

An Audience of Dead and Dying Men

“Run, you filthy tramps!”

I jumped, snapped back into reality by the deafening words of the SS officer. Run? What great advice! I could almost laugh. Had we not been doing so for hours now?

“Faster! Faster!”

Faster? How could we run faster when the only thing reminding us that we were still living, was the agony coursing through our veins, the violent, icy wind that chased us tirelessly.

We ran nonetheless, from the darkness of Buna, to the pitch-blackness that was the night ahead of us; towards our undoubtedly deleterious futures.

BANG

The sound of a gunshot erupting behind me once again broke my pace of automatic, mechanical running. There was no cry, no screams of sorrow for a lost companion. Nothing. I didn't even open my eyes. The poor boy would suffer, no more, the eternal run towards Gleiwitz. An SS yelled again, a warning, that anyone who could not sustain pace would face the same fate. We continued through the night, never ceasing our urges to be rid of our bodies, to run along without pain or weight. Yet it was no time to give up, and somehow, I knew this, so I ran.

Several hours later, we stopped, at an abandoned town and, as one, hundreds of men fell to the ground in exhaustion. Many left to find safer places of rest than the deep, thick snow, but I remained. A part of me begged to pray or cry, to just lay and weep for myself. . For Louis . . . I put the thought out of my mind and was soon overcome by sleep.

I awoke abruptly to the cold and sat up; it was dawn. I lay in a field of sleeping men. We were ready for harvesting, any minute now death himself would come to collect us. I stood up from the snow that threatened to steal my life and climbed onto the rooftop of a nearby building. Its windows were shattered, snow and debris lay scattered across it. Not a soul had been known it many years. Shivering, I slept once more.

Soon we were commanded to march farther. I suddenly remembered my violin, sleeping too, in the snow. I retrieved it, guilt surging up inside of me. How could I have forgotten such a gift?

After many hours, we reached Gleiwitz and were immediately sent into barracks. At the entrance to each building were a thousand men, lashing out for a place of shelter. Any man who dared to move in the opposite direction of an entrance was a salmon swimming upstream, trampled by desperate waves. My violin was knocked to the ground in the commotion, and, instinctively I reached to save it. I was thrown to the ground, on top of another man who lay face down in the snow. A body was thrust on top of me, another brick in this wall of people, blocking the entrance. I, struggling, cried out for help.

“You're crushing me. . . have mercy!”

There was no reply.

“You're crushing me. . . mercy, have mercy!”

Still nothing. I began to lose hope. I was to be killed by a dead man.

"Juliek, is that you?" A voice cried out my name from above me. I thought for a moment, and soon recognised the voice. An old friend of mine from the Orchestral kommando. A young boy, who was whipped before Louis and I left Buna. . .

"Eliezer . . . The twenty-five whiplashes . . . Yes . . . I remember."

The weight above me grew heavier. This was the end, I was to suffer a silent death, suffocation, within metres from the end of my journey. Within possible months from the end of the war.

"Juliek! Can you hear me Juliek?" Eliezer called out.

"Yes . . . What do you want?" Could I not die in peace?

"Are you alright Juliek?" he asked, his voice breaking, for he was only a child.

I wanted to answer "No!". I had lost everything, my family, my God, my life, Louis . . . My violin! It was not yet gone! I held the instrument tightly, praying for its survival.

'All right, Eliezer . . . All right' I replied. 'Not too much air . . . Tired . . . My feet are swollen. Its good to rest but my violin . . .'

'What about your violin?' He must have thought I had gone mad.

There wasn't enough time to explain. I cried, tears flowing, forcing me to gasp for any air at all under the wall of bodies.

'I . . . I'm afraid . . . they'll break . . . my violin' I whispered. 'I . . . I brought it with me.'

Eliezer did not answer, but I seemed to have made myself clear as he miraculously shifted his weight backwards. I scratched and kicked, fighting for a way out of the mass of bodies, my whole desire for freedom residing in my legs and fingernails. I did not understand how, but my short, skinny body escaped from the confusion.

Finally, I laid, slumped against a wall, violin and bow still intact through my struggles, and tried to sleep. Others who had made it through were attempting to do the same. The eerie silence was excruciating. I had barely managed to close my eyes before a young man grasped at my leg. I looked down, shocked at how impossibly dishevelled he was. The boy, desperate, smiled up at me; a smile so remarkably identical to Louis' that I felt compelled to help him. Pitifully, I touched the boy's hand. He calmed a little, loosening his grip on my leg. He nodded at my violin, and so, despite everything, I played.

I played Beethoven, a personal act of rebellion as Jews were not permitted such a privilege. My soul aflame, I played my burned past and my scorched future. I played a song so beautiful it seemed out of place, breaking the silence we had grown so used to. In spite of it all, I felt truly accomplished. I looked death in the eye and played a lullaby. I found myself praying to God, thanking him, so, I played for him. I played for Louis, my closest companion, my only friend, taken prematurely by Germans. I played for the boy who now lay peacefully at my feet. I played for myself. I played for an audience of dead and dying men, and I played until I took my last breath.