The Truce

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The Greek

Toward the end of February, after a month in bed, I felt not recovered but stable. I had the clear impression that, until I got myself (maybe with an effort) into a vertical position, and put shoes on my feet, I wouldn’t regain health and strength. So on one of the rare examination days, I asked to be discharged. The doctor examined me, or made a show of examining me; he verified that the desquamation of the scarlet fever had stopped: he told me that as far as he was concerned I could go; he urged me ridiculously not to expose myself to fatigue or cold, and wished me good luck.

So I cut myself a pair of walking shoes from a blanket, grabbed as many cloth jackets and pants as I could find around (since no other garments could be had), said goodbye to Frau Vita and Henek, and left.

I was rather shaky on my feet. Just outside the door, there was a Soviet officer; he photographed me and gave me five cigarettes. A little farther on, I was unable to avoid a fellow in civilian clothes, who was looking for men to get rid of the snow; he grabbed me, deaf to my protests, handed me a shovel, and added me to a team of shovelers.

I offered him the five cigarettes, but he rejected them with irritation. He was an ex-Kapo, and naturally had remained in service: who else would have made people like us shovel snow? I tried to shovel, but it was physically impossible. If I could get around the corner no one would see me anymore, but it was essential to get rid of the shovel; to sell it would have been interesting, but I didn’t know to whom, and to carry it with me, even for a few steps, was dangerous. There wasn’t enough snow to bury it. I finally dropped it through the window of a cellar, and was free.

I went into a Block. There was a guard, an old Hungarian, who didn’t want to let me in, but the cigarettes persuaded him. Inside it was warm, full of smoke and noise and unknown faces; but in the evening I, too, was given some soup. I was hoping for a few days of rest and gradual practice for an active life, but I didn’t know I had been unlucky. Immediately, the next morning, I fell into a Russian transport heading for a mysterious transit camp.

I can’t recall exactly how and when my Greek emerged out of the nothingness. In those days and in those places, shortly after the front passed, a high wind blew over the face of the Earth: the world around us seemed to have returned to a primal Chaos, and was swarming with deformed, defective, abnormal human examples; and each of them was tossing about, in blind or deliberate motion, anxiously searching for his own place, his own sphere, as the cosmogonies of the ancients say, poetically, of the particles of the four elements.

I, too, overwhelmed by the whirlwind, thus found myself many hours before dawn on a freezing night, after a copious snowfall, loaded onto a horse-drawn military cart, along with a dozen companions I didn’t know. The cold was intense; the sky, thick with stars, was growing light in the east, promising one of those marvelous sunrises of the plain that, in the time of our slavery, we watched interminably from Roll Call Square in the Lager.

Our guide and escort was a Russian soldier. He sat on the box singing to the stars at the top of his lungs, and every so often addressed himself to the horses in that strangely affectionate way Russians have, with gentle inflections and long modulated phrases. We had questioned him about our destination, naturally, but without learning anything comprehensible, except that, as it seemed from some rhythmic puffing and a piston-like movement of his elbows, his task was evidently limited to taking us to a railroad.
So in fact it was. When the sun rose, the cart stopped at the foot of a slope; above ran the tracks, severed and torn up for fifty meters by a recent bombardment. The soldier pointed out to us one of the two stumps, helped us get down from the cart (and it was necessary; the trip had lasted almost two hours, the cart was small, and many of us, because of our uncomfortable position and the penetrating cold, were so stiff we couldn’t move), said goodbye to us with cheerful, incomprehensible words, turned the horses, and went off, singing sweetly.

As soon as the sun rose it disappeared behind a veil of fog; from the height of the railroad slope one could see only an endless, flat, deserted countryside, buried in snow, without a roof, without a tree. Hours passed; none of us had a watch.

As I said, we were a dozen. There was a Reichsdeutscher, an ethnic German, who, like many other “Aryan” Germans, after the liberation had assumed relatively courteous and frankly ambiguous manners (this was an amusing metamorphosis, which I had seen happen in others: sometimes progressively, sometimes in a few minutes, at the first appearance of the new bosses with the red star, on whose broad faces it was easy to read a tendency not to be too particular). There were two tall, thin brothers, Wiennese Jews in their fifties, silent and cautious like all the old Häftlinge; an officer from the regular Yugoslav Army, who seemed unable to shake off the submissiveness and inertia of the Lager, and looked at us with empty eyes. There was a kind of human wreck, of an indefinable age, who talked to himself without stopping, in Yiddish: one of the many whom the savage life of the camp had half destroyed, leaving them to survive wrapped in (and perhaps protected by) a thick armor of insensitivity or obvious madness. And there was, finally, the Greek, with whom destiny was to join me for an unforgettable vagabond week.

