

IF THIS IS A MAN

Author's Preface

It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944, that is, after the German Government had decided, owing to the growing scarcity of labour, to lengthen the average life-span of the prisoners destined for elimination; it conceded noticeable improvements in the camp routine and temporarily suspended killings at the whim of individuals.

As an account of atrocities, therefore, this book of mine adds nothing to what is already known to readers throughout the world on the disturbing question of the death camps. It has not been written in order to formulate new accusations; it should be able, rather, to furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind. Many people – many nations – can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy'. For the most part this conviction lies deep down like some latent infection; it betrays itself only in random, disconnected acts, and does not lie at the base of a system of reason. But when this does come about, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premiss in a syllogism, then, at the end of the chain, there is the Lager. Here is the product of a conception of the world carried rigorously to its logical conclusion; so long as the conception subsists, the conclusion remains to threaten us. The story of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister alarm-signal.

I recognize, and ask indulgence for, the structural defects of the book. Its origins go back, not indeed in practice, but as an

idea, an intention, to the days in the Lager. The need to tell our story to 'the rest', to make 'the rest' participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs. The book has been written to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, as an interior liberation. Hence its fragmentary character: the chapters have been written not in logical succession, but in order of urgency. The work of tightening up is more studied, and more recent.

It seems to me unnecessary to add that none of the facts are invented.

PRIMO LEVI

If This is a Man

You who live safe
 In your warm houses,
 You who find, returning in the evening,
 Hot food and friendly faces:
 Consider if this is a man
 Who works in the mud
 Who does not know peace
 Who fights for a scrap of bread
 Who dies because of a yes or a no.
 Consider if this is a woman,
 Without hair and without name
 With no more strength to remember,
 Her eyes empty and her womb cold
 Like a frog in winter.
 Meditate that this came about:
 I commend these words to you.
 Carve them in your hearts
 At home, in the street,
 Going to bed, rising;
 Repeat them to your children,
 Or may your house fall apart,
 May illness impede you,
 May your children turn their faces from you.

The Journey

I was captured by the Fascist Militia on 13 December 1943. I was twenty-four, with little wisdom, no experience and a decided tendency – encouraged by the life of segregation forced on me for the previous four years by the racial laws – to live in an unrealistic world of my own, a world inhabited by civilized Cartesian phantoms, by sincere male and bloodless female friendships. I cultivated a moderate and abstract sense of rebellion.

It had been by no means easy to flee into the mountains and to help set up what, both in my opinion and in that of friends little more experienced than myself, should have become a partisan band affiliated with the Resistance movement *Justice and Liberty*. Contacts, arms, money and the experience needed to acquire them were all missing. We lacked capable men, and instead we were swamped by a deluge of outcasts, in good or bad faith, who came from the plain in search of a non-existent military or political organization, of arms, or merely of protection, a hiding place, a fire, a pair of shoes.

At that time I had not yet been taught the doctrine I was later to learn so hurriedly in the Lager: that man is bound to pursue his own ends by all possible means, while he who errs but once pays dearly. So that I can only consider the following sequence of events justified. Three Fascist Militia companies, which had

set out in the night to surprise a much more powerful and dangerous band than ours, broke into our refuge one spectral snowy dawn and took me down to the valley as a suspect person.

During the interrogations that followed, I preferred to admit my status of 'Italian citizen of Jewish race'. I felt that otherwise I would be unable to justify my presence in places too secluded even for an evacuee; while I believed (wrongly as was subsequently seen) that the admission of my political activity would have meant torture and certain death. As a Jew, I was sent to Fossoli, near Modena, where a vast detention camp, originally meant for English and American prisoners-of-war, collected all the numerous categories of people not approved of by the new-born Fascist Republic.

At the moment of my arrival, that is, at the end of January 1944, there were about one hundred and fifty Italian Jews in the camp, but within a few weeks their number rose to over six hundred. For the most part they consisted of entire families captured by the Fascists or Nazis through their imprudence or following secret accusations. A few had given themselves up spontaneously, reduced to desperation by the vagabond life, or because they lacked the means to survive, or to avoid separation from a captured relation, or even – absurdly – 'to be in conformity with the law'. There were also about a hundred Yugoslavian military internees and a few other foreigners who were politically suspect.

The arrival of a squad of German SS men should have made even the optimists doubtful; but we still managed to interpret the novelty in various ways without drawing the most obvious conclusions. Thus, despite everything, the announcement of the deportation caught us all unawares.

On 20 February, the Germans had inspected the camp with care and had publicly and loudly upbraided the Italian commissar for the defective organization of the kitchen service and

for the scarce amount of wood distribution for heating; they even said that an infirmary would soon be opened. But on the morning of the 21st we learned that on the following day the Jews would be leaving. All the Jews, without exception. Even the children, even the old, even the ill. Our destination? Nobody knew. We should be prepared for a fortnight of travel. For every person missing at the roll-call, ten would be shot.

Only a minority of ingenuous and deluded souls continued to hope; we others had often spoken with the Polish and Croat refugees and we knew what departure meant.

For people condemned to death, tradition prescribes an austere ceremony, calculated to emphasize that all passions and anger have died down, and that the act of justice represents only a sad duty towards society which moves even the executioner to pity for the victim. Thus the condemned man is shielded from all external cares, he is granted solitude and, should he want it, spiritual comfort; in short, care is taken that he should feel around him neither hatred nor arbitrariness, only necessity and justice, and by means of punishment, pardon.

But to us this was not granted, for we were many and time was short. And in any case, what had we to repent, for what crime did we need pardon? The Italian commissar accordingly decreed that all services should continue to function until the final notice: the kitchens remained open, the *corvées* for cleaning worked as usual, and even the teachers of the little school gave lessons until the evening, as on other days. But that evening the children were given no homework.

And night came, and it was such a night that one knew that human eyes would not witness it and survive. Everyone felt this: not one of the guards, neither Italian nor German, had the courage to come and see what men do when they know they have to die.

All took leave from life in the manner which most suited

them. Some praying, some deliberately drunk, others lustfully intoxicated for the last time. But the mothers stayed up to prepare the food for the journey with tender care, and washed their children and packed the luggage; and at dawn the barbed wire was full of children's washing hung out in the wind to dry. Nor did they forget the diapers, the toys, the cushions and the hundred other small things which mothers remember and which children always need. Would you not do the same? If you and your child were going to be killed tomorrow, would you not give him something to eat today?

In hut 6A old Gattegno lived with his wife and numerous children and grandchildren and his sons- and daughters-in-law. All the men were carpenters; they had come from Tripoli after many long journeys, and had always carried with them the tools of their trade, their kitchen utensils and their accordions and violins to play and dance to after the day's work. They were happy and pious folk. Their women were the first to silently and rapidly finish the preparations for the journey in order to have time for mourning. When all was ready, the food cooked, the bundles tied together, they unloosened their hair, took off their shoes, placed the Yahrzeit candles on the ground and lit them according to the customs of their fathers, and sat on the bare soil in a circle for the lamentations, praying and weeping all the night. We collected in a group in front of their door, and we experienced within ourselves a grief that was new for us, the ancient grief of the people that has no land, the grief without hope of the exodus which is renewed every century.

Dawn came on us like a betrayer; it seemed as though the new sun rose as an ally of our enemies to assist in our destruction. The different emotions that overcame us, of resignation, of futile rebellion, of religious abandon, of fear, of despair, now joined together after a sleepless night in a collective, uncontrolled

panic. The time for meditation, the time for decision was over, and all reason dissolved into a tumult, across which flashed the happy memories of our homes, still so near in time and space, as painful as the thrusts of a sword.

Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that there remain no memory.

With the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll-call. At the end the officer asked '*Wieviel Stück?*' The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty 'pieces' and that all was in order. They then loaded us on to the buses and took us to the station of Carpi. Here the train was waiting for us, with our escort for the journey. Here we received the first blows: and it was so new and senseless that we felt no pain, neither in body nor in spirit. Only a profound amazement: how can one hit a man without anger?

There were twelve goods wagons for six hundred and fifty men; in mine we were only forty-five, but it was a small wagon. Here then, before our very eyes, under our very feet, was one of those notorious transport trains, those which never return, and of which, shuddering and always a little incredulous, we had so often heard speak. Exactly like this, detail for detail: goods wagons closed from the outside, with men, women and children pressed together without pity, like cheap merchandise, for a journey towards nothingness, a journey down there, towards the bottom. This time it is us who are inside.

