

Dancing Under the Gallows: Recollections of a Holocaust Survivor

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Dancing Under the Gallows:
Recollections of a Holocaust Survivor

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*No, it is not I, it is someone else who is suffering.
I could not have borne it. And this thing which has
happened,
Let them cover it with black cloths,
And take away the lanterns...*

Night.

*—from “Requiem”
Anna Akhmatova*

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Prologue

I am not Jewish.

I write not from the perspective of one whose religion has been persecuted for centuries. Instead, I write from the perspective of a human being.

The inspiration for my Senior Honors Thesis came during a visit to Terezín, a former Jewish ghetto-turned-concentration camp located forty miles outside of Prague. I expected to find Terezín exactly like all the other camps about which I had read: bleak and gray, dark shadows of the past still lingering in the air. What awaited me, however, was a complete surprise.

I quickly discovered that Terezín was a kind of oasis, where culture, first banned, then accepted, flowed freely. Yes, it served as a transit station for Jews on their way to Auschwitz and other extermination camps. But it was also the scene of a cultural life unparalleled not only in the context of World War II, but also in the history of civilization. Here, prisoners could fulfill the human need to create, in the form of music, art, and poetry. Here, art sustained life.

My original thesis was to be an examination into the depths of the human spirit. Through research, I would argue that this culture gave meaning to the lives of prisoners, enabling them to endure in the face of overwhelming odds.

Imagine my excitement, then, when after a semester's worth of research, I brought my first chapter to my advisor. Naively, I waited for her praise and encouragement; instead, what I heard was, "This is nothing more than a glorified research paper. How are you going to fix that?"

Unexpectedly, fate stepped in, and the next day, it was confirmed that I had secured an interview with a Holocaust survivor in the area. I expected to use this opportunity as a *supplement* to my research. But after two meetings and six hours of conversation, I decided I needed to re-examine my approach to my thesis.

In listening to this man speak, in feeling his dynamic energy and passion, something in me was forced to respond in a creative way. I felt compelled to tell this man's incredible story, out of reverence and respect for what he endured. In my retelling, I have sought to lend meaning and validation to his suffering. In these pages, his experience is drawn out of the shadows.

My interview with Edgar Krasa did not eclipse my research, however. Instead, it made my research come alive. His stories made real for me those names that had once just been figures in the sphere of history. As he spoke, I became acutely aware of the immediacy and powerful connectedness of the interaction; I felt the spirit that kept these people alive, sane, and connected to their dignity. He became my research personified.

His experience exists in the context of the theoretical philosophy that was the basis of my original thesis: Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. According to Frankl:

[The] uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love....A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work,

will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the ‘why’ for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any ‘how.’¹

In Terezín, Mr. Krasa’s participation in musical activities enabled him to overcome the limitations of mortality. Later, in Auschwitz and during the infamous death march, his obligation to his parents and two boys he had befriended sustained him. They were the *why* which enabled him to endure.

These pages are not meant to speak only of gas chambers, cattle cars, bitter cold, and the putrid stench of death.

Rather, they stand as a testament to human loyalty, hope, determination, and unwavering belief in life. They are meant to expose the depths and resilience of the human spirit.

¹ Viktor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 101.

Turkish Coffee

The late afternoon sun is blinding as I approach my destination. *124 Hartman Road*, I repeat to myself, over and over. The numbers descend, 144, 136, 124. It is a yellow house, with the number in plain view, just as he said it would be. My stomach flips over. I hear the words of my Jewish friends in the back of my mind.

“You’re too emotional, Shannon. It’s going to be difficult for you, very chilling and disturbing. Meeting a Holocaust survivor is very different from reading someone’s memoir.”

My God Shannon, pull yourself together, I think. *There is nothing to be nervous about*. But my body betrays my rational thoughts, and I raise a trembling hand to the doorbell. I am greeted by an older man, the man I am about to interview, I presume. I extend my hand, and I am certain he can see my heart pounding violently in my chest.

“Hello, Mr. Krasa. I’m Shannon Williams. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Well, thank you,” he replies with a glint in his eye. “But maybe you want to see if I am useful for your thesis before you say that.”

“Make yourself comfortable,” he instructs me, motioning toward the dining room table in front of us. “First I have to ask you, will you have a coffee?”

“Yes, please,” I respond as I nervously organize my notes.

“Have you ever had Turkish coffee?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well today must be your lucky day then!”

His warmth and friendliness put me at ease, and I begin to relax as he serves our coffee. We drink it black, and I am surprised at how much I enjoy its bitter taste.

“Mr. Krasa,” I begin, tentatively. “Before we start, I just want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I’m sure you are busy with other things—”

“Nonsense,” he interjects. “After all, it’s not every day I get to spend an afternoon with a young blonde.” Again, I see the same spark in his eye. I quickly realize that these are not the eyes of an eighty-six year-old man, but of a mischievous young boy.

“So we will begin then.”

“Yes,” I reply.

And before I can utter another word, the man leans back in his chair, clears his throat, and begins to tell his extraordinary story.

“It Looks Like Hebrew”

“I grew up in the region of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland,” he recalls, his voice a rich baritone. “I had a very normal childhood. As this region bordered Germany, I was educated in German schools, and spoke only German. Here everything—business, social, and cultural affairs—was conducted in German. There was never any friction between the German nationals and the Czechs that were there, nor was there friction between the German nationals and the Jews, that is, until 1933.”

1933, of course, being the year in which Hitler came to power and succeeded in brainwashing an entire continent.

Mr. Krasa continues, “So in 1933, my father, a Jew, could no longer make a living among the Germans. We moved to Prague, where nothing of significance happened to us from 1933 to 1938.”

By this time, the Nazis had begun to instigate the German nationals in the Sudetenland to complain about oppression by the Czech government, and they demanded annexation of the region. Believing they could avoid another world war by appeasing Hitler, France and Britain advised the Czechs to comply with the Germans. On September 29, 1938, the Munich Agreement was signed, ceding the Sudetenland to Germany, and leaving Czechoslovakia virtually defenseless against the Nazis.

“The problem was, the Czechs had fortifications in the Sudetenland to protect them from the Germans,” he explains. “Now that the German army went beyond those fortifications, the Czechs were standing there naked without any defense. It was

anticipated that Hitler's appetite would only grow bigger, and with the absence of fortifications, he would occupy the rest of the Czech lands.

“After the occupation of the Sudetenland in 1938, in anticipation of additional occupation, Jewish parents encouraged their teenagers to learn a trade. This way, should emigration become necessary, they could support themselves and their parents as well. So an aunt of mine said to my mother, ‘Why don't you have the boy become a cook so he never has to go hungry?’ And with no further discussion about it, I started an apprenticeship in a fine restaurant.”

Their fears came true in March of 1939, when Czechoslovakia was annexed by the Nazis.

“They made it a protectorate,” he says. “Because the Czechs needed to be ‘protected.’”

I cannot help but notice the sarcasm that hangs on his words.

“Immediately after the occupation, the Nazis began with the implementation of the so-called ‘Jewish Laws,’ which really were anti-Jewish laws. And how did they do it?” he asks. “I'm sure you are aware of it, you must have seen it, this thing—this physical identification that every Jew had to wear.”

My heart skips a beat as he removes the bright yellow star from the folder of documents that sits in front of him.

“This was yours?” I ask, the words catching in my throat as I touch the scrap of fabric I've only seen in pictures.

“No, it was my wife's,” he explains. “I have nothing left from then; I came back from Auschwitz with only a British soldier's uniform that I found there.”

“The star had to be sewn onto the clothing so you couldn’t conveniently unpin it if you wanted to do something you were not supposed to do. If you took your jacket off, you had to have one on your shirt. On it is written *Jew* in German. Do you notice anything peculiar—particular—about the writing?” He looks at me, waiting for my response.

Angry black letters stare back at me. “It looks like Hebrew,” I answer definitively. My confidence surprises me.

“Oh, she’s clever,” he says with a smile. “Look what a clever girl you are! Yes, just to humiliate us even more, they made this in Hebrew-style lettering.

“So now that all the Jews were identified, they proceeded with all these restrictions. The first was—” he stops himself. “Is this what you want to hear or do you have something specific you want me to talk about?”

“I have some specific questions when you finish your story, if that would be alright.”

“My wife has questions too, always,” he replies, the familiar glint appearing in his eyes.

