

CHAPTER XX

The Underground

Oppression as intense as that under which we lived automatically provoked resistance. Our entire existence in the camp was marked by it. When the employees of "Canada" detoured items destined for Germany to the benefit of their fellow internees, it was resistance. When laborers at the spinning mills dared to slacken their working pace, it was resistance. When at Christmas we organized a little "festival" under the noses of our masters, it was resistance. When, clandestinely, we passed letters from one camp to another, it was resistance. When we endeavored, and sometimes with success, to reunite two members of the same family—for example, by substituting one internee for another in a gang of stretcher bearers—it was resistance.

These were the principal manifestations of our underground activity. It was not prudent to go further. Yet there were many acts of rebellion. One day a selectee wrested a revolver from an S.S. and started to beat him with it. Desperate courage certainly expressed this gesture, but it had no effect except to bring mass reprisals. The Germans held us all guilty; "collective responsibility" they called it. The beatings and the gas chamber explain, in part, why the history of the camp includes few open revolts, even when mothers were forced to surrender their children to death. In December, 1944, the Russian and Polish internees had been ordered to give up their babies. The order said they were to be "evacuated." Pitiful scenes followed: mothers distraught with grief hung crosses or improvised medals around the necks of their infants to be able to recognize them later.

They shed bitter tears and abandoned themselves to despair. But there was no rebellion, not even suicide.

But an organized underground thrived. It sought to express itself in countless ways—from the broadcast of a “spoken newspaper,” the sabotage practiced in the workshops devoted to war industries, and later to the destruction of the crematory oven by explosives.

The term “spoken newspaper” is perhaps presumptuous. We needed to disseminate war news that would help to bolster the morale of the internees. After solving technical problems of enormous difficulty, our friend L., thanks to the cooperation of the “Canada,” succeeded in constructing a little radio set! The radio was buried. Sometimes late at night a few trusted ones hurried out to listen to an Allied newscast. This news was then broadcast by word of mouth as fast as possible. The principal centers of our broadcasting were the latrines, which occupied the same “social” role that the washroom and the infirmary had in former times.

It was always interesting to observe the reactions of our overseers when such war news filtered to them, but hardly ever was it pleasant for us. The day after a heavy bombing of a German city, the Reich radio announced “reprisals.” Wherever else the Reich sought revenge, they took it first in our camp with a monstrous selection. As for the guards, the continued defeats of the Wehrmacht made them more and more suspicious, and they multiplied the controls and searches. Even the chiefs grew nervous and preoccupied. Occasionally, Dr Mengele even forgot to whistle his operatic airs.

Some of the resisters in the camp sought to get word of our desperate situation to the Allies. We hoped that the Royal Air Force or the Soviet aviators would appear to destroy the crematory ovens, and that this, at least, would check the rate of the extermination. A Czech internee, a former glazier and a militant leftist, did succeed in getting several reports to the Soviet Army.

There were some partisans in the region, and I understood that somehow they had established a contact with the camp. I

was told that the explosive later used to destroy the crematory ovens was furnished by these guerrillas.

The parcels of explosive were no larger than two packs of cigarettes and could be easily hidden in a blouse. But how did the explosive enter the camp?

I heard that Russian guerrillas, hidden in the mountains, sent several of their number to the environs of Auschwitz. They reached a man from Auschwitz who worked outside the camp and who belonged to our underground. Those prisoners who worked in the fields dug the parcels from the earth where they had been concealed, and smuggled them inside.

Why had the explosives been sent? The aim was clear to all underground members—to blow up the dreaded crematory.

A few of the little parcels did fall into the hands of the S.S. That was almost unavoidable, and it provoked a brutal reaction. The gallows were put into use and bodies hung from them every day. Whenever the Germans suspected anything, a frenzied order was given: “Search the place!” and a group of S.S. rushed into our barracks.

They took everything apart and prodded every square inch of the camp, seeking other explosives. In spite of every precaution they took, our underground continued to exist and to function. The members changed, for the Germans decimated us without knowing whether we were underground or not; but the ideal remained unchanged.

A young boy who only a day before had accepted a package from me swung on the gallows. One of my comrades, numb with fright, whispered to me, “Tell me, isn’t that the same boy who was in the infirmary yesterday?”

“No,” I replied. “I have never seen him before.”

That was the rule. Whoever fell was forgotten.

We were not heroes, and never claimed to be. We did not merit any Congressional Medals, Croix de Guerre, or Victoria Crosses. True, we undertook dangerous missions. But death and the so-called danger of death had a different meaning for us who lived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Death was always with us,

for we were always eligible for the daily selections. One nod might mean the end for any of us. To be late for roll call might mean only a slap in the face, or it might mean, if the S.S. became enraged, that he took out his Luger and shot you. As a matter of fact, the idea of death seeped into our blood. We would die, anyway, whatever happened. We would be gassed, we would be burned, we would be hanged, or we would be shot. The members of the underground at least knew that if they died, they would die fighting for something.