Sooner or later in life everyone discovers that perfect happiness is unrealizable, but there are few who pause to consider the antithesis: that perfect unhappiness is equally unattainable. The obstacles preventing the realization of both these extreme states are of the same nature: they derive from our human

condition which is opposed to everything infinite. Our ever-insufficient knowledge of the future opposes it: and this is called, in the one instance, hope, and in the other, uncertainty of the following day. The certainty of death opposes it: for it places a limit on every joy, but also on every grief. The inevitable material cares oppose it: for as they poison every lasting happiness, they equally assiduously distract us from our misfortunes and make our consciousness of them intermittent and hence supportable.

It was the very discomfort, the blows, the cold, the thirst that kept us aloft in the void of bottomless despair, both during the journey and after. It was not the will to live, nor a conscious resignation; for few are the men capable of such resolution, and we were but a common sample of humanity.

The doors had been closed at once, but the train did not move until evening. We had learnt of our destination with relief. Auschwitz: a name without significance for us at that time, but it at least implied some place on this earth.

The train travelled slowly, with long, unnerving halts. Through the slit we saw the tall pale cliffs of the Adige Valley and the names of the last Italian cities disappear behind us. We passed the Brenner at midday of the second day and everyone stood up, but no one said a word. The thought of the return journey stuck in my heart, and I cruelly pictured to myself the inhuman joy of that other journey, with doors open, no one wanting to flee, and the first Italian names ... and I looked around and wondered how many, among that poor human dust, would be struck by fate. Among the forty-five people in my wagon only four saw their homes again; and it was by far the most fortunate wagon.

We suffered from thirst and cold; at every stop we clamoured for water, or even a handful of snow, but we were rarely heard; the soldiers of the escort drove off anybody who tried to

approach the convoy. Two young mothers, nursing their children, groaned night and day, begging for water. Our state of nervous tension made the hunger, exhaustion and lack of sleep seem less of a torment. But the hours of darkness were nightmares without end.

There are few men who know how to go to their deaths with dignity, and often they are not those whom one would expect. Few know how to remain silent and respect the silence of others. Our restless sleep was often interrupted by noisy and futile disputes, by curses, by kicks and blows blindly delivered to ward off some encroaching and inevitable contact. Then someone would light a candle, and its mournful flicker would reveal an obscure agitation, a human mass, extended across the floor, confused and continuous, sluggish and aching, rising here and there in sudden convulsions and immediately collapsing again in exhaustion.

Through the slit, known and unknown names of Austrian cities, Salzburg, Vienna, then Czech, finally Polish names. On the evening of the fourth day the cold became intense: the train ran through interminable black pine forests, climbing perceptibly. The snow was high. It must have been a branch line as the stations were small and almost deserted. During the halts, no one tried any more to communicate with the outside world: we felt ourselves by now 'on the other side'. There was a long halt in open country. The train started up with extreme slowness, and the convoy stopped for the last time, in the dead of night, in the middle of a dark silent plain.

On both sides of the track rows of red and white lights appeared as far as the eye could see; but there was none of that confusion of sounds which betrays inhabited places even from a distance. By the wretched light of the last candle, with the rhythm of the wheels, with every human sound now silenced, we awaited what was to happen.

Next to me, crushed against me for the whole journey, there had been a woman. We had known each other for many years, and the misfortune had struck us together, but we knew little of each other. Now, in the hour of decision, we said to each other things that are never said among the living. We said farewell and it was short; everybody said farewell to life through his neighbour. We had no more fear.

The climax came suddenly. The door opened with a crash, and the dark echoed with outlandish orders in that curt, barbaric barking of Germans in command which seems to give vent to a millennial anger. A vast platform appeared before us, lit up by reflectors. A little beyond it, a row of lorries. Then everything was silent again. Someone translated: we had to climb down with our luggage and deposit it alongside the train. In a moment the platform was swarming with shadows. But we were afraid to break that silence: everyone busied himself with his luggage, searched for someone else, called to somebody, but timidly, in a whisper.

A dozen SS men stood around, legs akimbo, with an indifferent air. At a certain moment they moved among us, and in a subdued tone of voice, with faces of stone, began to interrogate us rapidly, one by one, in bad Italian. They did not interrogate everybody, only a few: 'How old? Healthy or ill?' And on the basis of the reply they pointed in two different directions.

Everything was as silent as an aquarium, or as in certain dream sequences. We had expected something more apocalyptic: they seemed simple police agents. It was disconcerting and disarming. Someone dared to ask for his luggage: they replied, 'luggage afterwards'. Someone else did not want to leave his wife: they said, 'together again afterwards'. Many mothers did not want to be separated from their children: they said 'good,

good, stay with child'. They behaved with the calm assurance of people doing their normal duty of every day. But Renzo stayed an instant too long to say good-bye to Francesca, his fiancée, and with a single blow they knocked him to the ground. It was their everyday duty.

In less than ten minutes all the fit men had been collected together in a group. What happened to the others, to the women, to the children, to the old men, we could establish neither then nor later: the night swallowed them up, purely and simply. Today, however, we know that in that rapid and summary choice each one of us had been judged capable or not of working usefully for the Reich; we know that of our convoy no more than ninety-six men and twenty-nine women entered the respective camps of Monowitz-Buna and Birkenau, and that of all the others, more than five hundred in number, not one was living two days later. We also know that not even this tenuous principle of discrimination between fit and unfit was always followed, and that later the simpler method was often adopted of merely opening both the doors of the wagon without warning or instructions to the new arrivals. Those who by chance climbed down on one side of the convoy entered the camp; the others went to the gas chamber.

This is the reason why three-year-old Emilia died: the historical necessity of killing the children of Jews was self-demonstrative to the Germans. Emilia, daughter of Aldo Levi of Milan, was a curious, ambitious, cheerful, intelligent child; her parents had succeeded in washing her during the journey in the packed car in a tub with tepid water which the degenerate German engineer had allowed them to draw from the engine that was dragging us all to death.

Thus, in an instant, our women, our parents, our children disappeared. We saw them for a short while as an obscure mass at the other end of the platform; then we saw nothing more.

Instead, two groups of strange individuals emerged into the light of the lamps. They walked in squads, in rows of three, with an odd, embarrassed step, head dangling in front, arms rigid. On their heads they wore comic berets and were all dressed in long striped overcoats, which even by night and from a distance looked filthy and in rags. They walked in a large circle around us, never drawing near, and in silence began to busy themselves with our luggage and to climb in and out of the empty wagons.

We looked at each other without a word. It was all incomprehensible and mad, but one thing we had understood: this was the metamorphosis that awaited us. Tomorrow we would be like them.

Without knowing how I found myself loaded on to a lorry with thirty others; the lorry sped into the night at full speed. It was covered and we could not see outside, but by the shaking we could tell that the road had many curves and bumps. Are we unguarded? Throw ourselves down? It is too late, too late, we are all 'down'. In any case we are soon aware that we are not without guard. He is a strange guard, a German soldier bristling with arms. We do not see him because of the thick darkness, but we feel the hard contact every time that a lurch of the lorry throws us all in a heap. At a certain point he switches on a pocket torch and instead of shouting threats of damnation at us, he asks us courteously, one by one, in German and in pidgin language, if we have any money or watches to give him, seeing that they will not be useful to us any more. This is no order, no regulation: it is obvious that it is a small private initiative, of our Charon. The matter stirs us to anger and laughter and brings relief.

2

On the Bottom

The journey did not last more than twenty minutes. Then the lorry stopped, and we saw a large door, and above it a sign, brightly illuminated (its memory still strikes me in my dreams): *Arbeit Macht Frei*, 'Work Gives Freedom'.

We climb down, they make us enter an enormous empty room that is poorly heated. We have a terrible thirst. The weak gurgle of the water in the radiators makes us ferocious; we have had nothing to drink for four days. But there is also a tap – and above it a card which says that it is forbidden to drink as the water is dirty. Nonsense. It seems obvious that the card is a joke, 'they' know that we are dying of thirst and they put us in a room, and there is, a tap, and *Wassertrinken Verboten*. I drink and I incite my companions to do likewise, but I have to spit it out, the water is tepid and sweetish, with the smell of a swamp.

This is hell. Today, in our times, hell must be like this. A huge, empty room: we are tired, standing on our feet, with a tap which drips while we cannot drink the water, and we wait for something which will certainly be terrible, and nothing happens and nothing continues to happen. What can one think about? One cannot think any more, it is like being already dead. Someone sits down on the ground. The time passes drop by drop.

