

companions. I spent only one night there, which I still remember as a nightmare; in the morning the corpses in the bunks or sprawling on the floor could be counted by the dozen.

The following day I was transferred to a smaller ward with only twenty bunks; I lay in one of these for three or four days, prostrated by a high fever, conscious only intermittently, incapable of eating, and tormented by thirst.

On the fifth day the fever had disappeared. I felt as light as a cloud, famished and frozen, but my head was clear, my eyes and ears felt as if purified by the enforced vacation, and I was able to re-establish contact with the world.

In the course of those few days a striking change had occurred around me. It was the last great sweep of the scythe, the closing of accounts; the dying were dead, in all the others life was beginning to flow again tumultuously. Outside the windows, despite the steady snowfall, the mournful roads of the camp were no longer deserted, but teemed with a brisk, confused and noisy ferment, which seemed to be an end in itself. Cheerful or wrathful calls, shouts and songs rang out till late at night. All the same, my attention, and that of my neighbours in the nearby beds, rarely managed to escape from the obsessive presence, the mortal power of affirmation of the smallest and most harmless among us, of the most innocent, of a child, of Hurbinek.

Hurbinek was a nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He looked about three years old, no one knew anything of him, he could not speak and he had no name; that curious name, Hurbinek, had been given to him by us, perhaps by one of the women who had interpreted with those syllables one of the inarticulate sounds that the baby let out now and again. He was paralysed from the waist down, with atrophied legs, as thin as sticks; but his eyes, lost in his triangular and wasted face, flashed terribly alive, full of demand, assertion, of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness.

The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency: it was a stare both savage and human, even mature, a judgement, which none of us could support, so heavy was it with force and anguish.

None of us, that is, except Henek; he was in the bunk next to me, a robust and hearty Hungarian boy of fifteen. Henek spent half his day beside Hurbinek's pallet. He was maternal rather than paternal; had our precarious coexistence lasted more than a month, it is extremely probable that Hurbinek would have learnt to speak from Henek; certainly better than from the Polish girls who, too tender and too vain, inebriated him with caresses and kisses, but shunned intimacy with him.

Henek, on the other hand, calm and stubborn, sat beside the little sphinx, immune to the distressing power he emanated; he brought him food to eat, adjusted his blankets, cleaned him with skilful hands, without repugnance; and he spoke to him, in Hungarian naturally, in a slow and patient voice. After a week, Henek announced seriously, but without a shadow of selfconsciousness, that Hurbinek 'could say a word'. What word? He did not know, a difficult word, not Hungarian: something like 'mass-klo', 'matisklo'. During the night we listened carefully: it was true, from Hurbinek's corner there occasionally came a sound, a word. It was not, admittedly, always exactly the same word, but it was certainly an articulated word; or better, several slightly different articulated words, experimental variations on a theme, on a root, perhaps on a name.

Hurbinek continued in his stubborn experiments for as long as he lived. In the following days everybody listened to him in silence, anxious to understand, and among us there were speakers of all the languages of Europe; but Hurbinek's word remained secret. No, it was certainly not a message, it was not a revelation; perhaps it was his name, if it had ever fallen to his lot to be given a name; perhaps (according to one

of our hypotheses) it meant 'to eat' or, 'bread'; or perhaps 'meat' in Bohemian, as one of us who knew that language maintained.

Hurbinek, who was three years old and perhaps had been born in Auschwitz and had never seen a tree; Hurbinek, who had fought like a man, to the last breath, to gain his entry into the world of men, from which a bestial power had excluded him; Hurbinek, the nameless, whose tiny forearm – even his – bore the tattoo of Auschwitz; Hurbinek died in the first days of March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine.

Henek was a good companion, and a perpetual source of surprise. His name too, like that of Hurbinek, was artificial: his real name, which was König, had been changed into Henek, a Polish diminutive for Henry, by the two Polish girls who, although at least ten years older than him, felt for Henek an ambiguous sympathy which soon turned into open desire.

Henek-König, alone of our microcosm of affliction, was neither ill nor convalescent; in fact he enjoyed splendid physical and spiritual health. He was of small stature and mild aspect, but he had the muscles of an athlete; he was affectionate and obliging towards Hurbinek and us, yet harboured sedate, sanguinary instincts. The Lager, a mortal trap, a 'bone-crusher' for the others, had been a good school for him; in a few months it had made of him a young carnivore, alert, shrewd, ferocious and prudent.

In the long hours we passed together he told me the chief events of his short life. He was born and lived on a farm in the middle of a wood in Transylvania, near the Rumanian border. On Sundays, he and his father often went to the woods, both with guns. Why with guns? To hunt? Yes, to hunt; but also to shoot at Rumanians. And why shoot at Rumanians? Because they are Rumanians, Henek explained