Auschwitz in One’s own Words

**Our Nights** (If this is a Man, 1947, 1958)

After twenty days of Ka-Be, when my wound was practically healed, I was discharged, to my great disappointment.

The ceremony is simple, but entails a painful and dangerous period of readjustment. On leaving Ka-Be, those who have no special contacts are not returned to their former Block and Kommando but are enrolled, on the basis of criteria wholly unknown to me, in some other barrack and given some other kind of work. Moreover, they leave Ka-Be naked; they are given “new” clothes and shoes (I mean not those left behind at their entry), which need to be adapted to their own persons with speed and diligence, and this involves effort and expense. They have once more to acquire a spoon and knife. And finally—and this is the gravest aspect—they find themselves inserted into an unknown environment, among hostile companions never seen before, with leaders whose character they do not know and against whom consequently it is difficult to protect themselves.

Man’s capacity to dig a niche for himself, to secrete a shell, to build around himself a tenuous barrier of defense, even in apparently desperate circumstances, is astonishing and deserves serious study. It is an invaluable exercise of adaptation, partly passive and unconscious, partly active: hammering in a nail above his bunk on which to hang his shoes at night; concluding tacit pacts of nonaggression with neighbors; understanding and accepting the habits and laws of the individual Kommando, the individual Block. By virtue of this work, one manages after a few weeks to arrive at a certain equilibrium, a certain degree of security in the face of the unforeseen. One has made oneself a nest: the trauma of the transplantation is over.

But the man who leaves Ka-Be, naked and almost always insufficiently recovered, feels himself ejected into the dark and cold of sidereal space. His trousers are falling down, his shoes hurt, his shirt has no buttons. He searches for a human contact and finds only backs turned. He is as helpless and vulnerable as a newborn babe, but in the morning he will have to march to work.

It is in these conditions that I find myself when the nurse entrusts me, after various obligatory administrative rites, to the care of the Blockältester of Block 45. But at once a thought fills me with joy: I’m in luck, this is Alberto’s Block!

Alberto is my best friend. He is only twenty-two, two years younger than me, but none of us Italians have shown a capacity for adaptation like his. Alberto entered the Lager head high, and lives in the Lager unscathed and uncorrupted. He understood, before any of us, that this life is war; he allowed himself no indulgences, he wasted no time complaining or feeling sorry for himself and others, but entered the battle from the outset. He is sustained by intelligence and intuition. He reasons correctly; often he does not even reason but is right just the same. He grasps everything immediately; he knows only a little French but understands whatever the Germans and Poles tell him. He responds in Italian and with gestures, he makes himself
understood and at once wins sympathy. He fights for his life but remains everybody’s friend. He “knows” whom to corrupt, whom to avoid, whose compassion to arouse, whom to resist.

Yet (and it is for this virtue of his that his memory is still dear and close to me) he did not become corrupt himself. I always saw, and still see in him, the rare figure of the strong yet gentle man against whom the weapons of the night are blunted.

But I was unable to get permission to sleep in a bunk with him—not even Alberto could manage that, although by now he enjoyed a certain popularity in Block 45. It was a pity, because to have a bed companion whom one can trust, or at least with whom one can reach an understanding, is an inestimable advantage; and, besides, it is winter now and the nights are long, and since we are forced to exchange sweat, smell, and warmth with someone, under the same blanket, and in a width of seventy centimeters, it is clearly desirable that he be a friend.
Vanadium (The Periodic Table)

A paint is by definition an unstable substance: in fact, at a certain point in its career, it has to turn from a liquid to a solid. This has to happen at the right moment and in the right place. The opposite case can be unpleasant or dramatic: it can happen that a paint solidifies (we say, brutally, “separates”) during its sojourn in the warehouse, and then the product is thrown away; or that the base resin solidifies during synthesis, which, in a reactor of ten or twenty tons, can tend toward the tragic; or, instead, that the paint doesn’t harden at all, even after its application, and then it becomes a laughingstock, because a paint that doesn’t “dry” is like a gun that doesn’t shoot or a bull that doesn’t inseminate.

In many cases, the oxygen in the air has a role in the process of hardening. Among the various tasks, vital or destructive, that oxygen can accomplish, what interests us paint makers most is its capacity to react with certain small molecules, such as those in some oils, and to create bridges between them, transforming them into a compact and therefore solid network: that, for example, is how linseed oil “dries” in the air.

We had imported a batch of resin for paints, in fact one of those resins that solidify at ordinary temperatures by simple exposure to the atmosphere, and we were worried. Tested by itself, the resin dried normally, but after it was ground with a certain (irreplaceable) type of lampblack, the capacity to dry diminished until it vanished; we had already set aside several tons of black enamel that, in spite of all the corrections attempted, remained sticky indefinitely after it was applied, like a lugubrious flypaper.

In cases like these, before formulating accusations you have to proceed cautiously. The supplier was W., a large and respectable German manufacturer, one of the limbs left when, after the war, the Allies dismembered the omnipotent I.G. Farben: people like this, before admitting their guilt, throw on the scale pan all the weight of their prestige and their full delaying capacity. But there was no way to avoid the controversy: the other batches of resin behaved well with that same batch of lampblack, the resin was of a special type, which only W. produced, and we were bound by a contract, and absolutely had to continue to supply that black enamel, without missing deadlines.

I wrote a polite letter of complaint, setting forth the main points of the issue, and a few days later a response arrived: it was long and pedantic, suggested obvious stratagems that we had already adopted without result, and contained a superfluous and deliberately obscure explication of the mechanism of the oxidation of resin; it ignored our urgency, and on the essential point said only that the obligatory tests were under way. There remained nothing to do but order another batch immediately, urging W. to test with particular care the behavior of the resin with that type of lampblack.

Along with the confirmation of the last order came a second letter, almost as long as the first, and signed by the same Doktor L. Müller. It was a little more relevant than the first, recognizing (with much circumspection and many reservations) the justness of our grievance, and containing a suggestion less obvious than the preceding ones: “ganz unerwarteterweise,” that is, in a completely unexpected way, the gnomes of their laboratory had found that the disputed batch
was cured by the addition of 0.1 percent of vanadium naphthenate—an additive that, until that moment, had never been heard of in the world of paints. The unknown Dr. Müller invited us to verify the assertion immediately; if the effect was confirmed, this observation would enable both sides to avoid the irritations and uncertainties of an international controversy and reexportation.

