

PRIMO LEVI

**THE
DROWNED
AND
THE
SAVED**

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PREFACE

THE first news about the Nazi annihilation camps began to spread in the crucial year of 1942. They were vague pieces of information, yet in agreement with each other: they delineated a massacre of such vast proportions, of such extreme cruelty and such intricate motivation that the public was inclined to reject them because of their very enormity. It is significant that the culprits themselves foresaw this rejection well in advance: many survivors (among others, Simon Wiesenthal in the last pages of *The Murderers Are Among Us*) remember that the SS militiamen enjoyed cynically admonishing the prisoners:

However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be

believed: they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers.

Strangely enough, this same thought ("even if we were to tell it, we would not be believed") arose in the form of nocturnal dreams produced by the prisoners' despair. Almost all the survivors, orally or in their written memoirs, remember a dream which frequently recurred during the nights of imprisonment, varied in its detail but uniform in its substance: they had returned home and with passion and relief were describing their past sufferings, addressing themselves to a loved one, and were not believed, indeed were not even listened to. In the most typical (and cruelest) form, the interlocutor turned and left in silence. This is a theme to which we shall return, but at this point it is important to emphasize how both parties, victims and oppressors, had a keen awareness of the enormity and therefore the noncredibility of what took place in the Lagers—and, we may add here, not only in the Lagers, but in the ghettos, in the rear areas of the Eastern front, in the police stations, and in the asylums for the mentally handicapped.

Fortunately, things did not go as the victims feared and the Nazis hoped. Even the most perfect of organizations has its flaws, and Hitler's Germany, especially during the last months before the collapse, was far from being a perfect machine. Much material evidence of the mass exterminations was suppressed, or a more or less dextrous attempt was made to suppress it; in the autumn of 1944 the Nazis blew up the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz, but the ruins are still there, and despite the contortions of epigones it is difficult to justify their function by having

recourse to fanciful hypotheses. The Warsaw ghetto, after the famous insurrection in the spring of 1943, was razed to the ground; but thanks to the superhuman concern of a number of fighter-historians (historians of themselves!), in the rubble, often many meters deep, or smuggled beyond the wall, other historians would later rediscover the testimony of how the ghetto lived and died day by day. All the archives in the Lagers were burned during the final days of the war, truly an irremediable loss, so that even today there is discussion as to whether the victims were four, six, or eight million—although one still talks of millions. Before the Nazis had recourse to the gigantic multiple crematoria, the innumerable corpses of the victims, deliberately killed or worn down by hardship and illness, could have constituted evidence and somehow had to be made to disappear. The first solution, macabre to the point of making one hesitate to speak of it, had been simply to pile up the bodies, hundreds of thousands of bodies, in huge common graves, and this was done, in particular at Treblinka and other minor Lagers, and in the wake of the German army in Russia. This was a temporary solution decided upon with bestial insouciance when the German armies were winning on all fronts and final victory appeared certain: they would decide afterward what should be done, and in any case the victor is the master even of truth, can manipulate it as he pleases. Somehow the common graves would be justified; or made to disappear, or attributed to the Soviets (who, for that matter, proved at Katyn not to be lagging too far behind). But after Stalingrad there were second thoughts: best to erase everything immediately. The prisoners themselves were forced to exhume those pitiful remains and burn them on pyres in the open, as if so unusual an operation of such proportions could go completely unnoticed.

The SS command posts and the security services then took the greatest care to ensure that no witness survived. This is the meaning (it would be difficult to excogitate another) of the murderous and apparently insane transfers with which the history of the Nazi camps came to an end during the first months of 1945: the survivors of Maidanek to Auschwitz, those of Auschwitz to Buchenwald and Mauthausen, those of Buchenwald to Bergen-Belsen, the women of Ravensbrück to Schwerin. In short, everyone had to be snatched away from liberation, deported again to the heart of a Germany that was being invaded from the west and east. It did not matter that they might die along the way; what really mattered was that they should not tell their story. In fact, after having functioned as centers of political terror, then as death factories, and subsequently (or simultaneously) as immense, ever renewed reservoirs of slave labor, the Lagers had become dangerous for a moribund Germany because they contained the secret of the Lagers themselves, the greatest crime in the history of humanity. The army of ghosts that still vegetated in them was composed of *Geheimnisfräger*, the bearers of secrets who must be disposed of; the extermination plants, also very eloquent, having been destroyed, had to be moved to the interior, it was decided, in the absurd hope of still being able to lock those ghosts up in Lagers less threatened by the advancing fronts and to exploit their final ability to work, and in the other, less absurd hope that the torment of those Biblical marches would reduce their number. And in fact their number was appallingly reduced, yet some nevertheless had the luck or the strength to survive and remained to bear witness.