His name was Mordo Nahum, and at first sight he appeared unremarkable, except for his shoes (leather, almost new, of an elegant model: a true miracle, given the time and the place), and the sack that he carried on his back, which had a considerable mass and a corresponding weight, as I was to verify in the days that followed. In addition to his own language, he spoke Spanish (like all the Jews of Salonika), French, a broken Italian but with a good accent, and, I found out later, Turkish, Bulgarian, and a little Albanian. He was forty; he was quite tall, but he walked bent over, with his head forward, as if he were nearsighted. He was red-haired and red-skinned, he had large pale, watery eyes, and a big hooked nose, which gave his entire person an aspect at once rapacious and clumsy, as of a nocturnal bird surprised by the light, or a predator fish out of its natural element.

He was recovering from an unspecified illness, which had caused spells of a very high, debilitating fever; even then, on the first nights of the journey, he sometimes fell into a state of prostration, shivering and delirious. Yet, without feeling particularly attracted to each other, we were brought together by two common languages, and by the fact—very noticeable in the circumstances—that we were the only two Mediterraneans in the little group.

The wait was interminable; we were hungry and cold, and were forced to stand or lie in the snow, because as far as the eye could see there was neither roof nor shelter. It must have been nearly noon when, heralded from a distance by puffing and smoke, the hand of civilization was charitably extended toward us, in the form of a puny little train consisting of three or four freight cars hauled by a small locomotive, of the type that in normal times is used to maneuver cars around a station.

The train stopped in front of us, at the edge of the cut-off track. Some Polish peasants got out, but we couldn’t get any information from them that made sense: they looked at us with blank faces, and avoided us as if we were contagious. In fact we were, probably in the literal sense, and, besides, our appearance could not have been pleasing; but we had deluded ourselves that we would receive a more cordial welcome from the first “civilians” we met after our liberation. We all got into one of the cars, and the little train started up again almost immediately, backward, pushed, rather than pulled, by the toy locomotive. At the next stop two peasant women got on, and, once the initial distrust and the difficulty of the language had been overcome, we learned from them some important geographic facts and some information that, if true, to our ears sounded little less than disastrous.

The break in the tracks was not far from a place called Neu Berun,
where a branch line from Auschwitz, since destroyed, had once ended. One of the two trunks that went off from the break led to Katowice (to the west), the other to Kraków (to the east). Both these places were around sixty kilometers from Neu Berun, which, in the frightful condition in which the war had left the line, meant at least two days of travel, with an uncertain number of stops and transfers. The train we were on was traveling toward Kraków: until a few days earlier the Russians had been shunting into Kraków an enormous number of former prisoners, and now all the barracks, the schools, the hospitals, the convents were overflowing with people in a state of acute need. The very streets of Kraków, according to our informants, were swarming with men and women of all races, who in the blink of an eye had been transformed into smugglers, black marketeers, or even thieves and bandits.

For several days now, the former prisoners had been concentrated in other camps, around Katowice: the two women were very surprised to find us traveling toward Kraków, where, they said, the Russian garrison itself was suffering deprivation. Having heard our story, they consulted briefly with each other, then declared themselves certain that it must have been simply an error of our guide, the Russian cart driver, who, with little experience of the country, had directed us to the eastern stub rather than the western.

This information threw us into a tangle of doubts and anguish. We had hoped for a short and safe journey, toward a camp equipped to welcome us, toward an acceptable surrogate for our homes; and that hope was part of a much larger hope, hope in a right and just world, miraculously reestablished on its natural foundations after an eternity of disruptions, mistakes, and slaughters, after our long time of endurance. It was a naïve hope, like all hopes that rest on sharp divisions between evil and good, between past and future: but we lived on them. That first crack, and the many others, large and small, that inevitably followed, was a cause of suffering for many of us, the more deeply felt because it had not been foreseen: since one does not dream for years, for decades, of a better world without imagining it to be perfect.

Instead no, something had happened that only a very few sages among us had predicted. Freedom, improbable, impossible freedom, so far from Auschwitz that only in dreams had we dared to hope for it, had arrived: but it had not brought us to the Promised Land. It was around us, but in the form of a pitiless, deserted plain. More trials awaited us, more labors, more hunger, more cold, more fears.