Müller. There was a Müller in a preceding incarnation of mine, but Müller is a very common name in Germany, like Molinari in Italy, of which it is the exact equivalent. Why continue to think about it? And yet, rereading the two letters with their extremely ponderous sentences, stuffed with technical terms, I couldn’t silence a doubt, of the sort which can’t be set aside, which squirm inside you like worms. But really, there must be two hundred thousand Müllers in Germany, forget it and think about the paint that has to be fixed.

. . . and then, suddenly, there returned to my eye a peculiarity of the last letter that had escaped me: it wasn’t a typing mistake; it had been repeated twice. He had written naptenat, not naphthenat, as he should have. Well, of the encounters I had in that now remote world I preserve pathologically precise memories; and that other Müller, in an unforgotten laboratory permeated by cold, hope, and fear, said beta-Naptylamin, rather than beta-Naphthylamin.

The Russians were at the gates, and two or three times a day the Allied planes arrived to batter the factory of Buna: no window was unbroken, and there was a shortage of water, steam, and electricity; but the order was to start producing Buna rubber, and the Germans do not question orders.

I was in a laboratory with two other specialist prisoners, like the educated slaves whom the rich Romans imported from Greece. Work was as impossible as it was useless: our time was almost entirely spent taking apart the equipment at every air-raid alarm and putting it back together at the all-clear. But orders are not questioned, and every so often some inspector advanced upon us through the ruins and the snow to make sure that the work of the laboratory was proceeding according to instructions. Sometimes it was a stone-faced SS officer, at other times an old soldier from the Territorial units, as frightened as a mouse, at still other times a civilian. The civilian who appeared most often was called Doktor Müller.

He must have been fairly important, because everyone greeted him first. He was a tall, corpulent man, around forty, with an aspect rather coarse than refined; with me he had spoken only three times, and all three with a timidity rare in that place, as if he were ashamed of something. The first time, only about matters of work (about the amount of the naptilamina, in fact); the second time he had asked me why my beard was so long, and I had answered that none of us had a razor, indeed not even a handkerchief, and that our beard was shaved officially every Monday; the third time he had given me a clear, typewritten note that authorized me to be shaved on Thursdays as well, and to get from the Effektenmagazin a pair of leather shoes, and he had asked, addressing me formally, “Why do you look so troubled?” I, who at that time thought in German, had concluded to myself, Der Mann hat keine Ahnung, the man has no idea.

Duty first. I hastened to inquire among our usual suppliers for a sample of vanadium naphthenate, and realized that it wouldn’t be easy: the product wasn’t manufactured regularly, it was prepared in small quantities and only to order; I ordered it.
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The return of that “pt” had thrown me into a violent agitation. To find myself settling accounts, man to man, with one of the “others” had been my most vivid and permanent desire of the post-Lager period. It had been appeased only in part by letters from my German readers: they didn’t satisfy me, those honest and generic declarations of regret and solidarity on the part of people I had never seen, whose other side I didn’t know, and who probably weren’t implicated except sentimentally. The encounter I was waiting for, with such intensity that I dreamed it (in German) at night, was an encounter with someone from that place, someone who had disposed of us, who had not looked us in the eye, as if we didn’t have eyes. Not out of revenge: I am no Count of Monte Cristo. Only to restore the balance, and to say “So?” If this Müller was my Müller, he wasn’t the perfect antagonist, because in some way, maybe only for a moment, he had had pity, or even just a rudiment of professional solidarity. Maybe still less: maybe he had only resented the fact that that strange hybrid of colleague and instrument, who was also, after all, a chemist, frequented a laboratory without the Anstand, the decorum, that a laboratory requires; but the others around him had felt not even this. He wasn’t the perfect antagonist: but, as we all know, perfection is one of those things which are recounted, not experienced.

I got in touch with the representative of W., with whom I was fairly friendly, and asked him to discreetly investigate Dr. Müller. How old was he? What did he look like? Where had he been during the war? The answer was not long in arriving: the age and aspect coincided, the man had worked first at Schkopau, to get training in the technology of rubber, then at the Buna works, in Auschwitz. I got his address, and sent him, from private citizen to private citizen, a copy of the German edition of If This Is a Man, along with a letter in which I asked if he was really the Müller of Auschwitz, and if he remembered “the three men of the laboratory”; well, if he would forgive the brutal intrusion, the return from the void, I was one of the three, in addition to being the client concerned with the resin that wouldn’t dry.

I prepared to wait for the response, while on the business side, like the oscillation of an enormous, very slow pendulum, the exchange of chemical-bureaucratic letters about the Italian vanadium, which did not work as well as the German, continued. Would you therefore send us, please, as a matter of urgency, the specifications of the product, and deliver to us by air 50 kg, whose cost you will deduct, etc. On the technological level the matter seemed well on its way, although the fate of the defective batch of resin wasn’t clear: keep it, with a discount on the price, or reexport it at the expense of W., or resort to arbitration; meanwhile, in customary fashion, we threatened each other, in turn, to have recourse to legal means, gerichtlich vorzugehen.

I continued to wait for the “private” response, which was almost as irritating and nerve-racking as the business dispute. What did I know of my man? Nothing: in all probability he had obliterated everything, deliberately or not; my letter and my book were for him a rude and irksome intrusion, a clumsy invitation to stir up a sediment by now settled, an attack on the Anstand. He would never respond. Too bad: he was not a perfect German, but do perfect Germans exist? or perfect Jews? They are an abstraction: the passage from the general to the particular always has in store some stimulating surprises, when the partner without definition,
larva-like, takes shape before you, little by little or in a single stroke, and becomes the Mitmensch, the fellow man, with all his thickness, tics, anomalies, and inconsistencies. Now almost two months had passed: the response would never arrive. A pity.

It arrived dated March 2, 1967, on fine paper with a letterhead in vaguely Gothic characters. It was an opening letter, brief and reserved. Yes, the Müller of Buna was indeed he. He had read my book, recognized with emotion persons and places; was happy to know that I had survived; asked for information about the other two “men in the laboratory,” and so far there was nothing strange, since they had been named in the book. But he also asked about Goldbaum, whom I had not named. He added that he had reread, in the circumstances, his notes on that period: he would like to discuss them in a hoped-for personal meeting, “useful to me, to you, and necessary for the purposes of overcoming that terrible past” (im Sinne der Bewältigung der so furchtbaren Vergangenheit). He declared, finally, that among all the prisoners he had met at Auschwitz, it was I who had made the strongest and most enduring impression on him. That might well be a blandishment: from the tone of the letter, and especially from that phrase on “overcoming,” it seemed that the man expected something from me.