I am amazed at his ability to find humor in a discussion of a subject that is the embodiment of pure evil.

He resumes. “Anyway, the first law was that Jews had to turn in all their valuables, including wedding rings. Next came radios, so people couldn’t listen to foreign broadcasts and would be dependent solely on German propaganda. Musical instruments had to be turned in to deprive Jews of the pleasure of playing. Everything, *everything*, had an evil motive.”

Indeed, Jews were prevented from access to public areas, movie theaters, parks and playgrounds. On the streetcar they were permitted to use only the last standing platform of the last car. Eventually, they barred students of all ages—from kindergarten to university—from education. Ration tickets were issued, which afforded them barely enough food to survive.

Still, Mr. Krasa insists that he and his family were among the “privileged.”

“I started the apprenticeship in 1938 and nothing really touched me very much because I worked long hours six days a week,” he explains. “All these things my parents handled—whatever there was to turn in, they turned in. I also must mention that there were many advantages to being a cook at that time, for myself and for my family. I had as much food as I wanted in the restaurant, so my parents were able to keep my ration ticket, which gave them fifty percent more of almost nothing. It is not so difficult to figure out what that was,” he says with a wink.

Again, his sense of humor amazes me. Increasingly, and continuing as his story progresses, I am intensely aware of undertones of irony and sarcasm in his words. Yet what shocks me most is his constant joking to lighten the mood of our dark conversation. As he tells, he several times alludes to his use of humor under dreadful circumstances. I am reminded of Viktor Frankl’s assertion that “Humor was another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation,”² and I cannot help but wonder if this ability to maintain his sense of humor helped keep Mr. Krasa alive.

As a person of feeling, perhaps too much so, I consistently put myself in his position as he speaks; I think about how I would have felt, robbed of my freedom, never

² Frankl 63.

knowing what the next day would bring. Eager to explore the psychological undertones of his story, I ask him to describe how he felt during this period of tremendous uncertainty. Apprehensive? Anxious? Indifferent?

To my dismay, he all but dismisses the question. “Not scared, really, but uncomfortable in not knowing what was going to happen. We knew it was not going to be as it was before.”

A Jewish Paradise

By the spring of 1941 the dire situation of Czechoslovakia's Jews had become abundantly clear. The Germans had begun to persuade Czech business owners not only to stop employing Jews, but to fire those who worked for them.

"The owner of the restaurant told me he was under great pressure to let me go," Mr. Krasa recalls. "He was not a bad man, and he struggled with the decision, but he finally let me go in the spring of that year. I couldn't get another job except in a dining hall maintained by Jewish community officials for immigrants from Poland."

At the time, war had been ravaging Poland for nearly three years, and the few Jews who were lucky enough to escape fled to Prague. They couldn't get working permits, however, as the government was afraid these immigrants would take the jobs of the Czechs. It became the responsibility of the Jewish community to take care of them. Clothing and bedding were collected, and the Polish Jews received a substantial meal at noon in this dining hall.

A few months later, a member of the Jewish community officials told Mr. Krasa that he was designated to become a member of a council of elders in a beautiful new community called Terezín, which would be created to hold all the Jews of the Czech lands.

"Schliesser was his name. Karl Schliesser," Krasa recalls. "He asked if I would volunteer to go with the first group to set up the kitchens. He said if I did this, I could protect my parents from being deported 'further east.'"

No one quite knew what awaited them 'further east.' They didn't want to.

His parents vehemently protested. “You don’t volunteer for something like this under these circumstances!” But their pleas fell on deaf ears.

“In those few months I got to know Schliesser as an honest and decent man. I thought that if he was good for his word, I would be ahead of the game.”

I shudder to think about how wrong he was.

“Did Schliesser lie to you?” I ask, certain Krasa had been the victim of some perverse Nazi plan. “Did he know what awaited you in Terezín?”

“No!” he exclaims, with a passion I had not yet seen in him. “Nobody knew! It was the best-kept secret, you see. In Terezín’s entire existence, no one knew what was coming, or where the transports were going. Every move the Germans made was a trick.”

Over the course of three-and-a-half years, Terezín would serve as a way station for Jews being ushered to their deaths.

It was their biggest deception.

* * *

I am struck by the immediacy and passion in his response. The powerful reality of this “secret” which fooled the entire world is clearly something that still disturbs him. It is obvious that he is still trying to make sense of what happened to him, how the Germans succeeded in their deception, and, most devastating, why no one cared.

Terezín

He has a strong accent, a mixture of Czech and German, I think to myself, noting that it only makes his story more authentic. I can feel myself letting go of all other thoughts as I allow my mind to be transported far away...

“It was November of 1941. Myself and 341 other handpicked men assembled at the railroad station in Prague as members of the first *Aufbaukommando* [work detail]. It was the last time we would travel in a passenger train.

“This is how it looks,” he says matter-of-factly, pulling out a map of Terezín. “It’s an octagon and all the corners were built with a sharp protrusion to observe possible intruders or approaching enemies. It was constructed as a fortress in 1780 when Austria was at war with the Prussians. It later became a town, which was roughly one-half of a square mile and surrounded by twelve-meter-thick walls with only three gates.” He smiles wryly: “It was an ideal place to hold someone you don’t want to let escape.

“Since the fortress was built before trains existed, the town didn’t have a railroad station, and the nearest one was two miles away. Of course, we had to walk. We were allowed to take with us 110 pounds of luggage.”

I feel myself tense as I imagine the weight of 110 pounds strapped to my back. Yet he continues, unfazed.

“They did not prescribe what we could bring,” explains Mr. Krasa. “But since it was November, we brought mostly warm clothing and bedding, and some non-perishable food, as nobody knew when the next meal would come.

“We came from here,” he shows me, pointing to the map. “And as we entered, the gate closed behind us, and immediately we knew. We were prisoners.”

Turkish Coffee, Part Two

“You’ve finished your coffee?” he asks, and I am catapulted back to the present.
“You don’t have to finish if you don’t like it.”

“No, I like it,” I reply, stirring absent-mindedly, still dazed from my trip through time.

“No, no—don’t shake!” he exclaims. Those are the grinds. The grounds, I mean. Looks like mud, yes?”

“Yes, it does,” I say, laughing.

“Now you know the proper way to drink Turkish coffee. Look at me,” he scoffs at himself. “I didn’t even give you a napkin.”

I’m beginning to feel right at home with my new friend.

Lucky

“The camp commander assembled us on the yard and immediately work was distributed and everyone had to go after his responsibility,” my host continues. “He also told us everything we were not allowed to do. Actually, there was very little left that we *could* do. No smoking. No writing home. I suppose there isn’t an awful lot that you can do when you have a ten-hour-a-day job, but the smoking was the worst part for most of the guys.”

Their task was to convert the town of Terezín from military fortress to Jewish ghetto. It held eleven military barracks, which, before German occupation, housed 5,000 soldiers. Terezín’s town inhabitants numbered about 3,000. It became the job of the engineers and technicians of the *Aufbaukommando* to convert the infrastructure—electricity, sewers, utilities—to serve 60,000 people, nearly ten times its intended capacity.

“I was lucky, with my job in the kitchen. I didn’t have any helpers, but I didn’t mind. And anyway, some of those 341 understood that under the new lifestyle they better have good connections with the kitchen. If you know what I mean...” he recalls with a wink.

Lucky? Tricked into imprisonment and he still considers himself lucky? I am beginning to realize this man’s survival was by no means just a fortunate twist of fate. It was, rather, the resilience of his spirit that enabled him to endure.

“I had few supplies to work with. Dr. Atkins would have protested vehemently, I’m sure,” he jokes. “It was mainly flour and some of the grains that the Germans didn’t

use, a little margarine, a little salt, and a little sugar.”

They had to work quickly, for just six days after their arrival in Terezín, the first transport of 1,000 Jews arrived. Every transport that came into or left the ghetto consisted of 1,000 people.

The Nazis considered it easy arithmetic.

“Compiling the transport lists in Prague was the responsibility of the Jewish community officials,” Mr. Krasa explains. “And It was a lousy responsibility. Here they have a list of all the Jews in the city and they have to choose—often their friends, neighbors, loved ones—who to send into this great unknown.