We are not dead. The door is opened and an SS man enters, smoking. He looks at us slowly and asks, '*Wer kann Deutsch?*'

at the fair skin of his hand writing down my fate on the white page in incomprehensible symbols.

'*Los, ab!*' Alex enters the scene again, I am once more under his jurisdiction. He salutes Pannwitz, clicking his heels, and in return receives a faint nod of the eyelids. For a moment I grope around for a suitable formula of leave-taking; but in vain. I know how to say to eat, to work, to steal, to die in German; I also know how to say sulphuric acid, atmospheric pressure, and short-wave generator, but I do not know how to address a person of importance.

Here we are again on the steps. Alex flies down the stairs: he has leather shoes because he is not a Jew, he is as light on his feet as the devils of Malabolge. At the bottom he turns and looks at me sourly as I walk down hesitantly and noisily in my two enormous unpaired wooden shoes, clinging on to the rail like an old man.

It seems to have gone well, but I would be crazy to rely on it. I already know the Lager well enough to realize that one should never anticipate, especially optimistically. What is certain is that I have spent a day without working, so that tonight I will have a little less hunger, and this is a concrete advantage, not to be taken away.

To re-enter Bude, one has to cross a space cluttered up with piles of cross-beams and metal frames. The steel cable of a crane cuts across the road, and Alex catches hold of it to climb over: *Donnerwetter*, he looks at his hand black with thick grease. In the meanwhile I have joined him. Without hatred and without sneering, Alex wipes his hand on my shoulder, both the palm and the back of the hand, to clean it; he would be amazed, the poor brute Alex, if someone told him that today, on the basis of this action, I judge him and Pannwitz and the innumerable others like him, big and small, in Auschwitz and everywhere.

11

The Canto of Ulysses

There were six of us, scraping and cleaning the inside of an underground petrol tank; the daylight only reached us through a small manhole. It was a luxury job because no one supervised us; but it was cold and damp. The powder of the rust burnt under our eyelids and coated our throats and mouths with a taste almost like blood.

The rope-ladder hanging from the manhole began to sway: someone was coming. Deutsch extinguished his cigarette, Goldner woke Sivadjan; we all began to vigorously scrape the resonant steelplate wall.

It was not the *Vorarbeiter*, it was only Jean, the Pikolo of our Kommando. Jean was an Alsatian student; although he was already twenty-four, he was the youngest Häftling of the Chemical Kommando. So that he was given the post of Pikolo, which meant the messenger-clerk, responsible for the cleaning of the hut, for the distribution of tools, for the washing of bowls and for keeping record of the working hours of the Kommando.

Jean spoke French and German fluently: as soon as we recognized his shoes on the top step of the ladder we all stopped scraping.

'*Also, Pikolo, was gibt es Neues?*'

'*Qu'est ce qu'il y a comme soupe aujourd'hui?*'

... in what mood was the Kapo? And the affair of the

twenty-five lashes given to Stern? What was the weather like outside? Had he read the newspaper? What smell was coming from the civilian kitchen? What was the time?

Jean was liked a great deal by the Kommando. One must realize that the post of Pikolo represented a quite high rank in the hierarchy of the Prominents: the Pikolo (who is usually no more than seventeen years old) does no manual work, has an absolute right to the remainder of the daily ration to be found on the bottom of the vat and can stay all day near the stove. He 'therefore' has the right to a supplementary half-ration and has a good chance of becoming the friend and confidant of the Kapo, from whom he officially receives discarded clothes and shoes. Now Jean was an exceptional Pikolo. He was shrewd and physically robust, and at the same time gentle and friendly: although he continued his secret individual struggle against death, he did not neglect his human relationships with less privileged comrades; at the same time he had been so able and persevering that he had managed to establish himself in the confidence of Alex, the Kapo.

Alex had kept all his promises. He had shown himself a violent and unreliable rogue, with an armour of solid and compact ignorance and stupidity, always excepting his intuition and consummate technique as convict-keeper. He never let slip an opportunity of proclaiming his pride in his pure blood and his green triangle, and displayed a lofty contempt for his ragged and starving chemists: '*Ihr Doktoren! Ihr Intelligenten!*' he sneered every day, watching them crowd around with their bowls held out for the distribution of the ration. He was extremely compliant and servile before the civilian *Meister* and with the SS he kept up ties of cordial friendship.

He was clearly intimidated by the register of the Kommando and by the daily report of work, and this had been the path that Pikolo had chosen to make himself indispensable. It had been a

long, cautious and subtle task which the entire Kommando had followed for a month with bated breath; but at the end the porcupine's defence was penetrated, and Pikolo confirmed in his office to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Although Jean had never abused his position, we had already been able to verify that a single word of his, said in the right tone of voice and at the right moment, had great power; many times already it had saved one of us from a whipping or from being denounced to the SS. We had been friends for a week: we discovered each other during the unusual occasion of an air-raid alarm, but then, swept by the fierce rhythm of the Lager, we had only been able to greet each other fleetingly, at the latrines, in the washroom.

Hanging with one hand on the swaying ladder, he pointed to me: '*Aujourd'hui c'est Primo qui viendra avec moi chercher la soupe.*'

Until yesterday it had been Stern, the squinting Transylvanian; now he had fallen into disgrace for some story of brooms stolen from the store, and Pikolo had managed to support my candidature as assistant to the '*Essenholen*', the daily corvée of the ration.

He climbed out and I followed him, blinking in the brightness of the day. It was warmish outside, the sun drew a faint smell of paint and tar from the greasy earth, which made me think of a holiday beach of my infancy. Pikolo gave me one of the two wooden poles, and we walked along under a clear June sky.

I began to thank him, but he stopped me: it was not necessary. One could see the Carpathians covered in snow. I breathed in the fresh air, I felt unusually light-hearted.

'*Tu es fou de marcher si vite. On a le temps, tu sais.*' The ration was collected half a mile away; one had to return with the pot weighing over a hundred pounds supported on the two

poles. It was quite a tiring task, but it meant a pleasant walk there without a load, and the ever-welcome chance of going near the kitchens.

We slowed down. Pikolo was expert. He had chosen the path cleverly so that we would have to make a long detour, walking at least for an hour, without arousing suspicion. We spoke of our houses, of Strasbourg and Turin, of the books we had read, of what we had studied, of our mothers: how all mothers resemble each other! His mother too had scolded him for never knowing how much money he had in his pocket; his mother too would have been amazed if she had known that he had found his feet, that day by day he was finding his feet.

An SS man passed on a bicycle. It is Rudi, the *Blockführer*. Halt! Attention! Take off your beret! '*Sale brute, celui-là. Ein ganz gemeiner Hund.*' Can he speak French and German with equal facility? Yes, he thinks indifferently in both languages. He spent a month in Liguria, he likes Italy, he would like to learn Italian. I would be pleased to teach him Italian: why not try? We can do it. Why not immediately, one thing is as good as another, the important thing is not to lose time, not to waste this hour.

Limentani from Rome walks by, dragging his feet, with a bowl hidden under his jacket. Pikolo listens carefully, picks up a few words of our conversation and repeats them smiling: '*Zup-pa, cam-po, acqua.*'

Frenkl the spy passes. Quicken our pace, one never knows, he does evil for evil's sake.

... The canto of Ulysses. Who knows how or why it comes into my mind. But we have no time to change, this hour is already less than an hour. If Jean is intelligent he will understand. He *will* understand – today I feel capable of so much.

... Who is Dante? What is the Comedy? That curious sensation of novelty which one feels if one tries to explain briefly

what is the Divine Comedy. How the Inferno is divided up, what are its punishments. Virgil is Reason, Beatrice is Theology.

Jean pays great attention, and I begin slowly and accurately:

'Then of that age-old fire the loftier horn
Began to mutter and move, as a wavering flame
Wrestles against the wind and is over-worn;
And, like a speaking tongue vibrant to frame
Language, the tip of it nickering to and fro
Threw out a voice and answered: "When I came ..."'

Here I stop and try to translate. Disastrous – poor Dante and poor French! All the same, the experience seems to promise well: Jean admires the bizarre simile of the tongue and suggests the appropriate word to translate 'age-old'.

And after 'When I came?' Nothing. A hole in my memory. 'Before Aeneas ever named it so.' Another hole. A fragment floats into my mind, not relevant: '... nor piety To my old father, not the wedded love That should have comforted Penelope ...', is it correct?

'... So on the open sea I set forth.'