Now it was up to me to respond, and I felt embarrassed. There: the enterprise had succeeded, the adversary was hooked; he was before me, almost a fellow paint maker, he wrote, like me, on letterhead, and he even remembered Goldbaum. He was still quite shadowy, but it was clear that he wanted from me something like absolution, because he had a past to overcome and I did not: I wanted from him merely a discount on the bill for a defective resin. The situation was interesting but not typical: it coincided only in part with that of the criminal before the judge.

In the first place: in what language should I respond? Certainly not in German; I would make ridiculous mistakes, which my role did not permit. Better always to fight on the home field: I wrote in Italian. The two men of the laboratory had died, I didn’t know where or how; so, too, Goldbaum, of cold and hunger, during the evacuation march. As for me, he knew the main things from the book, and from the business correspondence on vanadium.

I had many questions for him: too many, and too heavy for him and for me. Why Auschwitz? Why Pannwitz? Why children gassed? But I felt that it was not yet the moment to cross certain lines, and I asked only if he accepted the judgments, implicit and explicit, of my book. If he thought that I.G. Farben had employed slave labor of its own accord. If he knew at the time about the “facilities” of Auschwitz, which swallowed up ten thousand lives a day seven kilometers from the facilities for Buna rubber. Finally, since he referred to his “notes on that period,” would he send me a copy?

Of the “hoped-for encounter” I did not speak, because I was afraid of it. Pointless to look for euphemisms, to speak of shame, disgust, reluctance. Fear was the word: as I did not feel myself a Monte Cristo, so I did not feel myself a Horatius-Curiatius; I didn’t feel capable of representing the dead of Auschwitz, and neither did it seem reasonable to see in Müller the representative of the executioners. I know myself: I do not possess polemical quickness, the adversary distracts me, interests me more as a man than as an adversary, I listen to him and risk believing him; contempt and the proper judgment come to me later, on the stairs, when they are no longer any use. It suited me to continue by letter.
On the business side Müller wrote that the fifty kilos had been sent, and that W. had confidence in a friendly settlement, etc. Almost simultaneously the letter I had been expecting arrived at home: but it was not what I had been expecting. It wasn’t a model letter, a paradigm. At this point, if my story were invented, I would have been able to introduce only two types of letter: one humble, warm, Christian, from a redeemed German; one vile, arrogant, icy, from a stubborn Nazi. Now, this story is not invented, and reality is always more complex than invention: rougher, less combed, less rounded. Rarely does it lie on a flat surface.

The letter was eight pages long and contained a photograph that startled me. The face was that face: aged, and yet ennobled by a clever photographer, I felt it high above me uttering those words of casual and momentary compassion: “Why do you look so troubled?”

It was obviously the work of an inexpert writer: rhetorical, half sincere, full of digressions and excessive praise, moving, pedantic, and clumsy: it challenged any summary, global judgment.

He attributed the facts of Auschwitz to Man, without differentiating; he deplored them, and found consolation in the thought of other men cited in my book, Alberto, Lorenzo, “against whom the weapons of darkness were blunted”: the phrase was mine, but repeated by him it sounded to me hypocritical and false. He told his story: “initially drawn in by the general enthusiasm for Hitler’s regime,” he had joined a nationalist student association, which shortly afterward had been incorporated officially into the SA; he had obtained a discharge, and commented that “even this was therefore possible.” In the war, he had been mobilized in the anti-air corps, and only then, confronting the ruins of the cities, had he felt “shame and contempt” for the war. In May of ’44 he had been able (like me!) to assert his qualifications as a chemist, and had been assigned to the I.G. Farben Schkopau factory, of which the factory at Auschwitz was an enlarged copy. At Schkopau he had trained a group of Ukrainian girls in the laboratory work; in fact I had met them at Auschwitz, and had been unable to make sense of their peculiar familiarity with Dr. Müller. He had been transferred to Auschwitz, with the girls, only in November 1944: the name Auschwitz, at that time, had no meaning, not for him or for his acquaintances; yet, upon his arrival, he had had a brief meeting with the technical director (presumably the engineer Faust), who had warned him that “the Jews in Buna were to be assigned only to the most menial jobs, and compassion was not tolerated.”

He had been placed directly under Doktor Pannwitz, the one who had subjected me to a curious “state examination” to determine my professional capacities: Müller seemed to have a very low opinion of his superior, and told me that he had died in 1946 of a brain tumor. He, Müller, was in charge of the organization of the laboratory at Buna: he declared that he had known nothing of that exam, and that it was he who had chosen us three specialists, and me in particular; according to this information, improbable but not impossible, I should therefore have been indebted to him for my survival. With me, he declared, he had had relations almost of friendship between equals; he had talked to me about scientific problems, and had meditated, in this situation, on what “precious human values were destroyed by other men out of pure brutality.” Not only did I not remember any conversations of the sort (and my memory of that period, as I’ve said, is very good) but merely to imagine them, against that background of ruin, mutual distrust, and mortal exhaustion, was completely outside reality, and explicable only by a very ingenuous posthumous wishful thinking; perhaps it was a situation that he recounted to many, and didn’t realize that the
only person in the world who could not believe it was me. Maybe, in good faith, he had constructed for himself a comfortable past. He didn’t remember the two details of the beard and the shoes, but he remembered others, equivalent and, in my opinion, plausible. He had known about my scarlet fever, and had been worried about my survival, especially when he learned that the prisoners were evacuated on foot. On January 26, 1945, he had been assigned by the SS to the Volkssturm, the ragtag army of men unfit for military service, old people, and children that was supposed to resist the Soviet advance: the technical director mentioned above had, happily, saved him, authorizing him to escape behind the lines.