“They made the decision to keep whole families together, maybe sparing them of unnecessary hardship. But with the transports came more and more people, and every other day arrived another transport of 1,000. Soon the ghetto was full and the Germans decided to separate men, women, and children. It was unlike other ghettos in Europe, where families lived together and there was a town operated by and for the Jews. We were simply pawns—subject entirely to the German whims.”

“Mr. Krasa,” I interject. I’d like to know a little more about your mental and emotional condition throughout this entire ordeal—”

Before I can finish my sentence, I am interrupted. “I am not emotional now and I don’t remember whether I was emotional then. I was concentrated on keeping those kitchens going.”

I push ahead boldly, without thinking, though perhaps I should have. “But surely you must have felt something as the gates closed behind you and you knew you were a prisoner?”

“Feeling is only with my hands.”

* * *

In her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman discusses the human response to a traumatic experience. She explains: “...alterations of consciousness are at the heart of constriction or numbing.... Sometimes situations of inescapable danger may evoke not only terror and rage but also, paradoxically, a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage, and pain dissolve.”³ Further, she asserts that one who undergoes a traumatic experience may feel powerful emotion without detailed memory of the event, or one may remember vividly without expressing emotion. Mr. Krasa exemplifies the latter.

During the interview, I was struck by the rehearsed, almost robotic manner in which he recounted his experience. My attempts to explore the emotional undercurrents of his story all proved futile, and it occurred to me that he had to shut down in order to survive such a harrowing ordeal; it was all his spirit would allow.

Herman argues that the basic stages of recovery are “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community.”⁴ This is precisely what Mr. Krasa is doing in retelling his story. He tells to stay alive. More than fifty years later, this retelling functions as a kind of therapy, a means, as Herman notes, of restoration and healing. And as I listened to him tell, I felt an emotional link to him, a connectedness which Herman describes as stage three in the recovery process. In recounting his experience and interjecting my own emotional responses, it is my hope to use my voice to restore to him what he could not feel.

³ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992) 42-43.

⁴ Herman 3.

The Terezín Spa

Not sure how to react, I fear that I have overstepped my bounds. I realize I have been holding my breath for what seems like an eternity. Imagine my relief when, without hesitating, Mr. Krasa begins a new chapter of his story.

“As I said before, Terezín was supposed to hold all the Jews of the Czech lands,” he continues steadily. “Yet sometime in 1942, suddenly there were German Jews. But they were not whole families, not young or middle-age, only old ones. They were told by the Nazis that they were being brought to a spa.

“They came with very little, maybe a change of clothing for a week or two, in silk dresses and straw hats, like you would go to a resort. The men came in suits and jackets, displaying the medals that they won in World War I. Many of them had missing limbs.

“I don’t understand how they fell for such a lousy promise by the Nazis. Perhaps they were so militaristic that they believed an officer’s word of honor and didn’t question it.”

When they arrived, there was no space for them—the barracks were overcrowded, and the houses of the town occupied. The only place for them was in the attics of the military barracks, with straw mattresses on the floor.

“Now you tell me, how does an older person pick himself up from a mattress on the floor? It is difficult. You don’t know yet, you’re still young. Now imagine, it was even *more* difficult if one was missing an arm or a leg. These people died very fast. Many committed suicide, they were so struck by depression that they had been deceived.

“Also, when you get older you find that older people have to go to the bathroom more often. So these people had to first get up from the floor, then they had to climb over the others, move down a flight of stairs, then along a hallway to the bathroom. There was no bathroom in the attic. And when they couldn’t hold it—I don’t have to describe you the sanitary conditions that have developed.”

Inadvertently I cringe; I can almost imagine the stench that permeated the air.

“With this came disease. The best Jewish doctors from Prague were there in Terezín, and if you needed a consultation you could have gotten the best one. But if you needed medication, there was nothing for you. So naturally, diseases like dysentery and typhus, which you can’t heal with consultation, took a terrible—what do you call it—”

“Toll?” I offer.

“Toll! Yes, that’s it. You see what is happening to me now? Toll is a plain word, too, but sometimes a word leaks out and it comes up in Czech or in German. It doesn’t help because the people I talk with don’t know Czech and German. Don’t get old, stay young and beautiful.”

His eyes sparkle, an ephemeral glimpse of the incredible strength of spirit which kept him alive. But there is a pain in the simple beauty of his words, a pain reflective of lost years that could never be recaptured. The moment, although fleeting, is one of powerful connectedness, and, for an instant, I understand.

“Like Mushrooms After the Rain”

“In one of the very early transports came a man who I considered a Godsend, a piano player and chorus conductor named Rafael Schächter,” he continues, having regained his train of thought.

He sees my face light up in recognition of the name. *This man doesn't miss a beat*, I think to myself.

“Oh, she knows him!” he exclaims, visibly delighted. “Look how much she already knows. Such a clever girl she is.”

“I've done some research on Schächter and the other musicians,” I admit. “Mostly the impact of music on the lives of the prisoners.”

Schächter was a brilliant Czech pianist and composer, largely responsible for the organization of Terezín's choral activities. He arrived in Terezín in November of 1941 and would later perish in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

“Well, miss,” he says, the glint appearing in his eyes. “It seems I just may be useful for you after all...”

I lean forward, intrigued, waiting to hear what he has to say.

“In the beginning I lived in barracks. When the town population was entirely moved out, some people with connections could get in a house or an apartment that was not forty people sleeping in one room. With Schächter's help, we managed to get a little room for ourselves. In the backyard of one of the houses was another small house, I suppose the equivalent of today's in-laws apartment,” he says, grinning. “There, in the

attic, a carpenter put up a board and made a small room for the two of us. This was a great advantage.

“Through Terezín I met the other musicians—Viktor Ullmann, Gideon Klein. You know.”

My heart begins to race as I hear the familiar names. Names that were once just words on a page are becoming real people. Viktor Ullmann, composer and conductor, was considered the musical leader of Terezín. And Gideon Klein, one of Czechoslovakia’s most promising young artists, conspired with his fellow musicians to form a jazz group called the Ghetto Swingers. Both, like Schächter, were deported to Auschwitz, where, in a devastating loss to mankind, they met a similar end.

“I got to know them pretty well,” Mr. Krasa continues. “I was never a musician, I had a good voice but I never played an instrument. Ours wasn’t an intimate relationship, because we never could connect on that level. But it was a good friendship.

“In my opinion, Schächter was also a psychologist to a degree,” he explains. “He immediately understood the way we lived, closed in, constantly under guard—he knew that this was no way to live. Schächter came up with the idea that when everybody finished his day’s work he could come back to men’s barracks in the evening and sing Czech folk songs. This was not difficult because everybody knew some, or part, or all of the words. If not, by listening you learned fast. The benefit of this was that during the period you were concentrating on singing you were liberated from thoughts of reality occupying your mind.

“And I don’t know how he did it,” Mr. Krasa continues. “But he appeared in the women’s barracks. Our gate was closed, the women’s barracks gate was closed, yet he managed to go there and do the same for the women that he did for us.

“But it was not only those two hours that we were singing, you see. It gave us something to carry with us the next day—looking forward to the next evening when we could sing again. It was really a spiritual uplift.”

* * *

The theoretical philosophy which provided much of the foundation for this work comes from Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl, on the subject of his own experiences in a concentration camp, explains: “As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances.”⁵

My research is starting to take on a life of its own. *This is too good to be true*, I think, heart pounding. I had spent hours poring over books and articles, laboring to prove this very point: that given a reason to survive, man can endure almost anything. That, specifically in Terezín, music gave a poetic voice to their resistance. I never dreamed I’d be sitting across a table from one who experienced it firsthand.

“Mr. Krasa,” I interject. “May I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” he replies with enthusiasm, voice booming.

⁵ Frankl 59.

“In my research I came across a quote by Viktor Ullmann which says: ‘...Our endeavor with respect to Arts was commensurate with our will to live.’”⁶ Do you believe that music gave people a will to live? Or was it just a temporary escape?”

“It was almost every day, those two hours, the escape,” he recalls. “And this escape helped you through the next day until you joined again either the choir, or the orchestra, or the band. We studied our parts, and this took our minds off of being prisoners. And with the fact that we were looking forward to the next day, it did more than occupy our thoughts for the two hours.”

In my mind I hear the words of Greta Hofmeister, who participated in Terezin’s musical activities as a child: “Music! Music was life!”⁷

“So it is right then—the quote, that is. Music definitely, definitely strengthened the will and the hope to survive. It absolutely saved some lives.”