Of this I am certain, I am sure, I can explain it to Pikolo, I can point out why 'I set forth'* is not '*je me mis*', it is much stronger and more audacious, it is a chain which has been broken, it is throwing oneself on the other side of a barrier, we know the impulse well. The open sea: Pikolo has travelled by sea, and knows what it means: it is when the horizon closes in on itself, free, straight ahead and simple, and there is nothing but the smell of the sea; sweet things, ferociously far away.

* '*misi me*' [translator's note].

We have arrived at Kraftwerk, where the cable-laying Kommando works. Engineer Levi must be here. Here he is, one can only see his head above the trench. He waves to me, he is a brave man, I have never seen his morale low, he never speaks of eating.

'Open sea', 'open sea', I know it rhymes with 'left me': '... and that small band of comrades that had never left me', but I cannot remember if it comes before or after. And the journey as well, the foolhardy journey beyond the Pillars of Hercules, how sad, I have to tell it in prose – a sacrilege. I have only rescued two lines, but they are worth stopping for:

'... that none should prove so hardy
To venture the uncharted distances ...'

'To venture':* I had to come to the Lager to realize that it is the same expression as before: 'I set forth'. But I say nothing to Jean, I am not sure that it is an important observation. How many things there are to say, and the sun is already high, midday is near. I am in a hurry, a terrible hurry.

Here, listen, Pikolo, open your ears and your mind, you have to understand, for my sake:

'Think of your breed; for brutish ignorance
Your mettle was not made; you were made men,
To follow after knowledge and excellence.'

As if I also was hearing it for the first time: like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forget who I am and where I am.

Pikolo begs me to repeat it. How good Pikolo is, he is aware

* 'si metta' [translator's note].

that it is doing me good. Or perhaps it is something more: perhaps, despite the wan translation and the pedestrian, rushed commentary, he has received the message, he has felt that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with the poles for the soup on our shoulders.

'My little speech made every one so keen ...'

... and I try, but in vain, to explain how many things this 'keen' means. There is another lacuna here, this time irreparable. '... the light kindles and grows Beneath the moon' or something like it; but before it? ... Not an idea, '*keine Ahnung*' as they say here. Forgive me, Pikolo, I have forgotten at least four triplets.

'*Ça ne fait rien, vas-y tout de même.*'

'... When at last hove up a mountain, grey
With distance, and so lofty and so steep,
I never had seen the like on any day.'

Yes, yes, 'so lofty and so steep', not 'very steep',* a consecutive proposition. And the mountains when one sees them in the distance ... the mountains ... oh, Pikolo, Pikolo, say something, speak, do not let me think of my mountains which used to show up against the dusk of evening as I returned by train from Milan to Turin!

Enough, one must go on, these are things that one thinks but does not say. Pikolo waits and looks at me.

I would give today's soup to know how to connect 'the like on any day' to the last lines. I try to reconstruct it through the

* 'alta tanto', not 'molto alta' [translator's note].

rhymes, I close my eyes, I bite my fingers – but it is no use, the rest is silence. Other verses dance in my head: ‘... The sodden ground belched wind ...’, no, it is something else. It is late, it is late, we have reached the kitchen, I must finish:

‘And three times round she went in roaring smother
With all the waters; at the fourth the poop
Rose, and the prow went down, as pleased Another.’

I keep Pikolo back, it is vitally necessary and urgent that he listen, that he understand this ‘as pleased Another’ before it is too late; tomorrow he or I might be dead, or we might never see each other again, I must tell him, I must explain to him about the Middle Ages, about the so human and so necessary and yet unexpected anachronism, but still more, something gigantic that I myself have only just seen, in a flash of intuition, perhaps the reason for our fate, for our being here today ...

We are now in the soup queue, among the sordid, ragged crowd of soup-carriers from other Kommandos. Those just arrived press against our backs. ‘*Kraut und Rüben? Kraut und Rüben.*’ The official announcement is made that the soup today is of cabbages and turnips: ‘*Choux et navets. Kaposzta és répak.*’

‘And over our heads the hollow seas closed up.’

12

The Events of the Summer

Throughout the spring, convoys arrived from Hungary; one prisoner in two was Hungarian, and Hungarian had become the second language in the camp after Yiddish.

In the month of August 1944, we who had entered the camp five months before now counted among the old ones. As such, we of Kommando 98 were not amazed that the promises made to us and the examination we had passed had brought no result; neither amazed nor exceptionally saddened. At bottom, we all had a certain dread of changes: ‘When things change, they change for the worse’ was one of the proverbs of the camp. More generally, experience had shown us many times the vanity of every conjecture: why worry oneself trying to read into the future when no action, no word of ours could have the minimum influence? We were old Häftlinge: our wisdom lay in ‘not trying to understand’, not imagining the future, not tormenting ourselves as to how and when it would all be over; not asking others or ourselves any questions.

We preserved the memories of our previous life, but blurred and remote, profoundly sweet and sad, like the memories of early infancy. While for everybody, the moment of entry into the camp was the starting point of a different sequence of thoughts, those near and sharp, continually confirmed by present experience, like wounds re-opened every day.

17

The Story of Ten Days

Already for some months now the distant booming of the Russian guns had been heard at intervals when, on 11 January 1945, I fell ill of scarlet fever and was once more sent into Ka-Be. '*Infektionsabteilung*': it meant a small room, really quite clean, with ten bunks on two levels, a wardrobe, three stools and a closet seat with the pail for corporal needs. All in a space of three yards by five.

It was difficult to climb to the upper bunks as there was no ladder; so, when a patient got worse he was transferred to the lower bunks.

When I was admitted I was the thirteenth in the room. Four of the others – two French political prisoners and two young Hungarian Jews – had scarlet fever; there were three with diphtheria, two with typhus, while one suffered from a repellent facial erysipelas. The other two had more than one illness and were incredibly wasted away.

I had a high fever. I was lucky enough to have a bunk entirely to myself: I lay down with relief knowing that I had the right to forty days' isolation and therefore of rest, while I felt myself still sufficiently strong to fear neither the consequences of scarlet fever nor the selections.

Thanks to my by-now long experience of camp life I managed to bring with me all my personal belongings: a belt of

interlaced electric wire, the knife-spoon, a needle with three needlefuls, five buttons and last of all eighteen flints which I had stolen from the laboratory. From each of these, shaping them patiently with a knife, it was possible to make three smaller flints, just the right gauge for a normal cigarette lighter. They were valued at six or seven rations of bread.

I enjoyed four peaceful days. Outside it was snowing and very cold, but the room was heated. I was given strong doses of sulphur drugs, I suffered from an intense feeling of sickness and was hardly able to eat; I did not want to talk.

The two Frenchmen with scarlet fever were quite pleasant. They were provincials from the Vosges who had entered the camp only a few days before with a large convoy of civilians swept up by the Germans in their retreat from Lorraine. The elder one was named Arthur, a peasant, small and thin. The other, his bed-companion, was Charles, a school teacher, thirty-two years old; instead of a shirt he had been given a summer vest, ridiculously short.

On the fifth day the barber came. He was a Greek from Salonica: he spoke only the beautiful Spanish of his people, but understood some words of all the languages spoken in the camp. He was called Askenazi and had been in the camp for almost three years. I do not know how he managed to get the post of *Frisör* of Ka-Be: he spoke neither German nor Polish, nor was he in fact excessively brutal. Before he entered, I heard him speaking excitedly for a long time in the corridor with one of the doctors, a compatriot of his. He seemed to have an unusual look on his face, but as the expressions of the Levantines are different from ours, I could not tell whether he was afraid or happy or merely upset. He knew me, or at least knew that I was Italian.

When it was my turn I climbed down laboriously from the bunk. I asked him in Italian if there was anything new: he stopped shaving me, winked in a serious and allusive manner,

pointed to the window with his chin, and then made a sweeping gesture with his hand towards the west.

'Morgen, alle Kamerad weg.'

He looked at me for a moment with his eyes wide-open, as if waiting for a reaction, and then he added: *'todos, todos'* and returned to his work. He knew about my flints and shaved me with a certain gentleness.

The news excited no direct emotion in me. Already for many months I had no longer felt any pain, joy or fear, except in that detached and distant manner characteristic of the Lager, which might be described as conditional: if I still had my former sensitivity, I thought, this would be an extremely moving moment.

My ideas were perfectly clear; for a long time now Alberto and I had foreseen the dangers which would accompany the evacuation of the camp and the liberation. As for the rest, Askenazi's news was merely a confirmation of rumours which had been circulating for some days: that the Russians were at Czeŝtochowa, sixty miles to the north; that they were at Zakopane, sixty miles to the south; that at Buna the Germans were already preparing the sabotage mines.