To my question about I.G. Farben he responded emphatically that yes, he had hired prisoners, but only to protect them: indeed, he formulated the (crazy!) opinion that the entire Buna-Monowitz factory, eight square kilometers of cyclopean plants, had been constructed with the intention of “protecting the Jews and helping them to survive,” and that the order not to have compassion for them was eine Tarnung, a mask. Nihil de princepe, no accusation against I.G. Farben: my man was still dependent on W., which was its offspring, and you don’t spit on the plate you eat from. During his brief stay at Auschwitz, he “had never learned of any unit that seemed designed for the killing of the Jews.” Paradoxical, offensive, but not to be ruled out: at that time, among the silent German majority, it was a common technique to try to know as little as possible, and therefore not to ask questions. He, too, evidently, had not asked anyone for explanations, not even himself, although the flames of the crematorium, on clear days, were visible from the Buna factory.

Shortly before the final collapse, he had been captured by the Americans and held for several days in a camp for prisoners of war that, with involuntary sarcasm, he described as having “primitive facilities”: just as at the time of our encounter in the laboratory, Müller, even now as he was writing, continued to have keine Ahnung, no idea. He had returned to his family at the end of June 1945. The contents of his notes, which I had asked to know, were substantially this.

He perceived in my book an overcoming of Judaism, a fulfillment of the Christian precept to love one’s enemies, and a testimony to faith in Man, and he concluded by insisting on the necessity of our meeting, in Germany or Italy, where he was ready to come when and where I pleased: preferably the Riviera. Two days later, through business channels, a letter arrived from W. that, certainly not coincidentally, bore the same date of the long private letter, in addition to the same signature; it was a conciliatory letter, recognizing the company’s fault and declaring it agreeable to any offer. We were given to understand that every cloud has a silver lining: the incident had brought to light the virtue of vanadium naphthenate, which from now on would be incorporated directly into the resin, for whatever client it was intended.

What to do? The character Müller had entpuppt, had come out of the chrysalis, was sharp, in focus. Neither wicked nor heroic: with the rhetoric and the lies, in good or bad faith, filtered out, he remained a typically gray human specimen, one of the not few one-eyed men in the kingdom of the blind. He gave me undeserved credit by attributing to me the virtue of loving my enemies: no, notwithstanding the long-ago privileges he had secured for me, and although he wasn’t an enemy in the strict sense of the term, I did not feel that I loved him. I didn’t love him, and didn’t wish to see him, and yet I felt a certain measure of respect for him: it’s not easy to be one-eyed.
He wasn’t a coward or deaf or a cynic, he hadn’t adapted, he drew up his accounts with the past and the accounts didn’t balance: he tried to balance them, and maybe he cheated a little. Could one ask much more of a former SA? The comparison, which I had had many occasions to make, with other honest Germans met on the beach or in the factory, was completely in his favor: his condemnation of Nazism was timid and periphrastic, but he had not looked for excuses. He was looking for a conversation: he had a conscience, and he did his best to keep it quiet. In his first letter he had spoken of “overcoming the past,” Bewältigung der Vergangenheit: I learned later that this is a stereotype, a euphemism of the Germany of today, where it is universally understood as “redemption from Nazism”; but the root walt, which is contained in it, appears also in words that mean “domination,” “violence,” and “rape,” and I think that translating the expression as “distortion of the past,” or “violence done to the past,” would not be so far from its deepest sense. And yet this escape into clichés was better than the florid obtuseness of other Germans: his efforts at overcoming were clumsy, slightly ridiculous, irritating, and sad, yet decent. And hadn’t he procured for me a pair of shoes?

On the first free Sunday, full of misgivings, I prepared to write a response as sincere, balanced, and dignified as possible. I wrote a draft: I thanked him for having brought me into the laboratory; I declared myself ready to forgive my enemies and maybe even to love them, but only when they showed sure signs of repentance—that is, when they ceased to be enemies. In the opposite case, of the enemy who remains such, who persists in his desire to create suffering, certainly he should not be forgiven: one can try to redeem him, one can (one must!) discuss with him, but it is our duty to judge him, not forgive him. As for a specific judgment of his behavior, which Müller implicitly asked for, I discreetly cited two cases known to me of his German colleagues who had done something much more courageous on our behalf than what he claimed. I admitted that not everyone is born a hero, and that a world in which all were like him, that is, honest and defenseless, would be tolerable, but that is an unreal world. In the real world armies exist, they build Auschwitz, and the honest and defenseless smooth the way for them. Therefore every German must answer for Auschwitz, indeed, every man; and after Auschwitz we are not permitted to be helpless. Of the meeting on the Riviera I did not say a word.

That very night Müller called me on the telephone from Germany. There was some disturbance on the line, and, besides, it’s no longer easy for me to understand German on the telephone: his voice was labored and as if broken, the tone excited. He announced that in six weeks, at Pentecost, he was coming to Finale Ligure: could we meet? Caught unprepared, I said yes; I asked him to let me know at the proper time the details of his arrival, and set aside the now superfluous draft.

Eight days later I received from Frau Müller the announcement of the unexpected death of Dr. Lothar Müller, in his sixtieth year of life.
Cerium (Il sistema periodica, 1975)

That I, a chemist, engaged in writing here my life as a chemist, lived a different experience, has been recounted elsewhere.

At a distance of thirty years, I find it difficult to reconstruct what sort of human specimen, in November of 1944, corresponded to my name, or, rather, my number: 174517. I must have overcome the harshest trial, that of inserting myself into the Lager system, and I must have developed a strange callousness, if I was then able not only to survive but also to think, to register the world around me, and even to undertake a fairly delicate job, in an environment infected by the daily presence of death and at the same time frenzied by the approach of the Russian liberators, who by now were within eighty kilometers of us. Despair and hope alternated in a rhythm that would have crushed any normal individual in an hour.

We were not normal because we were hungry. Our hunger at that time had nothing in common with the well-known (not entirely unpleasant) sensation of someone who has skipped a meal and is sure that he will not miss the next: it was a need, a lack, a yearning that had been with us for a year, had put down deep and permanent roots in us, lived in all our cells and conditioned our behavior. To eat, to get food, was the primary stimulus, which was followed, at a great distance, by all the other problems of survival, and, even farther back, memories of home and the very fear of death.