What amazes me is not only the phenomenon of survival through art, but also how this culture came to fruition. In my research, I came across several different theories, the most plausible being the Nazi propaganda video which will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent pages. I am curious to hear Mr. Krasa’s interpretation as to why, exactly, culture flowed so freely in Terezín.

“The Germans didn’t produce it,” he explains, “and they did not encourage it, but they didn’t curb it. They tolerated it, I think, because they knew already what was going to happen to us. So they thought to themselves, it is rather perverse actually, ‘Let them have their fun now, because tomorrow they will die.’ And so we could make music. And

⁶ Statement of Viktor Ullmann, as quoted in Joza Karas’s book Music in Terezin 1941-1945 (New York: Beaufort Books Publishers, 1985) 197.

⁷ Statement of Greta Hofmeister, as quoted by Karas, p. 197.

the artists could paint and the writers could write. And this culture sprang up like mushrooms after the rain.”

Requiem

“In July 1942, seven months after we came in the first transport, the rest of the town inhabitants were evacuated,” he recalls. “While they were living here the gates were closed so we didn’t mingle with the non-Jewish population. From then on, though, the gates were open, and when we finished our day’s work, everybody could visit family and friends.

“At that point, Schächter got together the men and women who were singing with him and started to study the Czech opera *The Bartered Bride*.” He points to the map of Terezín. “We were studying in this building to the right of the church, in the basement. During the day it was a carpenter shop and in the evening we put up the boards and sang. We were studying this musical *by* wrote—handwritten, that is—because Schächter had only the piano score.

“His influence went even further when we knew *The Bartered Bride* by heart. There was down here—” he points again to the map, ensuring I have a clear understanding of where everything in Terezín took place. He continues: “There was a gym which, before occupation, belonged to the Czech national athletic association. It was a big one, so now Schächter’s music was impacting the masses of people who came to listen. And it is very interesting that, although they were passive, it had the same impact on them as it had on us who were performing.”

“Some time later, Schächter suddenly got in his mind to perform Verdi’s *Requiem*. That was July 1943. See how time runs when you’re having fun?” he says with a wry smile.

“There was a big uproar in town. *Everybody*—the Council of Elders, all the scholars, the intellectuals, the musicologists attacked him with questions: ‘Why would you, as a Jew, with Jewish singers, in a Jewish ghetto, want to perform a Catholic mass when there are works on the same level with Jewish themes that cannot be performed anywhere else in occupied Europe?’”

But Schächter had a brilliant motive. His idea was to take Verdi’s *Requiem*, a mass for the dead, and transform it into a mass for the dead Nazis. And what he longed to tell them in German but could not, he would say in Latin, using his choir as a vehicle.

“So he took those Czech Jews and he started to teach them Latin,” Mr. Krasa recalls, pausing. The memory draws a smile, and for a moment, he is back at Terezín in that basement room, his place by Schächter’s side at the piano.

The moment is over as quickly as it began. He shakes his head, coming out of his reverie. “He explained to them about Verdi’s *Requiem* and the intent behind his decision,” he continues. “No amount of protest from within the ghetto would change his mind.

“So he started to teach us—and I say *us* because I was also participating—the Latin translated so we knew what we were singing. And he said to us: ‘If any one of you is afraid of punishment, you can leave.’”

Nobody left.

“Then he played the tune for the sopranos and drilled them until they knew it, and then he did the same with the altos, and the male voices. Then he put it together all with just a decrepit piano.

“Schächter was encouraged by the fact that, for some reason, as of January 1943, no deportations took place. So no transports for a full six months. I guess the gas chambers weren’t ready yet,” he says, a touch of irony coloring his words.

“Imagine Schächter’s disappointment, then, when we were seven months into rehearsing and a rumor sprang up that transports would resume. Of course, the singers knew that some of them would be in it, so they wanted to make a performance as a reward for their hard work. Schächter had a dilemma because he was a perfectionist and it wasn’t yet up to his standards.”

But it soon became known that on September 6, 1943, five thousand people would be deported. It was expected that Schächter would lose a large portion of his choir. Thus, he conceded, and directed his singers in a special performance for friends and family, though it was not the official premiere.

“When September 6th came and went,” Mr. Krasa remembers, “almost half of his choir was gone. But he recruited new members, which was not difficult, people were flocking to him because they understood the benefit of being part of that choir.

“So he started them from the beginning—the Latin, the music—and once more, he lost a sizeable number of singers. For the third time, he began to teach the new ones.

“The premiere was in January of 1944. It was performed fifteen times, and after the fifteenth performance he was left with only sixty singers and an unequal amount in each voice part. That fifteenth performance was his last. It wasn’t good enough for him anymore.”

Overworked and undernourished, learning a dead language and one of the most difficult musical compositions ever written, the Jews of Terezín accomplished a feat that

is nothing short of remarkable. Viktor Ullmann, the oldest, most learned musician and Terezín's official critic, boldly proclaimed that *Requiem* could be performed in any concert hall in any capital of Europe.

That it was performed under such circumstances is almost inconceivable.

* * *

Mr. Krasa recalls Schächter with a fondness that moves me. I am struck by the improbability of their friendship—that in spite of the bleakness of their existences, in spite of the bitter discovery that the limits of human brutality have no bounds, there lie stories of companionship, loyalty, and growth in the face of extreme adversity. That even under such horrific circumstances, extraordinary relationships, perhaps strengthened by the magnitude of shared experience, were formed. When asked to comment on his relationship with Schächter, the pain in his eyes is evident as he recalls the memory of his dear friend.

He replies simply, “I named my son for Rafael Schächter, because his legacy lives only in the memories of those who sang with him.”

It is all I need to hear.

The Biggest Lie

We've finished the last of the cookies Mr. Krasa's wife, Hana, prepared for us.

"Ok," he says, pushing the plate to the side. "No more distractions.

"One thing I didn't tell you before is that some of the Jews in their hometowns did not turn in their musical instruments as they should have and they even had the guts to smuggle them into Terezín. And because they were so driven to maintain their proficiency, they were practicing in the evening in attics and cellars. This was a *real* danger because they shouldn't have had those instruments. And despite the fact that there were no German guards inside the ghetto, the commander found out.

"Now everybody was really trembling because the Germans kept us Jews obedient and submissive by imposing collective punishment, which meant we would all be penalized for the acts of those few guys. In this case the collective punishment was either immediate deportation, which everybody dreaded, or transfer to the Small Fortress, which was a Gestapo prison. Very few who ever got in there came out alive.

I realize I am holding my breath as I wait for him to tell what happened next. I feel like a spectator in the film of this man's life.

He continues. "The head of the Council of Elders, Jakob Edelstein, had an idea. He reasoned with the camp commander: 'Why would you want to punish those people? Look around at how much talent you have assembled here. Use them—think of a program by which you can show the world how well you treat the Jews.'

"So we weren't punished. They could keep their instruments, and even more instruments were brought in from the warehouse in Prague. This now started a *huge*

music life. There were chamber groups and string quartets. And jazz had just come to Europe so five guys, including my friend Gideon Klein, got together and created the Ghetto Swingers...”

And in this way, as a result of bold defiance by a few prisoners, the idea for the greatest piece of propaganda in history was born.

“The Führer Gives a City to the Jews”

Before it was even decided who would give the Germans this “evaluation,” the Jews were forced to immediately begin the massive undertaking of beautifying the town, focusing specifically on the houses of the street between the town square and the church. Mr. Krasa describes it as a “facelift;” the houses were painted, gardens planted in the front, and flowerboxes hung from the windows.

Is it just my imagination, or do I detect a bitterness in his usually even tone of voice? I think to myself as he goes on to describe the deception.

“Money was printed and we started to get paid for work, yet it was worthless because it was usable only inside the ghetto. And to make it look like a real, livable town, a bank was opened up where you could deposit your money and create a savings account. There was no interest,” he explains, voice tinged with sarcasm. He pulls some bills out of his folder. “This is the money. It looks just like bills of any country, except instead of George Washington they put a picture Moses with the two tablets. I have asked a lot of survivors because I didn’t remember how much I got paid. Nobody remembers. It was meaningless.