I looked at the faces of my comrades one by one: it was clearly useless to discuss it with any of them. They would have replied: 'Well?' and it would all have finished there. The French were different, they were still fresh.

'Did you hear?' I said to them. 'Tomorrow they are going to evacuate the camp.'

They overwhelmed me with questions. 'Where to? On foot? ... The ill ones as well? Those who cannot walk?' They knew that I was an old prisoner and that I understood German, and deduced that I knew much more about the matter than I wanted to admit.

I did not know anything more: I told them so but they continued to ask questions. How stupid of them! But of course, they

had only been in the Lager for a week and had not yet learnt that one did not ask questions.

In the afternoon the Greek doctor came. He said that all patients able to walk would be given shoes and clothes and would leave the following day with the healthy ones on a twelve mile march. The others would remain in Ka-Be with assistants to be chosen from the patients least ill.

The doctor was unusually cheerful, he seemed drunk. I knew him: he was a cultured, intelligent man, egoistic and calculating. He added that everyone, without distinction, would receive a triple ration of bread, at which the patients visibly cheered up. We asked him what would happen to us. He replied that probably the Germans would leave us to our fate: no, he did not think that they would kill us. He made no effort to hide the fact that he thought otherwise. His very cheerfulness boded ill.

He was already equipped for the march. He had hardly gone out when the two Hungarian boys began to speak excitedly to each other. They were in an advanced state of convalescence but extremely wasted away. It was obvious that they were afraid to stay with the patients and were deciding to go with the healthy ones. It was not a question of reasoning; I would probably also have followed the instinct of the flock if I had not felt so weak; fear is supremely contagious, and its immediate reaction is to make one try to run away.

Outside the hut the camp sounded unusually excited. One of the two Hungarians got up, went out and returned half an hour later laden with filthy rags. He must have taken them from the store-house of clothes still to be disinfected. He and his comrade dressed feverishly, putting on rag after rag. One could see that they were in a hurry to have the matter over with before the fear itself made them hesitate. It was crazy of them to think of walking even for one hour, weak as they were, especially in the snow with those broken-down shoes found at the last moment. I tried

to explain, but they looked at me without replying. Their eyes were like those of terrified cattle.

Just for a moment it flashed through my mind that they might even be right. They climbed awkwardly out of the window; I saw them, shapeless bundles, lurching into the night. They did not return; I learnt much later that, unable to continue, they had been killed by the SS a few hours after the beginning of the march.

It was obvious that I, too, needed a pair of shoes. But it took me an hour to overcome the feeling of sickness, fever and inertia. I found a pair in the corridor. (The healthy prisoners had ransacked the deposit of patients' shoes and had taken the best ones; those remaining, with split soles and unpaired, lay all over the place.) Just then I met Kosman, the Alsatian. As a civilian he had been a Reuters correspondent at Clermont-Ferrand; he also was excited and euphoric. He said: 'If you return before me, write to the mayor of Metz that I am about to come back.'

Kosman was notorious for his acquaintances among the Prominents, so his optimism seemed a good sign and I used it to justify my inertia to myself; I hid the shoes and returned to bed.

Late that night the Greek doctor returned with a rucksack on his shoulders and a woollen hood. He threw a French novel on my bed. 'Keep it, read it, Italian. You can give it back to me when we meet again.' Even today I hate him for those words. He knew that we were doomed.

And then finally Alberto came, defying the prohibition, to say good-bye to me from the window. We were inseparable: we were 'the two Italians' and foreigners even mistook our names. For six months we had shared a bunk and every scrap of food 'organized' in excess of the ration; but he had had scarlet fever as a child and I was unable to infect him. So he left and I remained. We said good-bye, not many words were needed, we had already discussed our affairs countless times. We did not

think we would be separated for very long. He had found a sturdy pair of leather shoes in a reasonable condition: he was one of those fellows who immediately find everything they need.

He also was cheerful and confident, as were all those who were leaving. It was understandable: something great and new was about to happen; we could finally feel a force around us which was not of Germany; we could concretely feel the impending collapse of that hated world of ours. At any rate, the healthy ones who, despite all their tiredness and hunger, were still able to move, could feel this. But it is obvious that whoever is too weak, or naked or barefoot, thinks and feels in a different way, and what dominated our thoughts was the paralysing sensation of being totally helpless in the hands of fate.

All the healthy prisoners (except a few prudent ones who at the last moment undressed and hid themselves in the hospital beds) left during the night of 18 January 1945. They must have been about twenty thousand, coming from different camps. Almost in their entirety they vanished during the evacuation march: Alberto was among them. Perhaps someone will write their story one day.

So we remained in our bunks, alone with our illnesses, and with our inertia stronger than fear.

In the whole Ka-Be we numbered perhaps eight hundred. In our room there were eleven of us, each in his own bunk, except for Charles and Arthur who slept together. The rhythm of the great machine of the Lager was extinguished. For us began the ten days outside both world and time.

18 January. During the night of the evacuation the camp-kitchens continued to function, and on the following morning the last distribution of soup took place in the hospital. The central-heating plant had been abandoned; in the huts a little heat still lingered on, but hour by hour the temperature dropped and

it was evident that we would soon suffer from the cold. Outside it must have been at least 5°F. below zero; most of the patients had only a shirt and some of them not even that.

Nobody knew what our fate would be. Some SS men had remained, some of the guard-towers were still occupied.

About midday an SS officer made a tour of the huts. He appointed a chief in each of them, selecting from among the remaining non-Jews, and ordered a list of the patients to be made at once, divided into Jews and non-Jews. The matter seemed clear. No one was surprised that the Germans preserved their national love of classification until the very end, nor did any Jew seriously expect to live until the following day.

The two Frenchmen had not understood and were frightened. I translated the speech of the SS man. I was annoyed that they should be afraid: they had not even experienced a month of the Lager, they hardly suffered from hunger yet, they were not even Jews, but they were afraid.

There was one more distribution of bread. I spent the afternoon reading the book left by the doctor: it was interesting and I can remember it with curious accuracy. I also made a visit to the neighbouring ward in search of blankets; many patients had been sent out from there and their blankets were free. I brought back some quite heavy ones.

When Arthur heard that they came from the dysentery ward, he looked disgusted: '*Y avait point besoin de la dire*'; in fact, they were polluted. But I thought that in any case, knowing what awaited us, we might as well sleep comfortably.

It was soon night but the electric light remained on. We saw with tranquil fear that an armed SS man stood at the corner of the hut. I had no desire to talk and was not afraid except in that external and conditional manner I have described. I continued reading until late.

There were no clocks, but it must have been about 11 p.m.

when all the lights went out, even those of the reflectors on the guard-towers. One could see the searchlight beams in the distance. A cluster of intense lights burst out in the sky, remaining immobile, crudely illuminating the earth. One could hear the roar of the aeroplanes.

Then the bombardment began. It was nothing new: I climbed down to the ground, put my bare feet into my shoes and waited.

It seemed far away, perhaps over Auschwitz.

But then there was a near explosion, and before one could think, a second and a third one, loud enough to burst one's eardrums. Windows were breaking, the hut shook, the spoon I had fixed in the wall fell down.

Then it seemed all over. Cagnolati, a young peasant also from the Vosges, had apparently never experienced a raid. He had jumped out naked from his bed and was concealed in a corner, screaming. After a few minutes it was obvious that the camp had been struck. Two huts were burning fiercely, another two had been pulverized, but they were all empty. Dozens of patients arrived, naked and wretched, from a hut threatened by fire: they asked for shelter. It was impossible to take them in. They insisted, begging and threatening in many languages. We had to barricade the door. They dragged themselves elsewhere, lit up by the flames, barefoot in the melting snow. Many trailed behind them streaming bandages. There seemed no danger to our hut, so long as the wind did not change.

The Germans were no longer there. The towers were empty.

Today I think that if for no other reason than that an Auschwitz existed, no one in our age should speak of Providence. But without doubt in that hour the memory of biblical salvations in times of extreme adversity passed like a wind through all our minds.

It was impossible to sleep; a window was broken and it was very cold. I was thinking that we would have to find a stove to set up and get some coal, wood and food. I knew that it was all essential, but without some help I would never have had the energy to carry it out. I spoke about it to the two Frenchmen.