I was a chemist in a chemical factory, in a chemical laboratory (this, too, has been recounted), and I stole in order to eat. If you don’t start as a child, learning to steal isn’t easy; it took several months for me to repress the moral commandments and acquire the necessary techniques, and at a certain point I realized (with a flash of laughter and a pinch of satisfied ambition) that I was reliving, I a respectable university graduate, the involution-evolution of a famous respectable dog, a Victorian and Darwinian dog who is deported and becomes a thief in order to live in his “Lager” of the Klondike, the great Buck, of Call of the Wild. I stole like him and like the foxes: on every favorable occasion, but with sly cunning and without exposing myself. I stole everything, except the bread of my companions.

In terms of substances that could be stolen with profit, that laboratory was virgin territory, all to be explored. There was gas and alcohol, banal and troublesome prey: many stole them, at various points of the worksite—the price was high and so was the risk, because liquids require containers. It’s the great problem of packaging, which every skilled chemist knows; the Heavenly Father also knew it, and resolved it brilliantly, for his part, with the cellular membranes, the eggshell, the multipart peel of the orange, and our skin, because in the end we,
too, are liquids. Now, at that time polyethylene didn’t exist; it would have been useful to me because it is flexible, light, and splendidly impermeable, but it is also a little too incorruptible, and not for nothing the Heavenly Father Himself, who, though a master of polymerization, refrained from patenting it—He doesn’t like incorruptible things.

In the absence of suitable packaging and boxes, the ideal thing to steal should be, therefore, solid, not perishable, not bulky, and above all new. It had to be of a high unit value, that is, not voluminous, because often we were searched at the entrance to the camp after work; and it had finally to be useful to or desired by at least one of the social categories that made up the complex universe of the Lager.

I had made various attempts in the laboratory. I had stolen a few hundred grams of fatty acids, with difficulty obtained through the oxidation of paraffin by some colleague on the other side of the barricade: I had eaten half, and it had truly sated my hunger, but the taste was so unpleasant that I gave up on selling the rest. I had tried to make pancakes with cotton wool, which I pressed against the plate of an electric stove; they had a vague taste of burned sugar, but they were so unsightly that I did not judge them to be salable. As for selling the cotton directly to the infirmary in the Lager, I tried that once, but it was too bulky and had little value. I also tried to ingest and digest glycerin, relying on the simplistic reasoning that, as a product of the splitting of fats, it must surely in some way be metabolized and provide calories: and perhaps it did provide them, but at the cost of disagreeable side effects.

There was a mysterious jar on a shelf. It contained twenty small gray, hard, colorless, tasteless cylinders, and it didn’t have a label. This was very strange, because it was a German laboratory. Yes, of course, the Russians were a few kilometers away, and catastrophe was in the air, almost visible; every day there were bombing raids; everyone knew that the war was about to be over. But, finally, some constants must endure, and among these was our hunger, and the fact that the laboratory was German, and that the Germans never forget labels. In fact, all the other jars and bottles in the laboratory had clear labels, typewritten, or written by hand in beautiful Gothic lettering: that alone did not have one.

In the situation, I certainly did not have available the equipment or the peace and quiet needed to identify the nature of the cylinders. Anyway, I hid three in my pocket and at night brought them back to the camp. They were perhaps twenty-five millimeters long and had a diameter of four or five.

I showed them to my friend Alberto. Alberto took a knife out of his pocket and tried to cut into one: it was hard, and resisted the blade. He tried scraping it: we heard a small squeak and a sheaf of yellow sparks burst forth. At this point the diagnosis was easy: it was ferrocerium, the alloy used for common flints in cigarette lighters. Why were they so big? Alberto, who for several weeks had worked as a laborer with a team of solderers, explained that they were mounted on the tips of oxyacetylene torches, to light the flame. At this point I felt skeptical about the commercial possibilities of my stolen goods: maybe they could be used to light a fire, but in the camp (illegal) matches were certainly not in short supply.
Alberto reproached me. For him, giving up, pessimism, despair were abominable and culpable. He did not accept the concentration-camp universe, he rejected it with his instinct and his reason, he would not let himself be polluted. He was a man of strong goodwill, and had miraculously remained free, and his words and actions were free: he had not lowered his head, had not bowed his back. A gesture of his, a word, a laugh had liberating virtues, were a hole in the stiff fabric of the Lager, and all who came near him realized it, even those who didn’t understand his language. I believe that no one, in that place, was more loved than he.

He reproached me: one must never be discouraged; it’s harmful, and hence immoral, almost indecent. I had stolen the cerium: well, now it was a matter of selling it, promoting it. He would see to that, he would turn it into a novelty, an article of high commercial value. Prometheus had been foolish to give men fire rather than sell it: he would have made money, placated Jove, and avoided the trouble with the vulture.

We had to be more astute. This topic, the need to be astute, was not new between us. Alberto had often discussed it with me, and before him others in the free world, and still others repeated it to me later on, innumerable times, up until today, with modest results; indeed, with the paradoxical result of developing in me a dangerous tendency toward symbiosis with an authentically astute person, who would get (or consider that he had got) temporal or spiritual advantages from living with me. Alberto was an ideal symbiont, because he refrained from exercising his astuteness to my detriment. I didn’t know, but he did (he always knew everything about everyone, and yet he had neither German nor Polish and very little French), that there existed a clandestine lighter industry at the worksite: unknown craftsmen, in their spare time, made lighters for the important people and the civilian workers. Now, for lighters flints are needed, and need to be a certain size: we would therefore have to make those I had in hand thinner. Make them thinner by how much, and how? “Don’t create difficulties,” he said. “I’ll take care of it. You take care of stealing the rest.”

I had no trouble following Alberto’s advice the next day. Around ten in the morning, the sirens of the Fliegeralarm, the air-raid warning, broke out. It was nothing new by now, but every time it happened we felt—we and everyone else—stricken to the core by anguish. It was not an earthly sound, not like a factory siren, but a sound of tremendous volume that, simultaneously throughout the entire area, and rhythmically, rose to a spasmodic high note and descended to a rumbling of thunder. It couldn’t have been an accidental discovery, because nothing in Germany was accidental, and, besides, it was too consistent with the purpose and the setting: I have often thought it was elaborated by an evil musician, who had put into it fury and lament, the wolf’s howl at the moon and the typhoon’s breath; the horn of Astolfo must have had such a sound. It caused panic, not only because it was announcing bombs but also because of its intrinsic horror, like the wail of a wounded beast that reaches as far as the horizon.