“Really the only opportunity to use it was when they opened two stores—a shoe store and a clothing store—to make it look more like a nice, Jewish community. And you could, while supplies lasted, buy and exchange because you had used whatever you brought in those 110 pounds day in and day out—things didn’t get any better.

“Where did the stuff come from?” he asks, disgusted. “Well ironically, it was stolen from the very people who were buying it.

“When a transport arrived, the Germans inspected the luggage and confiscated the better pieces to send to Germany because they needed it for *their* people,” he explains.

“So now they took a few shabby pieces, put them on coat hangers, and exhibited them in this store. They did the same with shoes.

“So in this one street there was a bank and two stores, and then they made what they called a grocery. And it’s funny—all they had was mustard and relish. Some grocery store. At least we had a little variety with what to put on our bread.

“At the same time, the musical life exploded,” he continues. “The quartets, the pianists, the Ghetto Swingers—they all played under a pavilion which was built in one corner of the town square. People—only healthy-looking ones of course, all the elderly and sick had been deported—were promenading to the tune of the musicians. What a wonderful life.

“An order came from the camp commander that Schächter’s choir was to perform *Requiem* for the visitors and some high officials who would come from Berlin to shake their hands and make nice for the evaluation. But he had a dilemma because—you remember—he had stopped performances after losing most of his members to deportations. So what was he to do? It wasn’t good enough for the Jews; he didn’t feel like he could perform it for those others. But he found a way, and in doing so, he fulfilled his dream. There they were, the Nazis, sitting right in front of him, and he was able to tell them, through music, exactly how he felt.

“The best part of that whole thing, though, was the cabaret performances. These were the most visited and most loved by us because the actors were throwing verbal darts

at the Germans—in Czech, of course. Any kind of subtle attack on them was uplifting for us.”

So pleased were the Nazis with their propaganda efforts that they decided to capture them on film. *Der Führer Schenkt den Juden Eine Stadt* or *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, opens with scenes depicting “daily life” in Terezín, the haunting strains of *Requiem* providing the background: people read in open air cafés; laughing young girls walk arm-in-arm, watching the Ghetto Swingers with adoration; children, delighted, run through parks and playgrounds. On the lawn there are teenagers lounging, relaxing in the sun. There is a soccer match, and the entire community has gathered to watch; cheers and whistles fill the air. It is Hitler’s “gift” to the Jews.

Finally, it was decided that the visitors would be the International Red Cross—a neutral, objective organization. Or so they thought.

The date was June 23, 1944. As the tour began, a series of well-rehearsed actions got underway. Children scampered on playgrounds; female workers dressed in blue shorts and white blouses marched to their assignments happily singing in unison; everything was a deceptive maneuver. But the visitors never left the one street leading from the town square to the church. They spoke only to Jews who were full of praise for their new home. Says Mr. Krasa: “Something didn’t add up.”

What he didn’t know then was that the Red Cross agreed to the visit on the Nazi condition that they would interview only those who were presented to them by the Germans. Those who, under the threat of collective punishment, were willing to tell the visitors what the Germans wanted them to hear.

Mr. Krasa seems to be lost in thought for a moment. “The greatest mystery, to me,” he begins, “is how the kids were taught to behave in front of those visitors. The older people I can understand—they knew they had to do it to save their families. But the kids—to this day I still don’t understand how they did it.

“They had to address the camp commander, whom they’d never seen, as ‘uncle’—because, you know, it was such a familiar place. And they had to look at him and say ‘Uncle Rohm, chocolate *again?*’ There were kids who never even knew chocolate because it wasn’t part of their ration ticket in their hometown.

“I have to find a psychologist to tell me how you do this.”

* * *

It was over in one-and-a-half hours.

In one-and-a-half hours the Nazis succeeded in convincing the International Red Cross that Terezín was a Jewish paradise.

In one-and-a-half hours they used the Jews of Terezín as pawns in their perverse scheme to fool the entire world.

In one-and-a-half hours they managed to strip them of any dignity they had left.

By forcing them to lie about their experience, to smile and pretend that life was wonderful, the Nazis successfully reduced the Jews of Terezín to mere shadows of their former selves. For how can one live with himself when he is forced to shake the hand of the man who beats him?

Perhaps this is why Mr. Krasa feels such bitterness discussing this part of his experience. Perhaps this is why this segment of the interview is more laden with biting sarcasm than any other. Perhaps this is why he had to learn not to feel.

Yet it is this sickening piece of Nazi propaganda that sets Terezín apart from the rest of the Nazi Hells. A bittersweet paradox, the Germans' intent was to silence and destroy the Jews of Terezín, and in doing so, they actually fueled the resistance and resilience of their spirit.

In his *Music in Terezín*, survivor Joza Karas proposes the question "...what makes the musical life in the Terezín ghetto so different and unique?" He goes on to answer himself: "The answer, in its great complexity, could be summarized in one simple word: everything."⁸

In Terezín, cultural activities not only functioned as a healing mechanism, an escape from reality, but a kind of intellectual protest against the Nazi regime, where masterfully crafted lyrics created subtle defiance. But above all, music sustained life. And in a world that reeked of death and despair, what better resistance could there be than to live?

It is for this reason that we must kneel at the altar of Terezín, immortalizing those who created something truly remarkable; those who refused to concede in the face of overwhelming odds. It is their experience that we must remember with reverence and respect. And it is from their ordeal that we must draw strength and inspiration, that we never forget.

⁸ Karas 191.

Deportation

He seems tired, I think to myself, fearing the afternoon has been a strain on him. Nevertheless, he continues.

“Very soon after the visit of those Red Cross people, it became known that all able-bodied people, men and women, were being deported.”

The Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943 left the Germans fearful that such violence would spring up in other ghettos throughout Europe. But the Poles had the advantage of Soviet weapons and a strong underground living in the woods and ambushing German convoys, which the Czechs did not. When it came time for the Germans to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto and all its remaining inhabitants, they rose up and fought back. Despite a detail of military sent from the front lines, it took the Germans three weeks to subdue these Jews so desperately clinging to their dignity, their lives. There were few survivors.

“To prevent a similar thing from happening in Terezín, even though it was highly unlikely, as we did not have the advantages of the Poles,” Mr. Krasa explains, “they sent all the able-bodied people away. I was still able-bodied.

“You know it’s interesting, what I thought would save me in this whole ordeal turned out to be the very thing that almost killed me.”

Auschwitz

“From the terminal here,” he continues, careful to show me on the map, “we were put into cattle wagons—boxcars, they called them—without windows except for one small one in the upper corner with bars on it. We were seventy people in one wagon; there was not enough space for everyone to sit down at the same time. And when somebody fainted or didn’t feel well and laid down on the floor, there was even less space to sit.

“There was—I don’t know whether it’s interesting for you—there was only one bucket in the corner of that wagon. ‘Comfort bucket,’ it was called. Only there was no comfort because there was no privacy. As you can imagine, it filled up very fast and overflowed. The stench in that wagon was horrific.

“We were in those wagons without food or water for three days. But since military transports had priority on the railroad tracks, we spent most of the time sidelined. And after the war, I checked the distance, and we didn’t have to be longer than five hours in those wagons.

“On the first day, two boys from one of the children’s homes in Terezín somehow attached themselves to me. They liked me; I was a tall guy and still had some humor left in me, so we created a trio, and we stayed together.

“After three days of this, death and dying and sickness, the doors opened and some wild guys came in wearing those striped pajamas, you know, the prison uniform. And they were yelling at us in German, ‘*Schnell!* Hurry! Out of the train!’

“One of them looked at the two boys and said, ‘How old are you?’ They said they were fifteen. And without saying why, he looked at them and said, ‘You are eighteen.’

“From there we were herded onto the platform and lined up five abreast. And there it was, in big ugly letters, the sign of the railroad station: AUSCHWITZ.”

There is a click, but it sounds far away. I am so enraptured that for a moment I don’t realize the tape has run out. Then I panic. *He has so much more to tell, I don’t want to cut him off, what am I going to do?*

“Mr. Krasa,” I say. That was the tape recorder. The tape ran out.”

“Oh. Well maybe we finish some other time then? Just as long as you remind me where we left off. I am old, I don’t remember so well anymore. Don’t get old.”

We laugh together and agree to meet the following day. He shows me to the door, and I am overcome with the impulse to hug him.