19 January. The Frenchmen agreed. We got up at dawn, we three. I felt ill and helpless, I was cold and afraid.

The other patients looked at us with respectful curiosity: did we not know that patients were not allowed to leave Ka-Be? And if the Germans had not all left? But they said nothing, they were glad that someone was prepared to make the test.

The Frenchmen had no idea of the topography of the Lager, but Charles was courageous and robust, while Arthur was shrewd, with the practical commonsense of the peasant. We went out into the wind of a freezing day of fog, poorly wrapped up in blankets.

What we saw resembled nothing that I had ever seen or heard described.

The Lager, hardly dead, had already begun to decompose. No more water, or electricity, broken windows and doors slamming to in the wind, loose iron-sheets from the roofs screeching, ashes from the fire drifting high, afar. The work of the bombs had been completed by the work of man: ragged, decrepit, skeleton-like patients at all able to move dragged themselves everywhere on the frozen soil, like an invasion of worms. They had ransacked all the empty huts in search of food and wood; they had violated with senseless fury the grotesquely adorned rooms of the hated *Blockältester*, forbidden to the ordinary Häftlinge until the previous day; no longer in control of their own bowels, they had fouled everywhere, polluting the precious snow, the only source of water remaining in the whole camp.

Around the smoking ruins of the burnt huts, groups of patients lay stretched out on the ground, soaking up its last warmth. Others had found potatoes somewhere and were roasting them on the embers of the fire, glaring around with fierce eyes. A few had had the strength to light a real fire, and were melting snow in it in any handy receptacle.

We hurried to the kitchens as fast as we could; but the potatoes were almost finished. We filled two sacks and left them in Arthur's keeping. Among the ruins of the *Prominenzblock* Charles and I finally found what we were searching for: a heavy cast-iron stove, with the flue still usable. Charles hurried over with a wheelbarrow and we loaded it on; he then left me with the task of carrying it to the hut and ran back to the sacks. There he found Arthur unconscious from the cold. Charles picked up both sacks and carried them to safety, then he took care of his friend.

Meanwhile, staggering with difficulty, I was trying to manoeuvre the heavy wheelbarrow as best as possible. There was the roar of an engine and an SS man entered the camp on a motor-cycle. As always when I saw their hard faces I froze from terror and hatred. It was too late to disappear and I did not want to abandon the stove. The rules of the Lager stated that one must stand at attention with head uncovered. I had no hat and was encumbered by the blanket. I moved a few steps away from the wheelbarrow and made a sort of awkward bow. The German moved on without seeing me, turned behind a hut and left. Only later did I realize the danger I had run.

I finally reached the entrance of the hut and unloaded the stove into Charles's hands. I was completely breathless from the effort, large black spots danced before my eyes.

It was essential to get it working. We all three had our hands paralysed while the icy metal stuck to the skin of our fingers, but it was vitally urgent to set it up to warm ourselves and to boil

the potatoes. We had found wood and coal as well as embers from the burnt huts.

When the broken window was repaired and the stove began to spread its heat, something seemed to relax in everyone, and at that moment Towarowski (a Franco-Pole of twenty-three, typhus) proposed to the others that each of them offer a slice of bread to us three who had been working. And so it was agreed.

Only a day before a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of the Lager said: 'eat your own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbour', and left no room for gratitude. It really meant that the Lager was dead.

It was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died slowly changed from *Häftlinge* to men again.

Arthur recovered quite well, but from then on always avoided exposing himself to the cold; he undertook the upkeep of the stove, the cooking of the potatoes, the cleaning of the room and the helping of the patients. Charles and I shared the various tasks outside. There was still an hour of light: an expedition yielded us a pint of spirits and a tin of yeast, thrown in the snow by someone; we made a distribution of potatoes and one spoonful of yeast per person. I thought vaguely that it might help against lack of vitamins.

Darkness fell; in the whole camp ours was the only room with a stove, of which we were very proud. Many invalids from other wards crowded around the door, but Charles's imposing stature held them back. It didn't occur to anyone, either to us or to them, that the inevitable mingling with our patients would make staying in our room extremely dangerous, and to fall ill of diphtheria in those conditions was more surely fatal than jumping from a third floor.

I myself was aware of it, but I did not dwell long on the idea:

for too long I had been accustomed to think of death by illness as a possible event, and in that case unavoidable, and anyhow beyond any possible intervention on our part. And it did not even pass through my mind that I could have gone to another room in another hut with less danger of infection. The stove, our creation, was here, and spread a wonderful warmth; I had my bed here; and by now a tie united us, the eleven patients of the *Infektionsabteilung*.

Very occasionally we heard the thundering of artillery, both near and far, and at intervals the crackling of automatic rifles. In the darkness, lighted only by the glow of the embers, Arthur and I sat smoking cigarettes made of herbs found in the kitchen, and spoke of many things, both past and future. In the middle of this endless plain, frozen and full of war, in the small dark room swarming with germs, we felt at peace with ourselves and with the world. We were broken by tiredness, but we seemed to have finally accomplished something useful – perhaps like God after the first day of creation.

20 January. The dawn came and it was my turn to light the stove. Besides a general feeling of weakness, the aching of my joints reminded me all the time that my scarlet fever was far from over. The thought of having to plunge into the freezing air to find a light in the other huts made me shudder with disgust. I remembered my flints: I sprinkled a piece of paper with spirits, and patiently scraped a small pile of black dust on top of it and then scraped the flint more vigorously with my knife. And finally, after a few sparks, the small pile caught fire and the small bluish flame of alcohol rose from the paper.

Arthur climbed down enthusiastically from his bed and heated three potatoes per person from those boiled the day before; after which, Charles and I, starved and shivering violently, left again to explore the decaying camp.

We had enough food (that is, potatoes) for two days only; as for water, we were forced to melt the snow, an awkward operation in the absence of large pots, which yielded a blackish, muddy liquid which had to be filtered.

The camp was silent. Other starving spectres like ourselves wandered around searching, unshaven, with hollow eyes, greyish skeleton bones in rags. Shaky on their legs, they entered and left the empty huts carrying the most varied of objects: axes, buckets, ladles, nails; anything might be of use, and those looking furthest ahead were already thinking of profitable commerce with the Poles of the surrounding countryside.

In the kitchen we found two of them squabbling over the last handfuls of putrid potatoes. They had seized each other by their rags, and were fighting with curiously slow and uncertain movements, cursing in Yiddish between their frozen lips.

In the courtyard of the storehouse there were two large piles of cabbages and turnips (those large, insipid turnips, the basis of our diet). They were so frozen that they could only be separated with a pickaxe. Charles and I took turns, using all our energy at each stroke, and we carried out about 100 pounds. There was still more: Charles discovered a packet of salt and (*'Une fameuse trouvaille!'*) a can of water of perhaps twelve gallons, frozen in a block.

We loaded everything on to a small cart (formerly used to distribute the rations for the huts; there were a great number of them abandoned everywhere), and we turned back, toiling over the snow.

We contented ourselves that day with boiled potatoes again and slices of turnips roasted on the stove, but Arthur promised important innovations for the following day.

In the afternoon I went to the ex-surgery, searching for anything that might prove of use. I had been preceded: everything had been upset by inexpert looters. Not a bottle intact, the floor

covered by a layer of rags, excrement and soiled bandages. A naked, contorted corpse. But there was something that had escaped my predecessors: a battery from a lorry. I touched the poles with a knife – a small spark. It was charged.

That evening we had light in our room.

Sitting in bed, I could see a large stretch of the road through the window. For the past three days the Wehrmacht in flight passed by in waves. Armoured cars, Tiger tanks camouflaged in white, Germans on horseback, Germans on bicycles, Germans on foot, armed and unarmed. During the night, long before the tanks came into sight, one could hear the grinding of their tracks.

Charles asked: *'Ça route encore?'*

'Ça route toujours.'

It seemed as if it would never end.

21 January. Instead it ended. On the dawn of the 21st we saw the plain deserted and lifeless, white as far as the eye could see, lying under the flight of the crows, deathly sad. I would almost have preferred to see something moving again. The Polish civilians had also disappeared, hiding who knows where. Even the wind seemed to have stopped. I wanted only one thing: to stay in bed under my blankets and abandon myself to a complete exhaustion of muscles, nerve and willpower; waiting as indifferently as a dead man for it to end or not to end.

But Charles had already lighted the stove, Charles, our active, trusting, alive friend, and he called me to work:

'Vas-y, Primo, descends-toi de là-haut; it y a Jules à attraper par les oreilles . . .'