The Germans were more afraid than we were of the bomb attacks: we, irrationally, weren’t afraid because we knew they were directed not against us but against our enemies. In seconds I was alone in the laboratory; I put all the cerium in my pockets and went outside to join my Kommando. The sky was already filled with the buzzing of the bombers, and falling from them, fluttering softly, yellow leaflets that bore atrocious words of mockery:
Im Bauch kein Fett,

Acht Uhr ins Bett;

Der Arsch kaum warm,

Fliegeralarm!

In your belly no fat,

At eight you go to bed;

When your ass is warm,

Air-raid alarm!

We were not allowed to enter the air-raid shelters: we gathered in the vast spaces that had not yet been built up, on the periphery of the worksite. As the bombs began to fall, and I lay on the frozen mud and sparse grass, fingerling the cylinders in my pocket, I reflected on the strangeness of my destiny, of our destinies as leaves on a branch, and of human destinies in general. According to Alberto, a flint for a lighter was worth a ration of bread, that is, a day of life; I had stolen at least forty cylinders, from each of which could be made three finished flints. In total, a hundred and twenty flints, two months of life for me and two for Alberto, and in two months the Russians would have arrived and liberated us: and in the end the cerium would have liberated us. It was an element that I knew nothing about, apart from its single practical application, and that it belongs to the equivocal and heretical family of the rare earth elements, and that its name has nothing to do with wax, and evokes not its discoverer but, rather (great modesty of the chemists of the past!), the dwarf planet Ceres, the metal and the star having been discovered in the same year, 1801. And perhaps this was an affectionate and ironic homage to alchemical coupling: as the Sun was gold and Mars iron, so Ceres had to be cerium.

At night I brought out the cylinders, Alberto a piece of metal with a round hole in it: this was the stipulated caliber to which we would have to trim the cylinders in order to transform them into flints and hence into bread.

What followed should be judged with caution. Alberto said that we had to reduce the cylinders by scraping them with a knife, secretly, so that no competitor could steal the secret. When? At night. Where? In the wooden barrack where we slept, under the covers and on top of our pallets filled with shavings; that is, we risked starting a fire and, more realistically, risked hanging, since this was the punishment to which those who, among other things, lit a match in the barracks were sentenced.

One always hesitates to judge rash actions, one’s own or others’, after these have had a good outcome: perhaps they were not, then, so rash? Or perhaps it’s true that there is a God who protects children, fools, and drunkards? Or perhaps again such actions have more weight and
heat than the innumerable actions that come to a bad end, and so are recounted more willingly? But we did not then pose these questions: the Lager had given us a crazy familiarity with danger and with death, and to risk the noose for more to eat seemed to us a logical choice, indeed obvious.

While our companions slept, we worked with our knives, night after night. The scene was so grim you could weep: a single electric bulb weakly illumined the big wooden shed, and in the shadowy light, as in a vast cavern, the faces of our companions were visible, overcome by sleep and by dreams: tinged with death, they wiggled their jaws, in dreams of eating. Many had a bare, skeletal arm or leg hanging off the edge of their pallet; others groaned or talked in their sleep.

But the two of us were alive and did not succumb to sleep. We kept the blanket raised with our knees, and under that improvised tent we scraped the cylinders blindly, by feel; at every cut a faint squeak could be heard, and a sheaf of tiny yellow stars could be seen rising. At intervals, we tested the cylinder to see if it fit through the sample hole: if it didn’t, we continued to scrape; if it did, we broke off the pared-down trunk and put it carefully aside.

We worked for three nights; nothing happened, no one was aware of our activity, neither the covers nor the pallet caught fire, and in this way we won the bread that kept us alive until the Russians arrived, and took comfort in the trust and friendship that united us. What happened to me is written elsewhere. Alberto left on foot with the majority when the front was near: the Germans made them walk for days and nights in the snow and cold, killing all who could not continue; then they loaded them onto open train cars, which carried the few survivors to a new chapter of slavery, at Buchenwald and Mauthausen. No more than a quarter of those who left survived the march.

Alberto did not return, and of him no trace remains; for some years after the war ended, someone from his town, half visionary and half swindler, lived by peddling to his mother, for a price, false consoling news.
The Sonderkommandos of Auschwitz and the other death camps represent an extreme case of collaboration. I would hesitate to speak of privilege here: the members of the squads were privileged (but at what cost!) only in the sense that for a few months they got enough to eat, not because their situation was enviable. The SS used the duly vague title “Sonderkommando,” or Special Squad, to indicate the group of inmates assigned to operate the crematoriums. Their duties were to maintain order among the new arrivals (often unaware of the fate awaiting them) who were to be herded into the gas chambers; remove the corpses from the chambers; extract gold teeth from their jaws; shear off the women’s hair; sort and classify clothing, shoes, and the contents of the baggage; transport the bodies to the crematoriums; supervise the operation of the ovens; and remove and dispose of the ashes. The Sonderkommando at Auschwitz numbered between seven hundred and one thousand units, depending on the period.

The Sonderkommandos did not escape the common fate. On the contrary, the SS was extremely diligent in making sure that none of them would live to tell. At Auschwitz there was a succession of twelve squads. Each one operated for a few months, then was slaughtered, each time with a different ruse to prevent possible resistance, and the next squad, for its initiation, would cremate the corpses of its predecessors. In October 1944, the last squad rebelled against the SS, blew up one of the crematoriums, and was exterminated in the unequal fight that I will describe below. Consequently, there were very few Sonderkommando survivors, and those few escaped death by some unpredictable twist of fate. None of them spoke willingly after liberation, and none speak willingly now, about their horrifying situation. The information we do have about the Sonderkommandos derives from various sources: the spare depositions of those who survived; the admissions of their “bosses” during trials before various courts; allusions contained in depositions by German or Polish “civilians” who had chance encounters with the squads; and, finally, the pages of diaries that some of them scribbled furiously for future memory and buried with extreme care in the vicinity of the Auschwitz crematoriums. While all of these sources concur, it is difficult, almost impossible, for us to construct a picture of how the men lived day to day, how they saw themselves, and how they accepted their condition.