I had now been without food for twenty-four hours. We sat on the wooden floor of the train car, close against one another to protect ourselves from the cold; the tracks were uneven, and at every jolt our heads, infirm on our necks, bumped against the wooden sides. I felt exhausted, not only in my body: like an athlete who has run for hours, using up all his resources, the natural ones first, and then the ones that are squeezed out, created from nothing in moments of extreme need; an athlete who arrives at the finish line, and, in the act of collapsing, exhausted, on the ground, is brutally pulled to his feet and forced to start running again, in the dark, toward another finish line, an unknown distance away. I had bitter thoughts: that nature rarely grants compensation, and neither does human society, being timid and slow to diverge from nature's gross schemes; and such an achievement would represent, in the history of human thought, the ability to see in nature not a model to follow but a shapeless block to carve, or an enemy to fight.

The train traveled slowly. In the evening, dark, apparently deserted villages appeared; then utter night descended, atrociously frigid, with no lights in the sky or on the earth. Only the jolting of the car kept us from slipping into a sleep that the cold would have rendered fatal. Finally, after interminable hours of traveling, perhaps around three in the morning, we stopped in a small, dark, badly damaged station. The Greek was delirious; none of the others—some out of fear, some out of pure inertia, some in the hope that the train would leave soon—wanted to leave the car. I got out, and wandered in the darkness with my ridiculous baggage until I saw a lighted window. It was the telegraph room, full of people; there was a glowing stove. I went in, wary as a wild dog, ready to vanish at the first threatening gesture, but no one noticed me. I collapsed onto the floor and fell asleep instantly, as one learns to do in the Lager.
I woke some hours later, at dawn. The booth was empty. The telegrapher saw me raise my head, and placed beside me, on the floor, a gigantic slice of bread and cheese. I was stunned (besides being half paralyzed by cold and sleep), and I'm afraid I didn't thank him. I stuffed the food into my stomach and went outside: the train hadn't moved. In the car, my companions lay stupefied; seeing me, they roused themselves, all except the Yugoslav, who tried in vain to move. The cold and the lack of movement had paralyzed his legs: if you touched him he screamed and groaned. We had to massage him a long time, and then cautiously move the limbs, the way you clear a rusty machine.

It had been a terrible night for everyone, perhaps the worst of our entire exile. I talked about it with the Greek: we found ourselves in agreement in deciding to form an alliance with the purpose of avoiding by any means another freezing night, which we felt we wouldn't survive.

I think that the Greek, thanks to my nighttime expedition, in some way overestimated my qualities as a débouillard et démerdard, as people used, elegantly, to say. As for me, I confess that I counted chiefly on his large sack, and the fact that he was a Salonikan, which, as everyone at Auschwitz knew, was a guarantee of sophisticated mercantile skills, of knowing how to get by in all circumstances. Liking, on both sides, and respect, on one, came later.

The train departed, and by a tortuous and indeterminate route brought us to a place called Szczakowa. Here the Polish Red Cross had established a wonderful hot-food service: a fairly substantial soup was distributed, at all hours of the day and night, to anyone who showed up, without distinction. A miracle that no one of us would have dared dream of in his boldest dreams; in a certain sense, it was the Lager reversed. I don't remember the behavior of my companions. I proved to be so greedy that the Polish nurses, although accustomed to the starving clientele of the place, made the sign of the cross.

We departed again in the afternoon. The sun shone. Our wretched train stopped at sunset, with engine trouble; in the distance the bell-towers of Kraków glowed red. The Greek and I got out of the car, and went to question the engineer, who was standing in the snow, completely dirty, busily contending with jets of steam bursting from some broken pipe. "Maschina kaput," he answered concisely. We were no longer slaves, we were no longer protected, we had emerged from guardianship. For us the hour of trial had come.

The Greek, restored by the hot soup of Szczakowa, felt in fairly good health. "On y va?" "On y va." So we left the train and our bewildered companions, whom we would never have to see again, and set off on foot in a dubious search for the Civilized World.

Following his peremptory request, I was carrying the famous load.

"But it's your stuff!" I had tried in vain to protest. "Precisely because it's mine. I organized it and you carry it. It's the division of labor. Later, you'll profit from it, too." So we walked, he first and I second, on the trampled snow of a street on the outskirts; the sun had set.

I've already mentioned the Greek's shoes; as for me, I wore a pair of odd shoes such as in Italy I've seen worn only by priests: of very delicate leather, up to the anklebone, with two large pins and no laces, and two side pieces of an elastic material that were supposed to ensure that they closed and stayed on. I also wore a good four pairs of pants of Häftling material, a cotton shirt, a jacket that was also striped, and that's all. My baggage consisted of a blanket and a cardboard box in which I had first saved some pieces of bread but which was now empty—all things that the Greek looked at with unconcealed contempt and scorn.