'Jules' was the lavatory bucket, which every morning had to be taken by its handles, carried outside and emptied into the cesspool; this was the first task of the day, and if one remembers that it was impossible to wash one's hands and that three of us

were ill with typhus, it can be understood that it was not a pleasant job.

We had to inaugurate the cabbages and turnips. While I went to search for wood and Charles collected the snow for water, Arthur mobilized the patients who could sit up to help with the peeling. Towarowski, Sertelet, Alcalai and Schenck answered the call.

Sertelet was also a peasant from the Vosges, twenty years old; he seemed in good shape, but day by day his voice assumed an ever more sinister nasal timbre, reminding us that diphtheria seldom relaxes its hold.

Alcalai was a Jewish glazier from Toulouse; he was quiet and discreet, and suffered from erysipelas on the face.

Schenck was a Slovak businessman, Jewish; a typhus patient, he had a formidable appetite. Likewise Towarowski, a Franco-Polish Jew, stupid and talkative, but useful to our community through his communicative optimism.

So while the patients scraped with their knives, each one seated on his bunk, Charles and I devoted ourselves to finding a suitable site for the kitchen operations. An indescribable filth had invaded every part of the camp. All the latrines were overflowing, as naturally nobody cared any more about their upkeep, and those suffering from dysentery (more than a hundred) had fouled every corner of Ka-Be, filling all the buckets, all the bowls formerly used for the rations, all the pots. One could not move an inch without watching one's step; in the dark it was impossible to move around. Although suffering from the cold, which remained acute, we thought with horror of what would happen if it thawed: the diseases would spread irreparably, the stench would be suffocating, and even more, with the snow melted we would remain definitively without water.

After a long search we finally found a small area of floor not

excessively soiled in a spot formerly used for the laundry. We lit a live fire to save time and complications and disinfected our hands, rubbing them with chloramine mixed with snow.

The news that a soup was being cooked spread rapidly through the crowd of the semi-living; a throng of starved faces gathered at the door. Charles, with ladle uplifted, made a short, vigorous speech, which although in French needed no translation.

The majority dispersed but one came forward. He was a Parisian, a high-class tailor (he said), suffering from tuberculosis. In exchange for two pints of soup he offered to make us clothes from the many blankets still to be found in the camp.

Maxime showed himself really able. The following day Charles and I were in possession of a jacket, trousers and gloves of a rough fabric of striking colours.

In the evening, after the first soup, distributed with enthusiasm and devoured with greed, the great silence of the plain was broken. From our bunks, too tired to be really worried, we listened to the bangs of mysterious artillery groups apparently hidden on all the points of the horizon, and to the whistle of the shells over our heads.

I was thinking life outside was beautiful and would be beautiful again, and that it would really be a pity to let ourselves be overcome now. I woke up the patients who were dozing and when I was sure that they were all listening I told them, first in French and then in my best German, that they must all begin to think of returning home now, and that as far as depended on us, certain things were to be done and others to be avoided. Each person should carefully look after his own bowl and spoon; no one should offer his own soup to others; no one should climb down from his bed except to go to the latrine; if anyone was in need of anything, he should only turn to us three. Arthur in particular was given the task of supervising the discipline and

hygiene, and was to remember that it was better to leave bowls and spoons dirty rather than wash them with the danger of changing those of a diphtheria patient with those of someone suffering from typhus.

I had the impression that the patients by now were too indifferent to everything to pay attention to what I had said; but I had great faith in Arthur's diligence.

22 January. If it is courageous to face a grave danger with a light heart, Charles and I were courageous that morning. We extended our explorations to the SS camp, immediately outside the electric wire-fence.

The camp guards must have left in a great hurry. On the tables we found plates half-full of a by-now frozen soup which we devoured with an intense pleasure, mugs full of beer, transformed into a yellowish ice, a chess board with an unfinished game. In the dormitories, piles of valuable things.

We loaded ourselves with a bottle of vodka, various medicines, newspapers and magazines and four first-rate eider-downs, one of which is today in my house in Turin. Cheerful and irresponsible, we carried the fruits of our expedition back to the dormitory, leaving them in Arthur's care. Only that evening did we learn what happened perhaps only half an hour later.

Some SS men, perhaps dispersed, but still armed, penetrated into the abandoned camp. They found that eighteen Frenchmen had settled in the dining-hall of the SS-Waffe. They killed them all methodically, with a shot in the nape of the neck, lining up their twisted bodies in the snow on the road; then they left. The eighteen corpses remained exposed until the arrival of the Russians; nobody had the strength to bury them.

But by now there were beds in all the huts occupied by corpses as rigid as wood, whom nobody troubled to remove. The ground

was too frozen to dig graves; many bodies were piled up in a trench, but right from the earliest days, the pile of bodies emerged out of the excavation and was obscenely visible from our window.

Only a wooden wall separated us from the ward of the dysentery patients, where many were dying and many dead. The floor was covered by a layer of frozen excrement. None of the patients had strength enough to climb out of their blankets to search for food, and those who had done it at the beginning had not returned to help their comrades. In one bed, clasping each other to resist the cold better, there were two Italians. I often heard them talking, but as I spoke only French, for a long time they were not aware of my presence. That day they heard my name by chance, pronounced with an Italian accent by Charles, and from then on they never ceased groaning and imploring.

Naturally I would have liked to have helped them, given the means and the strength, if for no other reason than to stop their crying. In the evening when all the work was finished, conquering my tiredness and disgust, I dragged myself gropingly along the dark, filthy corridor to their ward with a bowl of water and the remainder of our day's soup. The result was that from then on, through the thin wall, the whole diarrhoea ward shouted my name day and night with the accents of all the languages of Europe, accompanied by incomprehensible prayers, without my being able to do anything about it. I felt like crying, I could have cursed them.

The night held ugly surprises.

Lakmaker, in the bunk under mine, was a poor wreck of a man. He was (or had been) a Dutch Jew, seventeen years old, tall, thin and gentle. He had been in bed for three months; I have no idea how he had managed to survive the selections. He had had typhus and scarlet fever successively; at the same time a serious cardiac illness had shown itself, while he was smothered

with bedsores, so much so that by now he could only lie on his stomach. Despite all this, he had a ferocious appetite. He only spoke Dutch, and none of us could understand him.

Perhaps the cause of it all was the cabbage and turnip soup, of which Lakmaker had wanted two helpings. In the middle of the night he groaned and then threw himself from his bed. He tried to reach the latrine, but was too weak and fell to the ground, crying and shouting loudly.

Charles lit the lamp (the battery showed itself providential) and we were able to ascertain the gravity of the incident. The boy's bed and the floor were filthy. The smell in the small area was rapidly becoming insupportable. We had but a minimum supply of water and neither blankets nor straw mattresses to spare. And the poor wretch, suffering from typhus, formed a terrible source of infection, while he could certainly not be left all night to groan and shiver in the cold in the middle of the filth.

Charles climbed down from his bed and dressed in silence. While I held the lamp, he cut all the dirty patches from the straw mattress and the blankets with a knife. He lifted Lakmaker from the ground with the tenderness of a mother, cleaned him as best as possible with straw taken from the mattress and lifted him into the remade bed in the only position in which the unfortunate fellow could lie. He scraped the floor with a scrap of tinplate, diluted a little chloramine and finally spread disinfectant over everything, including himself.

I judged his self-sacrifice by the tiredness which I would have had to overcome in myself to do what he had done.

23 January. Our potatoes were finished. For days past the rumour had circulated through all the huts that an enormous trench of potatoes lay somewhere outside the barbed wire, not far from the camp.

Some unknown pioneer must have carried out patient explorations, or else someone knew the spot with precision. In fact, by the morning of the 23rd a section of the barbed wire had been beaten down and a double file of wretches went in and out through the opening.

Charles and I left, into the wind of the leaden plain. We were beyond the broken barrier.

'Dis donc, Primo, on est dehors!'

It was exactly like that; for the first time since the day of my arrest I found myself free, without armed guards, without wire-fences between myself and home.

Perhaps 400 yards from the camp lay the potatoes – a treasure. Two extremely long ditches, full of potatoes and covered by alternate layers of soil and straw to protect them from the cold. Nobody would die of hunger any more.

But to extract them was by no means easy work. The cold had made the surface of the earth as hard as iron. By strenuous work with a pickaxe it was possible to break the crust and lay bare the deposit; but the majority preferred to work the holes abandoned by others and continue to deepen them, passing the potatoes to their companions standing outside.