At first, they were selected by the SS from among the prisoners already registered, and according to testimony the selection was based not only on their physical strength but also on a thorough examination of their physiognomy. In rare cases, a prisoner was inducted as punishment. At a later stage, the preferred method was to take the candidates directly from the station platform, the moment the trains arrived. The SS “psychologists” realized that it would be easier to recruit from among these desperate and disoriented people, exhausted by the journey and drained of resistance, at the crucial moment of stepping off the train, when every new arrival truly felt that he was on the threshold of a dark, terrifying, and unearthly place.

The Sonderkommandos were for the most part made up of Jews. In one sense, there is nothing surprising about this, since the main purpose of the Lagers was to destroy the Jews, and, from 1943 on, the population of Auschwitz was 90 to 95 percent Jewish. In another sense, this paroxysm of perfidy and hatred is astonishing: it had to be Jews who put Jews in the ovens, in order to prove that Jews, the subrace, the subhumans, would submit to any humiliation, even their own destruction. At the same time, there has been testimony that not every SS officer
willingly accepted mass murder as a daily chore; assigning part of the work—the dirtiest part, to be exact—to the victims themselves was supposed to help relieve some consciences (and probably did).

Of course, it would be unjust to attribute this acquiescence to a specifically Jewish characteristic: the ranks of the Sonderkommandos also included non-Jewish prisoners, Germans and Poles, but with “more dignified” assignments as Kapos; and Russian prisoners of war, whom the Nazis considered only one rung above the Jews. There were not many, because at Auschwitz there were not many Russians (for the most part, they were exterminated immediately after capture, machine-gunned on the edge of enormous common graves), but they did not behave differently from the Jews.

The Sonderkommandos, as bearers of a horrendous secret, were kept strictly separate from the other prisoners and from the outside world. Nevertheless, as anyone who has been through similar experiences knows, there are always cracks in barriers. News, no matter how incomplete and distorted it may be, has an enormous power of penetration, and some piece of it always trickles through. Vague and incomplete rumors about the squads were already circulating among us during our imprisonment, and they were later confirmed by the sources mentioned above. The intrinsic horror of this human condition, however, has imposed a kind of restraint on all testimony. So it is still difficult today to construct an image of what it meant to be forced to do this job for months. Some people have testified that a great deal of alcohol was made available to those poor wretches, and that they were in a permanent state of total brutishness and prostration. One of them asserted, “To do this job, either you go crazy on the first day or you get used to it.” Another, instead, “Of course, I could have killed myself or let myself be killed,

but I wanted to live, to avenge myself and to bear witness. You mustn’t think we’re monsters: we’re like you, only much more unhappy.”

These statements, and the countless others that they must have made or shared with one another but that have not come down to us, cannot be taken literally. From men who have known this extreme destitution one cannot expect a deposition in the legal sense of the term but, rather, something between a complaint, a curse, atonement, and the impulse to justify, to rehabilitate oneself. What should be expected is a liberating outburst rather than truth with the face of Medusa.

Envisioning and organizing the squads was National Socialism’s most diabolical crime. Behind the pragmatic considerations (economizing on able-bodied men, forcing others to do the most atrocious jobs), more subtle ones can be detected. Through this institution, the attempt was made to shift the burden of guilt to others, that is, to the victims, so that not even the awareness that they were innocent was left to bring them relief. It is neither easy nor pleasant to plumb the depths of this evil, but I think it has to be done, because what was perpetrated yesterday could be attempted again tomorrow, and could involve us or our children. There is a temptation to turn away and to distract the mind: it is a temptation that must be resisted. In fact, the existence of the Sonderkommandos had a meaning and contained a message: “We, the Lord’s people, are your destroyers, but you are no better than us; if we want to, and we do, we are capable of destroying not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed our own.”
Miklos Nyiszli, a Hungarian doctor, was one of the few survivors of the last Sonderkommando at Auschwitz. He was a well-known anatomical pathologist, an expert on autopsies. The chief physician of the SS at Birkenau, the same Josef Mengele who died not many years ago, escaping justice, procured his services, giving him favorable treatment and considering him almost a colleague. Nyiszli was supposed to dedicate himself specifically to the study of twins: in fact, Birkenau was the only place in the world where it was possible to examine the corpses of twins who had been killed simultaneously. In addition to this special assignment, which, incidentally, he does not appear to have opposed very resolutely, Nyiszli was the physician for the Sonderkommando, with which he lived in close contact. He relates an episode that I find telling.

The SS, as I have said, chose the candidates for the squads carefully from the Lagers and the arriving trains, and did not hesitate to slaughter on the spot anyone who refused or who proved to be unfit for the assignment. They behaved in the same contemptuous and detached way toward the new recruits as they did toward all the inmates,

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Nothing of this kind ever took place, nor would it have been conceivable, with other categories of prisoners; but with them, the “crematorium crows,” the SS soldiers could take the field as equals, or almost. Behind this armistice one can see a Satanic smile: it has been consummated, we have succeeded, you are no longer the other race, the anti-race, the primary enemy of the Thousand Year Reich; you are no longer the people who reject idols. We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us. Now you are like us, you who are so proud: smeared with the blood of your people, like us. Like us and like Cain, you have murdered your brother. Come, now we can play together.

Nyiszli relates another episode that should give us pause. The travelers on a newly arrived train have been crammed into the gas chamber and killed, and the Squad is performing its ghoulish daily chores, sorting the pile of bodies, washing them down with hoses, and transporting them to the crematorium, when on the floor they find a young girl who is still alive. The event is exceptional, unique. Maybe the human bodies formed a barrier around her and sequestered a pocket of air that remained breathable. The men are in a quandary. Death is their job around the clock, a habit, since “either you go crazy the first day or you get used to it.” But the girl is alive. They hide her, warm her, bring her beef broth, ask her questions. She is sixteen years old. She has lost her sense of time and space. She doesn’t know where she is, and she endured without understanding the procedure of the sealed boxcar, the brutal preliminary selection, the stripping of clothes, and entrance into the chamber from which no one had ever come out alive. She did not understand, but she did see, so she has to die, and the men of the Squad know this, just as they know that they, too, will have to die, and for the same reason. But these slaves, brutalized by alcohol and daily slaughter, are transformed. Before them is not the anonymous mass, the river of frightened, stunned people getting off the trains: before them is a person.