We had been grossly deceived about the distance to Kraków: we would have to go at least seven kilometers. After twenty minutes of walking, my shoes were gone; the sole of one had fallen off, and the other was coming undone. The Greek had until then preserved a meaningful silence. When he saw me put down the bundle, and sit on a stone marker to observe the disaster, he asked me: "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five," I answered.

"What is your profession?"

"I'm a chemist."

"Then you're a fool," he said calmly. "Anyone who doesn't have shoes is a fool."

He was a fine Greek. Few times in my life, before or since, have I felt
such concrete wisdom hanging over my head. I could hardly object. The validity of the argument was palpable, obvious: the two formless wrecks on my feet, and the two shining marvels on his. There was no excuse. I was no longer a slave, but, after the first steps on the path of freedom, here I was sitting on a post, with my feet in my hand, clumsy and useless as the broken-down locomotive we had just left. So did I deserve freedom? The Greek seemed dubious.

"... But I had scarlet fever, I was in the infirmary: the shoe warehouse was far away, we weren't allowed to get near it, and then they said it had been ransacked by the Poles. And didn't I have the right to think that the Russians would provide them?"

"Words," said the Greek. "Everybody knows how to say words. I had a forty degree fever, and I didn't know if it was day or night. But one thing I knew, that I needed shoes and other things, so I got up and went to the warehouse to study the situation. And there was a Russian with a machine gun in front of the door; but I wanted shoes, and I walked around it, I broke a window, and I went in. So I had shoes, and also the sack and everything that's in the sack, which will be useful later. That is foresight; yours is stupidity, it's not taking account of the reality of things."

"You're the one who's full of words now," I said. "I may have made a mistake, but now we have to get to Kraków before night, with shoes or without." And so saying I struggled, with my numb fingers, and with some bits of wire I had found on the road, to at least temporarily tie the soles to the uppers.

"Forget it, you'll get nowhere like that," he handed me two pieces of strong cloth he had dug out of his bundle, and showed me how to wrap up shoes and feet, so as to be able to walk as well as possible. Then we continued in silence.

The outskirts of Kraków were anonymous and bleak. The streets were utterly deserted; the shop windows were empty, all the doors and windows were barred or smashed. We reached the end of a tram line. I hesitated, since we had no way to pay for a ride, but the Greek said, "Get on, then we'll see." The car was empty; after a quarter of an hour the driver appeared, and not the conductor (from which you see that once again the Greek was right; and, as will be seen, he was right in all the affairs that followed, except one); we left, and during the journey we found with joy that one of the passengers who got on was a French soldier. He explained to us that he was billeted in an ancient convent, which the tram would soon pass; at the next stop, we would find a barracks requisitioned by the Russians and full of Italian soldiers. My heart rejoiced: I had found a home.

In reality everything did not go so smoothly. The Polish sentinel on guard at the barracks first invited us curtly to go away. "Where?" "What do I care? Away from here, anywhere." After much persistence and prayer, he was finally induced to call an Italian marshal, evidently the one who made decisions on admitting other guests. It wasn't simple, he explained to us: the barracks was already full to overflowing, the rations were limited; that I was Italian he could admit, but I wasn't a soldier; as for my companion, he was Greek, and it was impossible to have him come in among former combatants in Greece and Albania—certainly scuffles and brawls would break out. I responded with my greatest eloquence, and with genuine tears in my eyes: I guaranteed that we would stay only one night (and thought to myself: once inside...), and that the Greek spoke Italian well and anyway would scarcely say a word. My arguments were weak and I knew it; but the Greek knew how all the military services of the world function, and while I was talking he was digging in the sack hanging on my shoulders. Suddenly he pushed me aside and silently placed under the nose of the Cerberus a dazzling can of pork, adorned with a multicolored label, and with futile instructions in six languages on the right way to handle the contents. So we won a roof and a bed in Kraków.

It was now night. Contrary to what the marshal wished us to believe, inside the barracks the most sumptuous abundance reigned: there were lighted stoves, candles and carbide lamps, food and drink, and straw to sleep on. The Italians were arranged ten or twelve to a room, but we at Monowitz had been two per cubic meter. They wore good military clothes, padded jackets, many had wristwatches, all had hair
shiny with brilliantine; they were noisy, cheerful, and kind, and overwhelmed us with attentions. As for the Greek, he was practically carried triumphantly. A Greek! A Greek is here! The news spread from room to room, and soon a festive crowd had gathered around my stern ally. They spoke Greek, some fluently, these veterans of the most pitiful military occupation that history records: they recalled with vivid sympathy places and events, in tacit, gallant recognition of the desperate valor of the invaded country. But there was something more, which opened the way for them: mine was not an ordinary Greek, he was visibly a master, an authority, a super Greek. In a few minutes of conversation, he had performed a miracle, had created an atmosphere.