I have already mentioned that I served as a postbox for letters and parcels. One day I darted into the infirmary to slip a little package under the table. As I was doing this, an S.S. guard unexpectedly entered.

"What are you hiding there?" he inquired with a frown.

I think I grew white. I succeeded in taking hold of myself and replied, "I have just taken some cellulose. I'm putting the rest in order."

"Let's take a peek at this," cried the S.S., decidedly suspicious.

With trembling hands, I pulled a box of surgical dressings from under the table and showed it to him.

Luck was with me. He did not insist on going through the contents. He glared and went about his business. Had he searched the box, I should have been lost.

Often I had to accept letters or packages brought to me by inmates who were doing labor at the camp. The intermediary was always different. In order to be recognized, I wore a silk string around my throat, for a necklace. In turn, I had to pass on the letter or the package to a man carrying the same sign. Often I had to seek him in the washroom or on the road where the men were working.

In the beginning I did not know much of the nature of the enterprise in which I was participating. But I knew that I was doing something useful. That was enough to give me the strength. I was no longer prey to crises of depression. I even forced myself to eat enough to be able to fight on. To eat and not let oneself become enfeebled—that, too, was a way to resist.

We lived to resist and we resisted to live.

* * *

Dr Mitrovna, the surgeon in our hospital, was the first Russian woman I had ever met. I knew women from many countries, and I was anxious to learn about the women from the Soviet Union.

She was a powerful, buxom, dark-haired woman with expressive brown eyes that seemed to look right through you. She was a real doctor who was very fond of her patients and fought for them. When Dr Mengele selected a very sick woman for transfer to a "central hospital," she resisted tooth and nail, and firmly declared, "No, she is well. We will discharge her in three days." It was surprising that Mengele gave in.

She created an atmosphere of respect. Yet she was the most natural and warmhearted person I have ever known. No one had as great a capacity for work as this fifty-year-old woman. When she saw that I was white from fatigue and still labored on, she would say, "You could be a good Russian." That was the greatest praise she could offer.

When the Russians bombed the S.S. kitchens in Birkenau, many inmates were hurt. I watched her carefully: would she show favoritism toward her compatriots? She treated every one impartially and repeated the same caressing words to everyone: "*Charashov, charashov* (There, there)."

On Christmas Eve, she joined the festivities and danced with the nurses. Although she had no voice, she sang like a child, without self-consciousness. She told us that at home she had been fond of holidays because the food was always better. At the same time, we could see that she respected the religious spirit of her neighbors in the camp.

"We should remember this Christmas Eve in captivity," she told us. "People from all the nations of Europe are together and hoping for the same thing . . . freedom."

Later I met other Russian women: aggressive ones; and also

kind, gentle souls. From them I realized that Communism is like a religion to the Russian people. Perhaps their faith helped them to endure the difficulties of life in Auschwitz-Birkenau better than the other inmates.

Each time a patient had to be sent to the hospital at Camp F, Dr Mitrovna decided who should be the stretcher bearer. The first time I left the camp for this reason and the gates closed behind me, I began to cry. We were being followed by our guards, but the hated barbed wires were not so close. There was a little more space, and we could breathe freely. For these reasons it was worth anything to me to be chosen for this task.

It took fifteen minutes for the five of us to carry the sick women to the surgical barrack. There I saw another drama. The doctors saved many of the inmates through their surgery, and the Germans sent the patients straight to the gas chamber.

But the doctors played their roles with a calm dignity. I gazed about me in the operating room. The sight of the instruments and of the figures in white, and the smell of the ether reminded me of my husband and of our hospital in Cluj. I was lost in memories when suddenly someone whispered in my ear. "Don't move! No questions! Contact Jacques, French Stubendienst, in hospital Barrack 30."

I was surprised. How did they know that I belonged to the Underground? Then I realized—the silk necklace.

I had an order and I must carry it out. But how? I was in a strange hospital camp for men, and I was a woman.

Suddenly a nurse announced that Dr Mengele was nearby. The doctors tried to overcome their fright. There was a hubbub of excited voices.

"Hide the rubber gloves at once!"

"Open the door! He will smell the ether!"

I understood only too well. The good people had bought instruments and anaesthetics with their food rations. Now they had to hide everything if they did not want to be punished or even killed for being merciful.

Still the operation had to begin. The unfortunate woman on

the table cried out in pain. It seemed as if she would have to be operated on without an anaesthetic.

"Those German beasts," I cursed. "I must reach Barrack 30!"

I started to leave when I saw blankets on the stretcher.

Sick people wrapped in blankets were not a rare sight in the hospital camp. That was my solution.

I wrapped myself in one and ran out. Finally I found Jacques, the French male nurse, in Barrack 30. I told him that I had been ordered to go to him. He climbed to the top koia and took a small package from under a sick man's head.

"Give this to the glazier in your camp!" he commanded.