This episode is reminiscent of the scene in Manzoni’s The Betrothed when even the “vile gravedigger” shows “unusual respect” and hesitation before a singular case, the refusal by the mother of Cecilia, a little girl who has died of the plague, to allow her daughter’s body to be thrown into the wagon and jumbled up with the other corpses. Such events astonish us because they contradict the image we harbor of man in harmony with himself, coherent, monolithic; and they should not astonish us, because man is not like that. Against all logic, compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual at the same time; anyway, compassion is not logical.
There is no proportionality between the compassion we feel and the dimensions of the sorrow that gives rise to compassion. A single Anne Frank arouses more emotion than the myriad others who suffered like her but whose images have remained in the shadows. Maybe things are this way out of necessity; if we had to and could suffer the suffering of everybody, we would be unable to live. Maybe saints are the only ones who have been granted the terrible gift of compassion toward the many. What remains for the gravediggers, the Sonderkommandos, and all of us, in the best of cases, is the occasional feeling of compassion toward the individual, the Mitmensch, our fellow man: the flesh-and-blood human being who stands before us, within reach of our providentially myopic senses.

A doctor is summoned and revives the girl with an injection. No, the gas had not achieved its effect, yes, she will be able to survive, but where and how? At that moment Muhsfeld, one of the SS officers assigned to the machinery of death, arrives. The doctor takes him aside and explains the situation. Muhsfeld hesitates, then makes his decision. The girl has to die. If she were older the situation would be different, it would make more sense. Maybe she could be persuaded to keep quiet about what has happened to her, but she is only sixteen: she can’t be trusted. But he does not kill her by his own hand; he summons a subordinate, who kills her with a shot to the nape of the neck. Now, this Muhsfeld was not a merciful man; his daily ration of slaughter was punctuated by arbitrary and capricious episodes, and he stood out for the refined cruelty of his inventions. He was tried in 1947, sentenced to death, and hanged in Kraków, and this was just. But not even he was a monolith. Had he lived in a different place and time, he probably would have behaved like any other ordinary man.

In The Brothers Karamazov, Grushenka tells the tale of the scallion. A wicked old woman dies and goes to hell, but her guardian angel, thinking hard, remembers that once, only once, she had done a good deed by giving to a beggar a scallion that she pulled up in her garden. He holds out the scallion to her, and the old woman grabs it and is pulled away from the flames of hell. I have always found this tale repugnant: what human monster has never in his life given a scallion to another, if only to his children, his wife, or his dog? That single instant of compassion, immediately erased, is not enough, of course, to absolve Muhsfeld, but it is enough to place him, if only at the far end, within the gray area, that zone of ambiguity that emanates from regimes founded on terror and obsequiousness.

It is not hard to judge Muhsfeld, and I don’t think the court that sentenced him had any doubts. By contrast, our need and our ability to judge falter before the Sonderkommandos. Questions arise immediately, convulsive questions that are hard to answer in a way that reassures us about human nature. Why did they accept this job? Why didn’t they rebel? Why didn’t they prefer death?

To some extent, the facts at our disposal allow us to attempt a response. Not everyone did accept. Some rebelled, knowing they would die. We have accurate reports of at least one case: in July of 1944, a group of four hundred Jews from Corfu were inducted into the Squad; to a man, they rejected the assignment and were immediately sent to the gas chamber. The memories of various other single mutinies remain, all of which were instantly punished by an atrocious death (Filip Müller, one of the very few survivors of the Sonderkommandos, tells of a comrade whom the SS
threw into the oven while he was still alive). There were also many cases of suicide at the moment of induction or immediately afterward. Finally, we should remember that it was the Sonderkommando that organized, in October 1944, the only, desperate attempt at revolt in the history of the Auschwitz Lager.

The reports of the uprising that have come down to us are neither complete nor concordant. We know that the rebels (assigned to two of the five crematoriums at Auschwitz-Birkenau), who were poorly armed and had no contacts with the Polish partisans on the outside of the camps or with the underground defense organization on the inside, blew up crematorium No. 3 and battled the SS. The fight ended quickly. Some of the insurgents managed to cut the barbed wire and flee to the outside world, but they were captured soon afterward. None of them survived. Some four hundred and fifty were killed immediately by the SS; of the SS, three were killed and twelve wounded.

The ones we do know about, the miserable manual laborers of the slaughter, are therefore the others, the ones who occasionally preferred a few weeks more of life (and what a life) to instant death, but in no case did they force themselves, nor were they forced, to kill with their own hands. I repeat: I believe that no one has the authority to judge them, not those who experienced the Lager and, especially, not those who did not. I would invite anyone who dares to attempt judgment to undertake, with sincerity, a conceptual experiment: imagine, if you can, spending months or years in a ghetto, tormented by chronic hunger, by exhaustion, by forced proximity to others, and by humiliation; seeing your loved ones die around you, one after the other; being cut off from the world, unable to either send or receive news; in the end being loaded onto a train, eighty or a hundred per boxcar; traveling toward the unknown, blindly, for sleepless days and nights; and finally finding yourself cast within the walls of an indecipherable hell. At this point you are offered a chance for survival: you are given a proposal, or rather an order, to perform a gruesome but unspecified job. This, it seems to me, is the true Befehlnotstand, the “state of coercion following an order”: not the excuse invoked systematically and impudently by the Nazis at their trials and, later (in their footsteps), by war criminals from many other countries. The first situation is a rigid ultimatum: immediate obedience or death. The second, instead, occurs within the power center, and could be (and often was) resolved by corrective action, a stalled promotion, a moderate punishment, or, in the worst cases, by a transfer to the war front.

The experiment I have proposed is not pleasant. Vercors tried to portray it in his novella Les armes de la nuit (The Weapons of the Night), which talks about the “death of the soul,” and which, reread today, seems to me intolerably contaminated by aestheticism and literary prurience. Yet its theme is still undoubtedly the death of the soul. No one can know how long and what torments his soul can resist before crumpling or breaking. Every human being has reserves of strength whose measure he does not know; they may be large, small, or nonexistent, but the only means of assessing them is severe adversity. Even without invoking the extreme case of the Sonderkommandos, we survivors commonly find that when we talk about our experiences our listeners say, “In your place, I wouldn’t have lasted a day.” This statement has no precise meaning; you are never in someone else’s place. Each individual is an object so complex that it is useless to try to predict behavior, especially in extreme situations; we cannot even predict our own behavior. This is why I ask that the history of the “crematorium crows” be pondered with compassion and rigor, but that any judgment of them be suspended.