He possessed the right equipment: he could speak Italian, and (what was more important, and is lacking in many Italians themselves) he knew what to talk about in Italian. He astonished me: he proved to be an expert in girls and spaghetti, in Juventus and opera, war and gonorrhea, wine and the black market, motorcycles and dodges. Mordo Nahum, with me so laconic, quickly became the center of the evening. I saw that his eloquence, his successful effort at captatio benevolentiae were not motivated only by opportunistic considerations. He, too, had fought in the Greek campaign, with the rank of sergeant: on the other side, of course, but this detail at this moment seemed negligible to everyone. He had been at Tepelenë, as had many Italians, too; he had, like them, suffered cold, hunger, mud, and bombardments; and at the end he, like them, had been captured by the Germans. He was a colleague, a fellow soldier.

He told curious war stories. Once, after the Germans broke through the front, he, along with six of his soldiers, had been ransacking the second floor of a bombed, abandoned villa in search of provisions, and heard suspicious noises on the floor below; he had cautiously gone down the stairs with the machine gun on his hip, and had run into an Italian sergeant who with six soldiers was doing the same job on the ground floor. The Italian had leveled his gun, in turn, but the Greek had pointed out that in those conditions a gun battle would be especially stupid, that they were both, Greeks and Italians, in the same soup, and that he didn’t see why they couldn’t make a small separate local peace and continue searching in their respective occupied territories—a proposal that the Italian had readily agreed to.

For me, too, it was a revelation. I knew he was nothing but a somewhat shady merchant, expert in scams and without scruples, egotistical and cold, and yet I felt that, encouraged by the sympathy of his listeners, a new warmth flowered in him, an unsuspected humanity, singular but genuine, and rich in promise.

Late at night, from somewhere or other, a flask of wine appeared. It was the final blow: for me everything was celestially shipwrecked in a warm purple haze, and I barely managed to crawl on all fours to the bed of straw that the Italians, with maternal care, had made in a corner for the Greek and me.

Day had barely broken when the Greek woke me. Alas, disappointment! Where had the jovial guest of the night before gone? The Greek who was before me was hard, secretive, taciturn. “Get up,” he said in a tone that admitted no response. “Put on your shoes, get the sack, and let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“To work. To the market. Do you think it’s right to let someone support us?”

To this argument I felt completely resistant. It seemed to me that, apart from being comfortable, it was extremely natural for someone to support me, and also right. I had found the previous night’s explosion of national solidarity—rather, of spontaneous humanity—wonderful, thrilling. Besides, full of self-pity as I was, it seemed to me just, and good, that the world should finally feel compassion for me. In any case, I didn’t have shoes, I was sick, I was cold, I was tired; and finally, in the name of heaven, what in the world could I do at the market?

I set out these considerations, which to me were obvious. But “C’est pas des raisons d’homme,” he answered, in irritation: I had to realize that I had insulted an important moral principle of his, that he was seriously shocked, that on that point he was not disposed to negotiate or discuss. Moral codes, all of them, are rigid by definition: they do not admit nuances, nor compromises, or mutual contamination. They are accepted or rejected entire. This is one of the main reasons that man is a herd.
animal, and more or less consciously seeks proximity not to his neighbor in general but only to one who shares his deep convictions (or his lack of such convictions). I had to realize, with disappointment and amazement, that such precisely was Mordo Nahum: a man of profound convictions; which, moreover, were very far from mine. Now, we all know how difficult it is to have business relations—indeed, to live together—with an ideological opposite.

Fundamental to his ethic was work, which he felt as a sacred duty but which he understood in a very broad sense. Work was that and only that which leads to gain without limiting freedom. The concept of work thus also includes, for example, besides certain legal activities, smuggling, theft, fraud (not robbery: he wasn’t a violent man). On the other hand, he considered reprehensible, because humiliating, all activities that do not involve initiative or risk, or that assume discipline and hierarchy: that is, any employee relationship, any providing of services, which, even if it was well compensated, he considered altogether “servile work.” But it wasn’t servile work to plow one’s own field, or sell fake antiquities to tourists at the port.

As for the loftier activities of the spirit, creative work, I quickly understood that the Greek was divided. These were a matter of delicate judgments, to be made case by case: it was permissible, for example, to pursue success in itself; even by selling fake paintings or bad literature, or anyway by harming one’s neighbor, but it was reprehensible to persist in following an unprofitable ideal, and sinful to withdraw from the world in contemplation. Permissible, however, in fact commendable, was the path of the man who devotes himself to meditation and acquiring wisdom, provided he doesn’t believe that he should receive his bread for nothing from the civilized world: even wisdom is goods, and can and should be exchanged.