* * *

I feel drained. Exhausted. As if I’ve felt for him every emotion that he could not. I sit in my car, unable to move, trying to process what I’ve just heard. I realize I am shaking. *They were right, I think. Listening to him was unlike any experience I’ve ever had.*

I regain my composure and drive away. But I can’t shake the nagging feeling that the worst is yet to come.

The Bakery

This time I know where to go. Ten minutes is all it takes, really. I am not even fazed by the nightmarish traffic pattern known as a rotary that stands between my home and that little yellow house. I am together, I am confident...

I am terrified.

Do not cry in front of him. Bite your lip, hold it in, get it out later, whatever. But if you want to maintain any intellectual credibility, do not cry, I implore myself, slightly annoyed at this new habit that seems to be developing.

I knock, but there is no response. I ring the doorbell, and still nothing. *Was I supposed to come another day?*

“Shannon?” a deep voice comes from behind me.

I turn around and see Mr. Krasa emerge from the garage; on his ears are a pair of the most enormous headphones I’ve ever seen.

“I was in my workshop and luckily I saw your red car. You know I don’t hear well normally, but with these things there is no chance.” He leads me inside through the garage. “Don’t tell my wife I let you in this way, in all this garage mess!” he says with a devilish grin.

“How are you today?” I ask.

He thinks for a moment, as if contemplating his current state. “No change from yesterday! Will you take a coffee?”

“Yes, please,” I reply, smiling, “now that I’ve discovered my love for Turkish coffee.”

“Ok,” he says, sitting down. “Where were we?”

“You had just arrived at Auschwitz,” I prompt him. “They lined you up in rows of five on the platform.”

“Right,” he says, taking a moment to find his place in the story. “The thing about that place was—sure, we had heard the name Auschwitz and we knew it was bad—but nobody knew what happened there because nobody came back.”

I nod, the feeling of dread already knotting my stomach.

“We were marching on the railroad platform until we were facing two officials with white gloves. They were looking everyone over and directing him to one side or the other. I was sent to one side, and then it was the kids’ turn. That official looked at them and shouted ‘How old are you?’ Now it lit up in their heads and they said they were eighteen. That saved their lives because at eighteen they were deemed usable for labor.

“I don’t know why that guy took mercy on them. Maybe he still had some humanity left in him. I guess it doesn’t matter the reason, only that the kids were saved from that first selection.

“We continued to march, a long way along a barbed wire fence. Looming ahead of us, getting closer all the time, was that gothic gate with those words—ARBEIT MACHT FREI. Ugly, snakelike black letters telling us ‘Work sets you free.’ So we thought, maybe here in Auschwitz we will work and be treated like humans.

“Over on the side I saw a tall chimney with curling black smoke and sparks coming out of it. Naively I asked the guard next to me what it was. And do you know

what he said to me? ‘Oh, that’s the bakery—they must have burned a whole load of bread.’

“Not until later did I learn that it was one of the chimneys of the five crematoria of Auschwitz.”

It is interesting, as he tells, his sense of ease and comfort grows, and so too does my discomfort. He comes alive and speaks in animated tones, joking with me, and it is obvious that he feels increasingly more comfortable as time passes. Herman calls this phenomenon “traumatic countertransference.” She describes a listener’s reactions to a trauma story: “In the role of witness to disaster or atrocity, the therapist at times is emotionally overwhelmed. She experiences, to a lesser degree, the same terror, rage, and despair as the patient.”⁹

By no means do I consider myself worthy of being called a therapist, but as a listener, something inside me reacts in a powerful way as he tells; I find myself at times holding my breath or clenching my fists. My body betrays me as I physically react to his words.

I feel like I’m going to be sick.

⁹ Herman 140.

Is This Hell?

“We came into a huge room,” he recalls. “There was nothing in there except benches all along the walls with numbered pegs above them. We were ordered to undress, hang up our clothes, and remember the number of our peg. Then we were shaved. *Every* hair on our body, with dull blades because they never changed them. And there was scraping and scratching and cutting. I suffered a lot because I am hairy from the top of my head to my big toe,” explains Mr. Krasa, causing me to wince inadvertently.

“Then we were washed down with some disinfectant, which burned in those scratches and scrapes. Finally, we got a hot shower. It was the first and last.

“All this was done because, unlike in the ghetto, where there were no German guards, here the guards were in the camp with the prisoners and they didn’t want to catch any disease.”

They would never see those numbered pegs again. It was just another perverse scheme designed to maximize German pleasure at the Jews’ expense.

“We were chased out of that room,” he continues, “wet and naked, no towels, through the snow to another barracks. We were made to walk along a counter behind which other prisoners were sitting. They were throwing at us those striped uniforms, a jacket, and a pair of shoes, all regardless of size. We had to do the fitting among ourselves. No underwear, no socks. Those striped pajamas were made of a thin cotton material and that was all we had in winter.

“From there we were brought into another camp. Auschwitz was so huge, there were camps inside the camp. Later I found out that we were in the gypsy camp; by the time we arrived, all gypsies had been exterminated.”

* * *

The fact is, I’ve read about these atrocities in the wealth of Holocaust literature I’ve accumulated over the years. These horror stories, stories of the stripping, the shaving, the dehumanization, are not new to me. Yet this time it is different. There is an immediacy, a connectedness in the experience. This powerful shift from intellectual, rational understanding to a personal encounter with a survivor makes it almost too real to bear.

B-11636

They were brought to a different barracks, expecting to find a familiar scene. What happened, though, they could never have predicted. Here, the Nazis' final blow in complete dehumanization would occur. They had stripped them of everything; now they would steal their identity. Edgar Krasa became prisoner number B-11636, his only form of identification a tattoo on his left forearm.

“And a crazy thing happened to me,” he says, growing more animated. “There were three guys doing the tattooing. I checked out all three of them to see which one did the neatest job—I wanted to have a nice tattoo. So I lined up with the guy who did it the nicest. Take a look,” he says, extending his arm. “This is really neat. I have seen guys who have one digit upside down, some tall, low, high, small. My handwriting isn't as nice as this tattoo!”

Thoughts are flying through my head. *He wanted a nice tattoo because he knew he would survive—a true testament to his strength of spirit.* Excited, I think I've stumbled onto something here.

“You knew you were going to survive, didn't you?” I ask. “Which is why you wanted a nice tattoo—because you would have it for the rest of your life?”

“No,” he replied, as if the answer were obvious. “I didn't know anything except that tomorrow was never promised. I am simply a perfectionist and I wanted a straight tattoo.”

Feeling deflated, an ineloquent “Oh,” is all I can manage.

Arbeit Macht Frei

“At first we didn’t work in Auschwitz. During the day we couldn’t go anywhere; we just sat in front of the barracks. We tried to get away; I guess everybody tried. The chimneys were too hot for us.

“Really the only way to get away,” he explains, “was to get picked by civilians who came every other day to look for workers for their factories. So the first ones I remember were looking for masons. How many Jewish masons do you know? I don’t know any,” he jokes.

“Finally we got away, the three of us, and 347 others, as welders. It is the same thing about Jewish welders. Do you know any? I don’t. But under these conditions, you could lie a little bit—it didn’t affect you. We learned on the job.”

“So anyway,” he continues, “for this job we were driven to a nearby town where 3,500 prisoners worked in a railroad repair shop. We worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. And just so we didn’t get too cocky, on Sundays they took us to the stone quarry, loaded us up with boulders, and we had to carry them to the other end.

“And do you know what we had to do the following Sunday? Bring them right back. It was useless work designed to break us as quickly and efficiently as possible.”

Their futile labor bears a striking parallel to that of Sisyphus, the Greek mythological figure condemned by the gods to toil for all eternity. His task: pushing a boulder to the top of a mountain where it would promptly roll back down when he

reached its peak. It seems the ancients and the Nazis shared the common belief that there is no worse punishment than “futile and hopeless labor.”¹⁰

Camus’ 20th century existential exploration of Sisyphus’ struggle provides an alternate interpretation: “I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end....At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.”¹¹

Edgar Krasa was stronger than his “rock”.

* * *

“I always wondered,” Mr. Krasa ponders out loud, “if they wanted us to work, why didn’t they let us rest a little so we could perform better? But they didn’t care. They wanted us all dead. Our idea of getting away was all wrong. We quickly learned that when your working capacity diminishes, they ship you back and you go up in those chimneys.

