

## The Supper

We waited patiently for the darkness to fall. The sun had already slipped far beyond the hills. Deepening shadows, permeated with the evening mist, lay over the freshly ploughed hillsides and valleys, still covered with occasional patches of dirty snow; but here and there, along the sagging underbelly of the sky, heavy with rain clouds, you could still see a few rose-coloured streaks of sunlight.

A dark, gusty wind, heavy with the smells of the thawing, sour earth, tossed the clouds about and cut through your body like a blade of ice. A solitary piece of tar-board, torn by a stronger gust, rattled monotonously on a rooftop; a dry but penetrating chill was moving in from the fields. In the valley below, wheels clattered against rails and locomotives whined mournfully. Dusk was falling; our hunger was growing more and more terrible; the traffic along the highway had died down almost completely, only now and then the wind would waft a fragment of conversation, a coach-

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man's call, or the occasional rumble of a cow-drawn cart; the cows dragged their hooves lazily along the gravel. The clatter of wooden sandals on the pavement and the guttural laughter of the peasant girls hurrying to a Saturday night dance at the village were slowly fading in the distance.

The darkness thickened at last and a soft rain began to fall. Several bluish lamps, swaying to and fro on top of high lamp-posts, threw a dim light over the black, tangled tree branches reaching out over the road, the shiny sentry-shack roofs, and the empty pavement that glistened like a wet leather strap. The soldiers marched under the circle of lights and then disappeared again in the dark. The sound of their footsteps on the road were coming nearer.

And then the camp Kommandant's driver threw a searchlight beam on a passage between two blockhouses. Twenty Russian soldiers in camp stripes, their arms tied with barbed-wire behind their backs, were being led out of the washroom and driven down the embankment. The Block Elders lined them up along the pavement facing the crowd that had been standing there for many silent hours, motionless, bareheaded, hungry. In the strong glare, the Russians' bodies stood out incredibly clearly. Every fold, bulge or wrinkle in their clothing; the cracked soles in their worn-out boots; the dry lumps of brown clay stuck to the edges of their trousers; the thick seams along their crotches; the white thread showing on the blue stripe of their prison suits; their sagging buttocks; their stiff hands and bloodless fingers twisted in pain, with drops of dry blood at the joints; their swollen wrists where the skin had started turning blue from the rusty wire cutting into the flesh; their naked elbows, pulled back unnaturally and tied with another piece of wire—all this emerged out of the surrounding blackness as if carved in ice. The elongated shadows of the men fell across the road and the barbed-wire fences

glittering with tiny drops of water, and were lost on the hillside covered with dry, rustling grasses.

The Kommandant, a greying, sunburned man, who had come from the village especially for the occasion, crossed the lighted area with a tired but firm step and, stopping at the edge of the darkness, decided that the two rows of Russians were indeed a proper distance apart. From then on matters proceeded quickly, though maybe not quite quickly enough for the freezing body and the empty stomach that had been waiting seventeen hours for a pint of soup, still kept hot perhaps in the kettles at the barracks. 'This is a serious matter!' cried a very young Camp Elder, stepping out from behind the Kommandant. He had one hand under the lapel of his 'Custom made', fitted black jacket, and in the other hand he was holding a willow crop which he kept tapping rhythmically against the top of his high boots.

'These men—they are criminals! I reckon I don't have to explain... They are Communists! Herr Kommandant says to tell you that they are going to be punished properly, and what the Herr Kommandant says... Well boys, I tell you, you too had better be careful, eh?'

'*Los, los*, we have no time to waste,' interrupted the Kommandant, turning to an officer in an unbuttoned top-coat. He was leaning against the fender of his small Skoda automobile and slowly removing his gloves.

'This certainly shouldn't take long,' said the officer in the unbuttoned top-coat. He snapped his fingers, a smile at the corner of his mouth.

'*Ja*, and tonight the entire camp again will go without dinner!' shouted the young Camp Elder. 'The Block Elders will carry the soup back to the kitchen and... if even one cup is missing, you'll have to answer to me. Understand, boys?'

A long, deep sigh went through the crowd. Slowly,

slowly, the rear rows began pushing forward; the crowd near the road grew denser and a pleasant warmth spread along your back from the breath of the men pressing behind you, preparing to jump forward.

The Kommandant gave a signal and out of the darkness emerged a long line of S.S. men with rifles in their hands. They placed themselves neatly behind the Russians, each behind one man. You could no longer tell that they had returned from the labour Kommandos with us. They had had time to eat, to change to fresh, gala uniforms, and even to have a manicure. Their fingers were clenched tightly around their rifle butts and their fingernails looked neat and pink; apparently they were planning to join the local girls at the village dance. They cocked their rifles sharply, leaned the rifle butts on their hips and pressed the muzzles up against the clean-shaven napes of the Russians.

'*Achtung! Bereit, Feuer!*' said the Kommandant without raising his voice. The rifles barked, the soldiers jumped back a step to keep from being splattered by the shattered heads. The Russians seemed to quiver on their feet for an instant and then fell to the ground like heavy sacks, splashing the pavement with blood and scattered chunks of brain. Throwing their rifles over their shoulders, the soldiers marched off quickly. The corpses were dragged temporarily under the fence. The Kommandant and his retinue got into the Skoda; it backed up to the gate, snorting loudly.

No sooner was the greying, sunburned Kommandant out of sight than the silent crowd, pressing forward more and more persistently, burst into a shrieking roar, and fell in an avalanche on the blood-spattered pavement, swarming over it noisily. Then, dispersed by the Block Elders and the barracks chiefs called in for help from the camp, they scattered and disappeared one by one inside the blocks.

#### THIS WAY FOR THE GAS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

I had been standing some distance away from the place of execution so I could not reach the road. But the following day, when we were again driven out to work, a 'Muslimized' Jew from Estonia who was helping me haul steel bars tried to convince me all day that human brains are, in fact, so tender you can eat them absolutely raw.

#### A True Story

I felt certain I was going to die. I lay on a bare straw mattress under a blanket that stank of the dried-up excrement and pus of my predecessors. I was so weak I could not even scratch myself or chase away the fleas. Enormous bedsores covered my hips, buttocks, and shoulders. My skin, stretched tightly over the bones, felt red and hot, as from fresh sunburn. Disgusted by my own body, I found relief in listening to the groans of others. At times I thought I would suffocate from thirst. Then I would part my parched lips and, daydreaming of a brimming cup of cold water, fix a blank stare on the small fragment of empty sky that stretched outside the open window. It looked like rain, for an ash-grey smoke hovered low over the roof-tops. The tar was melting on the roofs and it glistened in the sun like quicksilver.

When the raw meat of my buttocks and back started turning to fire, I would roll over to my side on the rough straw mattress, and, resting my head on my fist, gaze up