When I returned to the surgery barrack, my comrades were no longer there. The stretcher was gone. I ran to the camp entrance. The Russian doctor was arguing with the German. We had been in the men's camp for too long. And, I was absent.

When the Russian woman saw me coming with the blankets over my head, she understood. But she continued her dispute with the guard. "I told you that someone had taken away our blankets, and I sent this prisoner to bring them back. What is it that you cannot understand about it?" she argued.

She could only speak a little German; yet, perhaps, that saved us. A few Russian words, a few German words. Somehow the matter was settled. As we were hurrying back, I wondered when Mitrovna would ask for an explanation of where I had been. She asked nothing.

When we arrived at the camp I learned that the glazier had left! But the next day Jacques sent someone else, and I finally got rid of the parcel of explosive that had complicated my life so.

I wondered what Dr Mitrovna really thought. She could have told the guard that I had left the group without permission, and washed her hands of the whole affair. Instead, she had waited for me. Noticing that the blankets were missing from the stretcher, she had found a clever excuse, and saved me. She was, indeed, a good comrade.

I remember that I often saw the same worker who came to me

with packages, in deep discussion with her. I can assume, therefore, that she, too, was a member of the camp resistance. This brilliant, silent woman could have known that I, too, belonged to the Underground. Perhaps that is why she did not protest when I left the surgery at Camp F, and why she saved me from the German guard. We knew few others in the underground because, in case of exposure, it was safer that way. Actually, Dr Mitrovna may not have belonged. But there was something sterling in her character that made me believe she would have been with us—in everything.

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At about three o'clock in the afternoon, on October 7, 1944, a terrific explosion rocked the camp. The internees gazed at each other in stupefaction. Where the crematory was located an immense column of flames was rising. The news spread like wildfire. The crematory oven had exploded!

Caught napping, the Germans completely lost their heads. They ran in every direction, shouting orders and counter-orders. Obviously, they feared a revolt. Under the threats of their guns they made us return to our barracks.

But what had actually happened? I took advantage of the relative impunity which my infirmary blouse assured and left the hospital to sneak up to the kitchens. The latter were about ten yards from the camp entrance and looked out on the road to the crematories. It made an excellent observation post.

Several detachments of soldiers were already coming toward the camp, some in trucks, others on motorcycles. Then the infantry of the Wehrmacht arrived, followed by trucks with munitions. The soldiers surrounded the crematory and opened up with machine gun fire. I shuddered, why? A few scattered revolver shots replied. Was this a rebellion? A few more machine gun volleys and the Wehrmacht and S.S. stormed the place.

What had happened?

The resistance group of the Sonderkommando, the slaves of the gas chambers, had conceived a plan for blowing up the ovens. Through members of the Pasche group, they had procured a quantity of explosives, sufficient to carry out their project. But a number of things went wrong, and the explosion destroyed only one of the four buildings.

The revolt was organized by a young French Jew named David. Knowing that he was condemned to death anyway, since all members of the Sonderkommando were liquidated every three or four months, he decided to employ usefully what little time of life remained to him. It was he who had obtained the explosives and he who had hidden them. Then unforeseen events thwarted his plans.

The Germans advanced the date for the execution of the Sonderkommando. One day they gave them the order to be ready for transport and to leave the crematory building. The first group, about one hundred men, obeyed. But the second group protested. The attitude of these Sonderkommando, most of whom were robust, strapping fellows, became menacing. The few S.S. were so surprised that they prudently withdrew for orders and reinforcements. When they returned, one oven, which, in the meantime, had been crammed with explosives and sprinkled with gasoline, blew up. The rebels did not have time to blow up the other three. However, the Sonderkommando of the fourth oven took advantage of the disorder, cut the barbed wire, and succeeded in slipping out of camp. Some of the men were stopped, but the rest managed to escape.

In the battle that ensued, the Sonderkommando resisted ferociously. They had nothing but sticks, stones, and a few revolvers to fight against trained killers armed with automatic weapons. Four hundred and thirty were captured alive, including David, their chief, who was fatally wounded.

The retaliation was horrible. The S.S. made the prisoners get down on hands and knees. Two or three S.S. shot each in the nape of the neck with devilish precision. Those who raised their heads to see if their turns were near received twenty-five lashes

from the whip before being shot.

After this revolt, a number of reprisals followed in the camp. Beatings became more frequent, as did mass selections. Dr Mengele, angry, personally used his revolver to slaughter several selectees who tried to elude him. His subordinates followed his example. Until the next rain the soil of the camp was thick with blood.

As for the several hundred Sonderkommandos who had not taken part in the rebellion, they were shot in groups in the nearby forests. In this way, Dr Pasche, the French doctor in the Sonderkommando and an active member of the camp underground, perished. It was he who had furnished us with the data on the activity of the Sonderkommando. L., who saw him shortly before his death, told us with what exemplary courage he spoke of his approaching death.

Were we discouraged that the explosion should have been a failure? We were chagrined, of course; but that it could take place at all was proof that times were changing even in Auschwitz-Birkenau.