“Arbeit macht frei,” he says, shaking his head. “It was just another lie.”

¹⁰ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 119.

¹¹ Camus 121.

A Nutrition Lesson

For a moment he is far away and I am afraid to speak for fear of shattering his reverie. He retreats into his mind; he has allowed himself to feel the horror of the lies, the pain of his experience. But it is over in an instant.

He clears his throat and begins hastily. “I forgot I didn’t explain you the Auschwitz diet, which is a very important part of the story.

“We were given three times a day an inch-wide slice of bread, and in the morning and evening some black water that was called coffee. At noon we got a thin soup, usually only some beets, and if you were lucky, some potatoes were in it.

“Again, you had to learn to understand the ways of the camp. For example, you never wanted to be in the front of the line because the soup barrels were tall and the ladles were short. When you are at the front, and at the beginning most people tried to get at the front because they were so hungry, all they got was the liquid. You had to be clever about it. When you come later in the line and they can reach some of the solid, you are better off.

“So under this Auschwitz diet, big guys like me deteriorated very fast, the skinny ones not so quickly; I guess their bodies didn’t require as much. I developed on my back a lot of pussy boils. The puss deposited itself on the jacket, and when it dried, it rubbed back into the wounds. We never got a chance to change uniform; we never got even a chance to wash it! You are wondering why I am telling you this. Well, now I am going to give you a nutrition lesson.

“One evening going back to camp after work, I saw on the side of the road a huge onion,” he recalls. “It may not have been very large, but to me it seemed enormous. So I wanted it for the three of us—*everything* that we stole or ‘acquired,’ we shared.

“So now, here I have this onion, and I said to one of the guys behind me, ‘Step out of the formation—cover me.’ And I picked up the onion and put it in my jacket to bring home and surprise the kids.

“But as we came back into the camp they lined us up for frisking—since we worked with tools and machinery, we could have easily made a weapon. So what do I do? I told you about collective punishment—if I throw it away and don’t confess it was me, the whole group gets punished. If I say it was me, I’ll be beaten to a pulp because they won’t believe that I found it, they will insist that I stole it! The only way out was—can you guess it?”

Clearly, I know that he survived this ordeal, yet my heart is still pounding. I shake my head stupidly, unable to coax my voice out of hiding.

“To eat it, quickly!” he answers, his features animated. “The whole onion, and deprive the kids of it. Have you ever eaten a whole onion? Even the little roots were still on it! Tears were coming out of my eyes, the nose was running, sweat was standing up on my forehead on that cold evening.

“Why am I telling you all this? Well, two, three days later, those boils became smaller and less pussy.

“To this day I have great respect for onions.”

Red Snow

“People ask me a lot of questions which I don’t remember the answers to. ‘How long were you in Auschwitz?’ they often ask. The truth is, I have no idea. I know it wasn’t long, but I have no idea. The time frame is totally lost.”

“One day in January ’45,” he continues, “there came an announcement over the loudspeaker calling us back to camp. We were very concerned because that had never happened before and unusual things were not good under those circumstances. We were marched back to the camp, lined up for roll call, and told to get our blankets from the barracks—we had the luxury of having a blanket at night,” he says sarcastically. “That was terrific because we could wrap ourselves with the blanket and we were less cold standing there. But a thin blanket doesn’t do much in a frigid Polish winter.

“We didn’t stand for a long time, though. They were kind enough to give us a three-inch slice of bread and we were counted and recounted and marched out of the camp. And that was the beginning of what is now known as the death march.”

My heart jumps into my throat. I had known that Mr. Krasa was deported to Auschwitz. I had not known about the death march. I am paralyzed by the awful foreknowledge of what I am about to hear.

“It was already quite late in the afternoon when we started, so we marched till late at night. Actually we didn’t march; we were chased almost to run because the Russian military was fast approaching. Very late that night, we arrived at another already evacuated camp where we spent a few hours sleeping.

“At dawn we were awakened, and with great speed we continued through the day and again until late at night. There was no food, no water, only some dirty snow on the road to eat.

“The second night we came to a farm and they put us in a barn,” Mr. Krasa continues. “This was *really* very lucky because there was some hay or straw and we dug in and kept a little warmer. And in the early morning, again we started to go.

“We were already very weak and many couldn’t last even through the first day of this speedy movement. And when anyone dropped down because he couldn’t go any further, he was shot by the guards at the end when the column passed. I guess they didn’t want to leave live witnesses, as if those bodies all along the road wouldn’t be enough, you know, for witness,” he says, and a grim laugh escapes his lips.

“On the first day, there was one who was very weak. One of us stood on either side of him, helping him along. And as long as he could move his legs, it was alright. But when he couldn’t anymore, we were too weak to support his weight, and we had to let go. When I heard the shot, I felt like I had been shot. Guilty. But I had to keep reminding myself that there was no way we could have dragged him any farther.”

He continues. “I had, through all this Auschwitz time, a pair of wooden clogs, because I had big feet and they were the only shoes that fit me. They were good because they were insulating from the cold, but you can imagine how uncomfortable they were because they were not flexible. I don’t know how the Dutch walk in them all the time.

“On the second day, a piece in the shape of a triangle broke off the top of the shoe. So now I had two sharp points digging into my foot. This was very uncomfortable.”

Uncomfortable?! It is taking every ounce of my self control to keep from crying out just imagining the pain. The words agonizing, unbearable come to mind. But uncomfortable? This man is unbelievable.

“I don’t know where or how, but I found a piece of wax cloth and I wrapped my feet in that. Now the insulation from the cold was gone, but at least I wasn’t totally barefoot.

“On the third day, I thought I could go no farther. I had reached the limit of what I thought I could endure. And late that night we suddenly came into a forest; there were tall trees on either side of the road and it was completely dark. Not even the light of the moon shone that night.

“The kids were still in fairly good condition—for Auschwitz, that is. And it broke my heart, but I had to tell them that I was of no use to them anymore. I would try to escape into that forest, and if they shot me, well, it would have been better than being shot for dropping on the road.”

My hands are clenched into tight fists, yet I barely notice the searing pain from my fingernails cutting into my palms.

“So in this dark forest I slipped into a ditch on the side of the road, lying face down to look like I was dead. And one of the guards shot me. But maybe because it was dark, or maybe for some other reason which I will never understand, that bullet came in under the arm and became lodged in my rib.

“I was lying there in a pool of blood, the snow turning red all around me. This was a blessing, because no soldier attempted to shoot me again.”

I imagine the German soldiers' perverse pleasure at seeing the bodies lying on the side of the road. "Another dead Jew, drowning in his own blood." The thought is sickening.

"I waited for the whole column to pass, then I picked myself up and ran into the forest. And there I found other people who had had the same idea, but they were lucky, they managed to escape without being shot. So we huddled, shared the blanket, and spent the night out there in that forest."

So This is Freedom

“When the first light became obvious, we ventured to the edge of the forest and looked down the road to see if we could see something. And we did!” he exclaims, suddenly springing to life. “There at the top of the hill was another camp. The gate was open and there was no guard in the tower, and we became curious.

“Of course, yesterday I couldn’t walk anymore, and suddenly I could run. I guess that’s how the body works, you know?”

With rekindled spirits, they ran up to the camp and asked the prisoners what was happening.

“We don’t know,” they responded. “But before dawn the guards jumped into trucks and took off.”

“They must have taken off in a great hurry,” Mr. Krasa recalls, “because they never would have left live prisoners behind. Later I found out that a Russian tank force cut a wedge into the German front right there, and, of course, the Germans didn’t want to fall into Russian hands. So they fled.”

I am paralyzed by my thoughts of the two boys. *Did they make it? They must have made it; they were not as weak. God, please let him say that they survived.*

“And the kids?” I manage, my voice barely above a whisper. “What about the kids?”

A smile slowly spreads across his face, which I correctly presume to be a good indication. “I was exploring the camp, searching for the two boys and I was getting very

nervous because I didn't find them until I came to the last barracks. But they were there, and the three of us were together once more."

A wave of relief washes over me.

"The kids had already scoured the camp looking for food, but there was none to be found. One of the old timers in the camp told us that there was a nearby village that had been deserted and perhaps we could find food there. We could not believe our eyes when we arrived in that village. Those people must have fled with the guards because there was unfinished breakfast on the table, food burning in the oven, and plenty of food in the pantry.