An old Hungarian had been surprised there by death. He lay there like hunger personified: head and shoulders under a pile of earth, belly in the snow, hands stretched out towards the potatoes. Someone came later and moved the body about a yard, so freeing the hole.

From then on our food improved. Besides boiled potatoes and potato soup, we offered our patients potato pancakes, on Arthur's recipe: rub together raw potatoes with boiled, soft ones, and roast the mixture on a red-hot iron-plate. They tasted of soot.

But Sertelet, steadily getting worse, was unable to enjoy them. Besides speaking with an ever more nasal tone, that day he was

unable to force down any food; something had closed up in his throat, every mouthful threatened to suffocate him.

I went to look for a Hungarian doctor left as a patient in the hut in front. When he heard the word diphtheria he started back and ordered me to leave.

For pure propaganda purposes I gave everyone nasal drops of camphorated oil. I assured Seretelet that they would help him; I even tried to convince myself.

24 January. Liberty. The breach in the barbed wire gave us a concrete image of it. To anyone who stopped to think, it signified no more Germans, no more selections, no work, no blows, no roll-calls, and perhaps, later, the return.

But we had to make an effort to convince ourselves of it, and no one had time to enjoy the thought. All around lay destruction and death.

The pile of corpses in front of our window had by now overflowed out of the ditch. Despite the potatoes everyone was extremely weak: not a patient in the camp improved, while many fell ill with pneumonia and diarrhoea; those who were unable to move themselves, or lacked the energy to do so, lay lethargic in their bunks, benumbed by the cold, and nobody realized when they died.

The others were all incredibly tired: after months and years of the Lager it needs more than potatoes to give back strength to a man. Charles and I, as soon as we had dragged the fifty pints of daily soup from the laundry to our room, threw ourselves panting on the bunks, while Arthur, with that domesticated air of his, diligently divided the food, taking care to save the three rations of '*rabiot pour les travailleurs*' and a little of the sediment '*pour les italiens d'à côté*'.

In the second room of the contagious ward, likewise adjoining ours and occupied mainly by tuberculosis patients, the

situation was quite different. All those who were able to had gone to other huts. Their weakest comrades and those who were most seriously ill died one by one in solitude.

I went in there one morning to try and borrow a needle. A patient was wheezing in one of the upper bunks. He heard me, struggled to sit up, then fell dangling, head downwards over the edge towards me, with his chest and arms stiff and his eyes white. The man in the bunk below automatically stretched up his arms to support the body and then realized that he was dead. He slowly withdrew from under the weight and the body slid to the ground where it remained. Nobody knew his name.

But in hut 14 something new had happened. It was occupied by patients recovering from operations, some of them quite healthy. They organized an expedition to the English prisoner-of-war camp, which it was assumed had been evacuated. It proved a fruitful expedition. They returned dressed in khaki with a cart full of wonders never seen before: margarine, custard powders, lard, soya-bean flour, whisky.

That evening there was singing in hut 14.

None of us felt strong enough to walk the one mile to the English camp and return with a load. But indirectly the fortunate expedition proved of advantage to many. The unequal division of goods caused a reflowering of industry and commerce. Our room, with its lethal atmosphere, transformed itself into a factory of candles poured into cardboard moulds, with wicks soaked in boracic acid. The riches of hut 14 absorbed our entire production, paying us in lard and flour.

I myself had found the block of beeswax in the *Elektromagazin*; I remember the expression of disappointment of those who saw me carry it away and the dialogue that followed:

'What do you want to do with that?'

It was inadvisable to reveal a shop secret; I heard myself

replying with the words I had often heard spoken by the old ones of the camp, expressing their favourite boast – of being hard-boiled, ‘old hands’, who always knew how to find their feet: ‘*Ich verstehe verschiedene Sachen.*’ I know how to do many things ...

25 *January.* It was Sómogyi’s turn. He was a Hungarian chemist, about fifty years old, thin, tall and taciturn. Like the Dutchman he suffered from typhus and scarlet fever. He had not spoken for perhaps five days; that day he opened his mouth and said in a firm voice:

‘I have a ration of bread under the sack. Divide it among you three. I shall not be eating any more.’

We could not find anything to say, but for the time being we did not touch the bread. Half his face had swollen. As long as he retained consciousness he remained closed in a harsh silence.

But in the evening and for the whole of the night and for two days without interruption the silence was broken by his delirium. Following a last interminable dream of acceptance and slavery he began to murmur: ‘*Jawohl!*’ with every breath, regularly and continuously like a machine, ‘*Jawohl!*’, at every collapsing of his wretched frame, thousands of times, enough to make one want to shake him, to suffocate him, at least to make him change the word.

I never understood so clearly as at that moment how laborious is the death of a man.

Outside the great silence continued. The number of ravens had increased considerably and everybody knew why. Only at distant intervals did the dialogue of the artillery wake up.

We all said to each other that the Russians would arrive soon, at once; we all proclaimed it, we were all sure of it, but at bottom nobody believed it. Because one loses the habit of hoping in the Lager, and even of believing in one’s own reason.

In the Lager it is useless to think, because events happen for the most part in an unforeseeable manner; and it is harmful, because it keeps alive a sensitivity which is a source of pain, and which some providential natural law dulls when suffering passes a certain limit.

Like joy, fear and pain itself, even expectancy can be tiring. Having reached 25 January, with all relations broken already for eight days with that ferocious world that still remained a world, most of us were too exhausted even to wait.

In the evening, around the stove, Charles, Arthur and I felt ourselves become men once again. We could speak of everything. I grew enthusiastic at Arthur’s account of how one passed the Sunday at Provençères in the Vosges, and Charles almost cried when I told him the story of the armistice in Italy, of the turbid and desperate beginning of the Partisan resistance, of the man who betrayed us and of our capture in the mountains.

In the darkness, behind and above us, the eight invalids did not lose a syllable, even those who did not understand French. Only Sómogyi implacably confirmed his dedication to death.

26 *January.* We lay in a world of death and phantoms. The last trace of civilization had vanished around and inside us. The work of bestial degradation, begun by the victorious Germans, had been carried to its conclusion by the Germans in defeat.

It is man who kills, man who creates or suffers injustice; it is no longer man who, having lost all restraint, shares his bed with a corpse. Whoever waits for his neighbour to die in order to take his piece of bread is, albeit guiltless, further from the model of thinking man than the most primitive pigmy or the most vicious sadist.

Part of our existence lies in the feelings of those near to us. This is why the experience of someone who has lived for days

during which man was merely a thing in the eyes of man is non-human. We three were for the most part immune from it, and we owe each other mutual gratitude. This is why my friendship with Charles will prove lasting.

But thousands of feet above us, in the gaps in the grey clouds, the complicated miracles of aerial duels began. Above us, bare, helpless and unarmed, men of our time sought reciprocal death with the most refined of instruments. A movement of a finger could cause the destruction of the entire camp, could annihilate thousands of men; while the sum total of all our efforts and exertions would not be sufficient to prolong by one minute the life of even one of us.

The saraband stopped at night and the room was once again filled with Sómogyi's monologue.

In full darkness I found myself suddenly awake. 'L'pau'-*vieux*' was silent; he had finished. With the last gasp of life, he had thrown himself to the ground: I heard the thud of his knees, of his hips, of his shoulders, of his head.

'*La mort l'a chasse de son lit,*' Arthur defined it.

We certainly could not carry him out during the night. There was nothing for it but to go back to sleep again.

27 January. Dawn. On the floor, the shameful wreck of skin and bones, the Sómogyi thing.

There are more urgent tasks: we cannot wash ourselves, so that we dare not touch him until we have cooked and eaten. And besides: '*... rien de si dégoûtant que les débordements,*' said Charles justly; the latrine had to be emptied. The living are more demanding; the dead can wait. We began to work as on every day.

The Russians arrived while Charles and I were carrying Sómogyi a little distance outside. He was very light. We overturned the stretcher on the grey snow.

Charles took off his beret. I regretted not having a beret.

Of the eleven of the *Infektionsabteilung* Sómogyi was the only one to die in the ten days. Sertelet, Cagnolati, Towarowski, Lakmaker and Dorget (I have not spoken of him so far; he was a French industrialist who, after an operation for peritonitis, fell ill of nasal diphtheria) died some weeks later in the temporary Russian hospital of Auschwitz. In April, at Katowice, I met Schenck and Alcalai in good health. Arthur has reached his family happily and Charles has taken up his teacher's profession again; we have exchanged long letters and I hope to see him again one day.