Less well known and less studied is the fact that many bearers of secrets were also on the other side, although many knew little and few knew everything. No one will

ever be able to establish with precision how many, in the Nazi apparatus, could *not not know* about the frightful atrocities being committed, how many knew something but were in a position to pretend that they did not know, and, further, how many had the possibility of knowing everything but chose the more prudent path of keeping their eyes and ears (and above all their mouths) well shut. Whatever the case, since one cannot suppose that the majority of Germans lightheartedly accepted the slaughter, it is certain that the failure to divulge the truth about the Lagers represents one of the major collective crimes of the German people and the most obvious demonstration of the cowardice to which Hitlerian terror had reduced them: a cowardice which became an integral part of mores and so profound as to prevent husbands from telling their wives, parents their children. Without this cowardice the greatest excesses would not have been carried out, and Europe and the world would be different today.

Without a doubt those who knew the horrible truth because they were (or had been) responsible had compelling reasons to remain silent; but inasmuch as they were depositories of the secret, even by keeping silent they could not always be sure of remaining alive, witness the case of Stangl and the other Treblinka butchers, who after the insurrection there and the dismantling of that Lager were transferred to one of the most dangerous Partisan areas.

Willed ignorance and fear also led many potential "civilian" witnesses of the infamies of the Lagers to remain silent. Especially during the last years of the war, the Lagers constituted an extensive and complex system which profoundly penetrated the daily life of the country; one has with good reason spoken of the *univers concentrationnaire*, but it was not a closed universe. Small and large industrial com-

panies, agricultural combines, agencies, and arms factories drew profits from the practically free labor supplied by the camps. Some exploited the prisoners pitilessly, accepting the inhuman (and also stupid) principle of the SS according to which one prisoner was worth another, and if the work killed him he could immediately be replaced; others, a few, cautiously tried to alleviate their sufferings. Still other industries—or perhaps the same ones—made money by supplying the Lagers themselves: lumber, building materials, cloth for the prisoners' striped uniforms, dehydrated vegetables for the soup, etc. The crematoria ovens themselves were designed, built, assembled, and tested by a German company, Topf of Witsbaden (it was still in operation in 1975, building crematoria for civilian use, and had not considered the advisability of changing its name). It is hard to believe that the personnel of these companies did not realize the significance of the quality or quantity of the merchandise and installations being commissioned by the SS command units. The same can be, and has been, said with regard to the supplies of the poison employed in the gas chambers at Auschwitz: the product, substantially hydrocyanic acid, had already been used for many years for pest control in the holds of boats, but the abrupt increase in orders beginning with 1942 could scarcely go unnoticed. It must have aroused doubts, and certainly did, but they were stifled by fear, the desire for profit, the blindness and willed stupidity that we have mentioned, and in some cases (probably few) by fanatical Nazi obedience.

It is natural and obvious that the most substantial material for the reconstruction of truth about the camps is the memories of the survivors. Beyond the pity and indignation these recollections provoke, they should also be read with a critical eye. For knowledge of the Lagers, the Lagers themselves

were not always a good observation post: in the inhuman conditions to which they were subjected, the prisoners could barely acquire an overall vision of their universe. The prisoners, above all those who did not understand German, might not even know where in Europe their Lager was situated, having arrived after a slaughterous and tortuous journey in sealed boxcars. They did not know about the existence of other Lagers, even those only a few kilometers away. They did not know for whom they worked. They did not understand the significance of certain sudden changes in conditions, or of the mass transfers. Surrounded by death, the deportee was often in no position to evaluate the extent of the slaughter unfolding before his eyes. The companion who worked beside him today was gone by the morrow; he might be in the hut next door, or erased from the world; there was no way to know. In short, the prisoner felt overwhelmed by a massive edifice of violence and menace but could not form for himself a representation of it because his eyes were fixed to the ground by every single minute's needs.