Since Mordo Nahum was not a fool, he understood clearly that his principles could not be shared by individuals of different origin and upbringing, and in particular by me; but he was firmly convinced of them, and it was his ambition to translate them into acts, to show me their general validity.

In conclusion, my proposal to sit calmly and wait for bread from the Russians could only appear to him detestable; because it was “bread not earned”; because it involved a relationship of subjugation; and because every kind of order, of structure, was for him suspect, whether it led to a loaf every day or a pay envelope every month.

So I followed the Greek to the market, not so much because I was convinced by his arguments as through inertia and curiosity. The evening before, while I was navigating in a sea of vinous fogs, he had diligently informed himself of the location, customs, tariffs, demands, and supplies of the free market of Kraków, and duty called him.

We left, he with the sack (which I carried), I in my decrepit shoes, by virtue of which every single step became a problem. The market of Kraków had grown up spontaneously, right after the front passed by, and in a few days had occupied an entire neighborhood. You could buy or sell anything, and the whole city made its way there: bourgeois residents sold furniture, books, paintings, clothes, and silver; peasants peddled like mattresses offered meat, chickens, eggs, cheese; children, their noses and cheeks reddened by the frigid wind, sought smokers for the rations of tobacco that the Soviet military administration distributed with peculiar generosity (three hundred grams a month for everyone, even newborns).

I was overjoyed to meet a small group of fellow countrymen: skilled types, three soldiers and a girl, cheerful and openhanded, who in those days were doing excellent business with hot pancakes, made with strange ingredients in a doorway not far away.

After a first general survey, the Greek decided on shirts. Were we partners? Well, he would contribute capital and mercantile experience; I, physical work and my (tenuous) knowledge of German. “Go,” he said, “and take a look at all the stalls where shirts are sold, ask how much they cost, say it’s too much, then come back and report. Don’t attract too much attention.” I prepared unwillingly to carry out this market research: I harbored in myself old hunger and cold, and inertia, and at the same time curiosity, carelessness, and a new, piquant desire to start conversations, to open human relations, to flaunt and waste my boundless freedom. But the Greek, behind the backs of my interlocutors, fol-
I came back from my tour with some prices for reference, which the Greek made a mental note of, and with a certain number of disjointed philological notions: that “shirt” is said something like kosciuła; that Polish numerals resemble Greek ones; that “how much is it” and “what time is it” are said approximately ile kostiuje and ktura gogina; a genitive ending in -ego that made clear to me certain Polish curses often heard in the Lager; and other shreds of information that filled me with a silly, childish joy.

The Greek calculated in his head. One shirt could be sold for between fifty and a hundred złoty; an egg cost five or six złoty; with ten złoty, according to the information of the Italians with the pancakes, one could get soup and main course at the soup kitchen for the poor, behind the cathedral. The Greek decided to sell one of the three shirts he had, and to eat at that soup kitchen; the rest he would invest in eggs. Then we would see what to do.

So he handed me the shirt, and told me to display it, and to shout, “Shirt, gentlemen, shirt.” For “shirt” I already had the information; for “gentlemen” I thought the correct form was panowie, a word that I had heard used a few minutes earlier by my competitors, and that I interpreted as the vocative plural of pan, sir. On the latter term, besides, I had no doubts: it appears in an important dialogue in The Brothers Karamazov. It must have been the right word, because several clients spoke to me in Polish, asking me incomprehensible questions about the shirt. I was embarrassed: the Greek intervened authoritatively, pushed me aside, and conducted the negotiations directly; they were long and laborious but ended happily. At the invitation of the buyer, the exchange of property took place not in the public square but in a doorway.

Seventy złoty, equal to seven meals or a dozen eggs. I don’t know about the Greek: I for fourteen months had not had at my disposal such an amount of foodstuffs, all at once. But was it really at my disposal? That seemed dubious: the Greek had pocketed the sum in silence, and with his whole attitude gave me to understand that he intended to administer the proceeds himself.

We made the rounds of the egg sellers’ stalls, where we learned that, for the same price, hard-boiled and raw eggs could be acquired. We bought six, to dine on: the Greek made his purchase with extreme care, choosing the largest after minute comparisons and after many perplexities and second thoughts, utterly indifferent to the critical gaze of the seller.

