, on Zwarte Weg, I saw for the first time in my life a Jewish flag, and I knew we were not dreaming. Except that we had to wait forty years, forty bitter years, and that was something we did not know.'

During the Great War he enrolled as a volunteer in the Dutch army even though he did not have the Dutch nationality. He served for three and a half years because he considered it a duty to his new homeland.

After the war he studied law, worked in the courts, and then set himself up in Amsterdam as a lawyer specialising in administrative law.

In the 1930s he played a prominent role in the Dutch Jewish community. He was also editor of De Joodse Wachter and from 1934 to 1939 chairman of the Dutch Zionist Association.

Following the occupation of Holland in 1940, Abel Herzberg, his wife Thea and their three children were forced to go into hiding. Their first hiding place seemed to them to be too insecure. In the second refuge in Blaricum, the Herzbergs came to realise what it meant to wipe out their existence, as it were, while simultaneously endangering the lives of other people. The family was unable to endure this way of life and took the risk of returning to Amsterdam. In March 1943, they were arrested by the Germans. The family was interned in Barneveld. Before they were taken to Westerbork transit camp, Thea Herzberg managed to smuggle the children out of the camp and take them to safety on a nearby farm.

From September 1943 until January 1944, Abel and Thea Herzberg were imprisoned in Westerbork. In the middle of January they were transported to Bergen-Belsen. In April 1944, 172 prisoners – among them the Herzbergs – were told they could leave for Palestine in exchange for interned Germans. They were
moved into separate huts, were exempted from forced labour, and were not maltreated. After five weeks, though, they were returned to the ‘normal’ camp without any explanation, together with fifty other prisoners. At the same time, Abel Herzberg decided to keep a diary with the intention of expanding the notes ‘later’. They cover the period from 11 August 1944 to 26 April 1945.

In the summer of 1945, Abel and Thea Herzberg returned to Amsterdam. Their three children had also survived. Their son and eldest daughter, twenty-one and nineteen years old, immediately emigrated to Palestine. The youngest daughter remained with her parents in Holland. Herzberg’s diary was first published in the journal *De Groene Amsterdammer*.

In the letters to his grandson he wrote, ‘In those days, who could have expected that those who migrated to Palestine would found a state there for the third time and those who migrated to America would become their financiers? Both were equally poor and equally inexperienced. We expected it. We were certain of it. As a child I discussed with both my uncles, who themselves were still only youngsters then, what the uniform of Jewish soldiers should look like. And we were quite serious.’

After the war Abel Herzberg wrote many books: novels, stories, dramas. Most of them had as their theme the persecution of the Jews. He wanted to keep alive both the knowledge of what people were capable of and the debate about how one could prevent it from happening again.

In the 1970s he spoke out for the release of several German war criminals, not from a sense of compassion, but because he was convinced that revenge was inhuman.

He received numerous honours and prizes. In 1965 he was made Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau and in 1974 he was awarded the Dutch prize for literature for his collected works. Abel Herzberg died in May 1989.

For these biographical details I wish to express my thanks to Tamir Herzberg, the author’s grandson, to whom he wrote the above mentioned letters.

Renata Laqueur