"We were like animals. We lost control completely. We ate and ate, after the months of Auschwitz diet and three days of nothing. We ate everything, crazy stuff. And it wasn't without consequences.

"On the way back we found that this camp was within a huge industrial complex where 5000 prisoners had worked. Here we found the barracks of the British prisoners of war. They must have had some special treatment because we found a lot of warm uniforms, socks, underwear, coats, everything. So now ten of us guys moved into those barracks. Home sweet home," he says with a touch of sarcasm.

"About the consequences I spoke of," he continues, "at each side of the barracks there was a toilet, and that was not enough for the ten of us. I don't think I need to go into more detail.

"So every day eight of the ten went to the village for supplies. One of the kids had worked in Terezín in a carpenter shop, and he made a sort of sled so we could carry more

than just an armful. And I was cooking on the heating stove, you know, a kind of improvisation, but it was warm food and a cold winter, and to us, it was heaven.

“One day they brought from one of the houses a kitchen stove with the pipes and we installed it. Then *really* did we cook,” he recalls, and I can hear the excitement in his voice. “The Russian soldiers came to eat with us because our food was better than what they got.

“We stayed in that camp for six weeks. We weren’t far from Auschwitz—how far can near-dead prisoners walk in three days? Prague was here,” he explains, pointing to a map, “but the Russians were still moving in that direction. We couldn’t leave right away for two reasons. One was that we were too weak, and the other was that they were still fighting in Czechoslovakia.

“In six weeks, with my own cooking and uninterrupted diarrhea, I gained seventy-nine pounds. This was almost back to my original weight, so now you can imagine how much I lost.”

But I cannot. I am frozen, speechless. The magnitude of his words has overshadowed my ability to comprehend.

Reunion

“After six weeks we picked ourselves up and went to a nearby town in Poland,” he recalls. “There the Polish Red Cross gave us an ID based only on what we told them, since we had nothing to show except that tattooed number. We needed some form of identification traveling in Russian occupied territory. And then we started out on the long way home.

“We traveled in military convoys, in trucks, in horse-drawn carriages, in railroad freight cars. Whatever moved, we used. We were here and Prague was here,” he says, showing me on the map, “but we could only travel in a very roundabout way. We went through Poland to Ukraine, to Rumania, to Hungary, to Austria and finally home. The whole journey took six weeks. I came to Prague two days after the war ended.

“First thing I did was go straight to Terezín. I found my parents there.”

Suddenly and without warning, tears spring to my eyes. I struggle to blink them away, overcome with every emotion. Relief, joy, hope. The chances of finding any living relative after the Holocaust were slim. To find both parents was almost unheard of.

I want him to rejoice, to reminisce about a tearful reunion. But he does not.

“I was very happy to find my parents,” he continues evenly. “And I have no idea how it happened. I researched, trying to find out how Schliesser did it so that they never were in a transport in spite of all the older people being deported. I couldn’t ask him because he didn’t survive. Almost no one did.”

* * *

The fact the Mr. Krasa relates this so evenly is indicative of his total suppression of emotion, even to this day. What should have been the most joyful moment of his story was actually very anti-climactic. There is no discussion of how it felt to be reunited with his parents. He does not speak of the disbelief and disillusionment felt by many survivors after the war, nor does he elaborate on the sheer impossibility of redefining his life. This dissociative state in which he appears detached from his own experience is explained by Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*:

The person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body....These perceptual changes combine with a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle. This altered state of consciousness might be regarded as one of nature's small mercies, a protection against unbearable pain.¹²

I remember the painful words of Russian poet Anna Akhmatova: "No, it is not I, it is someone else who is suffering. / I could not have borne it."¹³

¹² Herman 43

¹³ Anna Akhmatova, from "Requiem," Selected Poems, trans. D.M. Thomas (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) 90.

Ever After

“So we went back to Prague and tried to pick up the pieces of our lives. I didn’t remember how to dress very well, all I had was that British uniform. I started to work two jobs because, as I mentioned, I had nothing and my parents had just what was left from that 110 pounds of possessions from three years earlier.

“I worked until the fall of 1946 when the Czech army inducted me into the reserve. But ironically, that was short-lived because in December the United Nations asked all member countries to reduce their military and the easiest way to do this was to release the ones in whom they had invested least. So on New Years Eve of 1946, I came home.

“One of my friends made up a New Year’s Eve party and I was invited. There I met Hana, my wife. I had known her father in Terezín. Of her family, she was the only one who survived. But we did not start to date until sometime later.

“In the spring of ’47 I thought to myself, ‘If I am a cook, I want to be a good cook, and there is not much to cook here in postwar Czechoslovakia.’ So I wrote to the chamber of commerce in Switzerland to get a job as a cook there.”

He would go on to live in Switzerland for almost a year, overworked and underpaid, but gaining valuable experience.

“After some time, I returned to Prague,” he continues. “But in February of 1948 the communist government took over and I was determined never to live under dictatorship again. I wanted to go to Israel, against my father’s wishes.

“Do you remember that girl Hana who I met at the New Year’s Eve party? Well, I looked her up and we dated a little, and in 1949, she proposed and wouldn’t take no for an answer. I knew I was done in,” he says with a wink. “So we married, and at that time, I had a good job as a chef at the Israeli embassy in Prague.

“One day, they closed the borders with no warning or notice, and suddenly, that put an end to emigration. We were stuck. We had to look for an illegal exit, which we found. But nothing is ever easy. It was discovered in Austria that we were using fake papers, and then we were sent back to Italy, where we had just passed through. There we spent six weeks in jail for illegal crossing of the border.”

Mr. and Mrs. Krasa finally made it to Israel, where their first child was born. The subsequent years would hold for them a multitude of disappointments, joys, hardships, and triumphs. A series of adventures brought them from Israel to America, where Mr. Krasa would achieve his dream of owning his own restaurant.

“That’s it,” he says, leaning back in his chair. He looks at me and smiles. “And we lived, almost, happily ever after.”

Epilogue

Mr. Krasa concludes his tale as abruptly as it began. And now I am left to ponder how a story such as this could possibly end. How does one conclude a story that should never, ever be forgotten? How do I justly honor a man who has lived a life of faith and commitment, maintaining dignity in the face of evil?

His words reverberate in my mind. *“And we lived, almost, happily every after.”* How could one who endured such atrocities say that he lived happily ever after, without a trace of bitterness or resentment? And then it becomes clear. He possesses a rare ability to transcend the hopelessness of a situation—to rise above his suffering, when so many others disappeared into the shadows. It is the childlike hope that still flickers in his eyes. It is the reason he survived.

Frankl said, “When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task....His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.”¹⁴ Edgar Krasa chose to live. They broke him, but he refused to die.

Today, Mr. Krasa speaks about his experience to promote tolerance and understanding. But there is another reason, one which runs deeper than the first. He speaks to keep his spirit alive. More than fifty years later, he speaks to make sense of his experience, to find meaning in his suffering. He speaks because he is compelled.

As a writer, I am compelled to listen, and I am irrevocably changed. Today we listen to rhetoric that stories such as this never occurred despite the fact anti-Semitism

¹⁴ Frankl 99

continues to surface throughout the world. Jews are being harassed on the streets of Europe, and leaders of the Islamic world continue to commit atrocities against this religion of Abraham, proudly identifying themselves and taking credit for their evil deeds.

America is not immune to hate crimes, despite our pride in diversity and the work of our educators to teach our youth the value of our differences. The sentiments of anti-Semitism are frightening. Neo-Nazi groups recruit young people to ensure there will be a new generation to spread racism and hate. Even in America, where Jews have been more secure as equal citizens than anywhere else in 2,000 years, the unsettling truth is that the number of anti-Semitic incidents continues to grow. When will this be stopped? Are we doomed to repeat the actions cited in Martin Niemoller's poem, which has become a powerful symbol of the Holocaust? He writes: *"First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for me."*

I am reminded of Sir Edmund Burke's quote, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Now more than ever, we are compelled to take Mr. Krasa's story and share it with the rest of the world. It is our duty as human beings to ensure that the likes of the Holocaust will never happen again—to any race or creed.

I am not Jewish.

I am a human being.

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Author's Note: The title of this work, *Dancing Under the Gallows*, comes from a statement made by Terezín survivor Zdenka Fantlova, as quoted by Mr. Krasa.

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