The soup kitchen was behind the cathedral: it remained to find out which, among the many beautiful churches of Kraków, was the cathedral. Whom to ask, and how? A priest went by: I would ask the priest. Now, that priest, young and with a kind face, understood neither French nor German; as a result, for the first and only time in my post-scholastic career, I got some use out of years of classical studies by initiating in Latin the strangest and most tangled of conversations. From the first request for information ("Tater optime, ubi est mensa pauperorum?") we talked confusedly about everything, about my being a Jew, about the Lager ("castra"); "Lager" was better, unfortunately understood by anyone, about Italy, about the inadvisability of speaking German in public (which I came to understand later, through direct experience), and about countless other things, to which the unusual guise of the language gave a curious flavor of the pluperfect.

I had completely forgotten hunger and cold, since the need for human contact should truly be numbered among the elemental needs. I had even forgotten the Greek; but he hadn’t forgotten me, and showed up brutally after a few minutes, ruthlessly interrupting the conversation. Not that he was against human contact, and not that he didn’t understand the good of it (he had shown it the night before in the barrack): but these were things outside of working hours, for holidays, accessories, not to be mixed with that serious and strenuous business that is daily work. He responded to my weak protests only with a harsh look. We set off; the Greek was silent for a long time, then, in conclusive judgment of my assistance, he said to me thoughtfully, "Je n’ai pas encore compris si tu es idiot ou fainéant."

Guided by the priest’s valuable information, we reached the soup kitchen, which was a very depressing place, but warm and full of delicious smells. The Greek ordered two soups and a single portion of beans
with lard: it was the punishment for the unsuitable and foolish way I had behaved that morning. He was angry; but once he had swallowed the soup he softened noticeably, so much that he left me a good quarter of his beans. Outside it had begun to snow, and a savage wind was blowing. Maybe it was pity for my striped garments, or indifference toward the rules; for a large part of the afternoon, the kitchen staff left us alone, thinking, and making plans for the future. The Greek’s mood seemed to have changed: maybe the fever had returned, or maybe, after the solid business of the morning, he felt on vacation. He felt, in fact, in a benevolently pedagogical mood. Gradually, as the hours passed, the tone of his conversation imperceptibly warmed, and at the same time the relationship that bound us was changing: from master–slave at noon, to boss–employee at one, to master–disciple at two, to older brother–younger brother at three. The conversation returned to my shoes, which neither of us, for different reasons, could forget. He explained to me that to be without shoes is a very grave offense. In war, there are two things you must think of above all: in the first place shoes, in the second food, and not the other way around, as the populace maintains—because someone who has shoes can go around looking for food, while the opposite is not true. “But the war is over,” I objected; and I thought it was over, like many in those months of truce, in a more universal sense than one dares to think today. “There is always war,” Mordo Nahum answered, memorably.

We all know that no one is born with a set of rules, that each of us constructs his own along the way or, ultimately, on the store of his experiences, or those of others, similar to his; and so the moral universe of each of us, properly interpreted, coincides with the sum of our previous experiences, and thus represents a condensed version of our biography. The biography of my Greek was linear: that of a strong, cold man, solitary and logical, who had moved from childhood within the rigid meshes of a mercantile society. He was (or had been) open also to other aspirations: he wasn’t indifferent to the sky and the sea in his country, the pleasures of home and family, dialectic encounters. But he had been conditioned to push all this to the margins of his day and of his life, so that it did not disturb what he called the travail d’homme. His had been a life of war, and he considered cowardly and blind anyone who rejected that universe of iron. The Lager had come to us both: I had perceived it as a monstrous distortion, an ugly anomaly of my history and the history of the world, he as a sad confirmation of well-known things. “There is always war,” man is a wolf toward man: an old story. Of his two years in Auschwitz he never spoke to me.

He talked to me, instead, eloquently, about his many activities in Salonika, of the batches of goods bought, sold, smuggled by sea, or at night across the Bulgarian border; of the scams shamefully endured and gloriously perpetrated; and, finally, of the happy, tranquil hours passed on the shore of the gulf, after the day of work, with his merchant colleagues, in certain cafés on stilts that he described with unusual abandon, and of the long conversations that were held there. What conversations? About money, about customs, about freight charges, naturally; but also about other things. What is to be understood by “knowledge,” by “spirit,” by “justice,” by “truth.” What is the nature of the fragile tie that binds the soul to the body, how it is established at birth and released at death. What is freedom, and how to reconcile the conflict between freedom of the spirit and fate. What follows death, too; and other grand Greek things. But all this in the evening, of course, when the trafficking was done, with coffee or wine or olives, a brilliant game of intellect among men active also in idleness: without passion.

Why the Greek told me these things, why he confessed to me, isn’t clear. Maybe, in front of me, who was so different, so foreign, he felt alone, and his conversation was a monologue.

We left the soup kitchen in the evening, and returned to the Italians’ barrack. After much insistence, we had got permission from the Italian colonel in charge to stay in the barrack one more night, only one. No ration, and we were not to attract any attention—he didn’t want to have trouble with the Russians. The next morning, we would have to leave. For dinner each of us had two of the eggs acquired in the morning, saving the last two for breakfast. After the events of the day, I felt much “younger” compared with the Greek. When it came to the eggs, I asked if he knew how to distinguish between a raw egg and a hard-boiled one from the outside (you spin the egg rapidly, on a table, for example; if it’s
I had an avalanche of urgent things to tell the civilized world, my own but belonging to everyone, things of blood, things that, it seemed to me, would shake every conscience to its foundations. The lawyer really was polite and kind: he questioned me, and I spoke dizzyly of my so recent experiences, of Auschwitz, nearby and yet, it seemed, unknown to all, of the massacre I alone had escaped, everything. The lawyer translated into Polish for the public. Now, I did not know Polish, but I knew how to say “Jew,” and how to say “political”; and I quickly realized that the translation of my account, although heartfelt, was not faithful. The lawyer described me to the audience not as an Italian Jew but as an Italian political prisoner.

I asked for an explanation, surprised and almost offended. He answered, embarrassed, “C’est mieux pour vous. La guerre n’est pas finie.” The words of the Greek.

I felt the warm wave of feeling free, of feeling myself a man among men, of feeling alive, recede into the distance. I was suddenly old, wan, tired beyond any human measure: the war isn’t over, war is forever. My listeners trickled away; they must have understood. I had dreamed something like that, we all had, in the Auschwitz night: to speak and not be listened to, to find freedom again and remain alone. Soon, I remained alone with the lawyer; after a few minutes, he, too, left me, apologizing urbanely. He urged me, as the priest had, to avoid speaking German. When I asked why, he answered vaguely, “Poland is a sad country.” He wished me good luck and offered me some money, which I refused; he seemed to me moved.

The locomotive whistled its departure. I got back in the freight car, where the Greek was waiting for me, but I didn’t tell him what had happened.

It wasn’t the only stop: others followed, and at one of these, at night, we realized that Szczakowa, the place where there was hot soup for everyone, was not far. It was in fact north, and we were supposed to go west, but since at Szczakowa there was hot soup for all, and we had no plan other than to satisfy our hunger, why not head to Szczakowa? So we got out, waited for the right train, and showed up many more times at the Red Cross counter; I believe that the Polish nurses recognized me easily, and remember me still.
As night fell, we settled ourselves to sleep on the floor, right in the middle of the waiting room, since all the places along the sides were occupied. Perhaps made compassionate or curious by my outfit, a few hours later a Polish gendarme arrived, whiskered, ruddy, and corpulent. He questioned me in vain in his language; I answered with the first sentence one learns in any unknown language, and that is *Nie rozumiem po polsku*, I don’t understand Polish. I added, in German, that I was Italian, and that I spoke a little German. At which, a miracle! the gendarme began to speak Italian.

He spoke a terrible Italian, guttural and aspirated, smudged with new, invented curses. He had learned it, and this explains everything, in a valley near Bergamo, where he had worked some years as a miner. He, too, and he was the third, urged me not to speak German. I asked why: he answered with an eloquent gesture, passing his index and middle fingers, like a knife, between chin and larynx, and adding cheerfully, “Tonight all Germans kaput.”

Certainly it was an exaggeration, and yet an opinion-hope. But in fact the next day we met a long train of freight cars, closed from the outside; it was headed east, and through the peepholes many human faces could be seen, in search of air. That sight, strongly evocative, roused in me a knot of confused and opposing feelings, which even today I would have a hard time sorting out.

The gendarme, very kindly, proposed to the Greek and me that we spend the rest of the night in the warmth of the guardroom; we accepted willingly, and in the unusual environment did not wake until late in the morning, after a restorative sleep.

We left Szczakowa the next day, for the last stop on the journey. We reached Katowice without incident; there really did exist a transit camp for Italians, and one for Greeks. We separated without many words; but at the moment of farewell, in a fleeting yet distinct way, I felt a solitary wave of friendship move in me toward him, veined with faint gratitude, contempt, respect, animosity, curiosity, and regret that I wouldn’t see him again.

I did see him again, in fact: twice. I saw him in May, in the glorious and turbulent days of the end of the war, when all the Greeks in Kato-