This deficiency conditioned the oral or written testimonies of the "normal" prisoners, those not privileged, who represented the core of the camps and who escaped death only by a combination of improbable events. They were the majority in the Lager, but an exiguous minority among the survivors: among them, those who during their imprisonment enjoyed some sort of privilege are much more numerous. At a distance of years one can today definitely affirm that the history of the Lagers has been written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, never fathomed them to the bottom. Those who did so did not return, or their capacity for observation was paralyzed by suffering and incomprehension.

On the other hand, the "privileged" witnesses could avail themselves of a certainly better observatory, if only because it was higher up and hence took in a more extensive horizon; but it was to a greater or lesser degree also falsified by the privilege itself. The discussion concerning privilege (not only in the Lager) is delicate, and I shall try to go into it later with the greatest possible objectivity. Here I will only mention the fact that the privileged par excellence, that is, those who acquired privilege for themselves by becoming subservient to the camp authority, did not bear witness at all, for obvious reasons, or left incomplete or distorted or totally false testimony. Therefore the best historians of the Lagers emerged from among the very few who had the ability and luck to attain a privileged observatory without bowing to compromises, and the skill to tell what they saw, suffered, and did with the humility of a good chronicler, that is, taking into account the complexity of the Lager phenomenon and the variety of human destinies being played out in it. It was in the logic of things that these historians should almost all be political prisoners: because the Lagers were a political phenomenon; because the political prisoners, much more than the Jews and the criminals (as we know, the three principal categories of prisoners), disposed of a cultural background which allowed them to interpret the events they saw; and because, precisely inasmuch as they were ex-combatants or antifascist combatants even now, they realized that testimony was an act of war against fascism; because they had easier access to statistical data; and lastly, because often, besides holding important positions in the Lager, they were members of the secret defense organization. At least during the final years, their living conditions were tolerable, which permitted them, for example, to write and preserve notes, an unthinkable lux-

ury for the Jews and a possibility of no interest to the criminals.

For all the reasons touched on here, the truth about the Lagers has come to light down a long road and through a narrow door, and many aspects of the *univers concentrationnaire* have yet to be explored in depth. By now more than forty years have passed since the liberation of the Nazi Lagers; this considerable interval has, for the purposes of clarification, led to conflicting results, which I will try to enumerate.

In the first place, there has been the decanting, a desirable and normal process, thanks to which historical events acquire their chiaroscuro and perspective only some decades after their conclusion. At the end of World War II, quantitative data on the Nazi deportations and massacres, in the Lagers and elsewhere, had not been acquired, nor was it easy to understand their import and specificity: For only a few years now has one begun to understand that the Nazi slaughter was dreadfully "exemplary" and that, if nothing worse happens in the coming years, it will be remembered as the central event, the scourge, of this century.

By contrast, the passage of time has as a consequence other historically negative results. The greater part of the witnesses, for the defense and the prosecution, have by now disappeared, and those who remain, and who (overcoming their remorse or, alternately, their wounds) still agree to testify, have ever more blurred and stylized memories, often, unbeknownst to them, influenced by information gained from later readings or the stories of others. In some cases, naturally, the lack of memory is simulated, but the many years that have gone by make it credible: Also, the "I don't know" or "I did not know" spoken today by many

Germans no longer shocks us, as it did or should have when events were recent.

Of another or further stylization we are ourselves responsible, we survivors, or, more precisely, those among us who have decided to live our condition as survivors in the simplest and least critical way. This does not mean that ceremonies and celebrations, monuments and flags are always and everywhere to be deplored. A certain dose of rhetoric is perhaps indispensable for the memory to persist. That sepulchres, "the urns of the strong," kindle souls to perform lofty deeds, or at least preserve the memory of accomplished deeds, was true in Foscolo's time and is still true today; but one must beware of oversimplifications. Every victim is to be mourned, and every survivor is to be helped and pitied, but not all their acts should be set forth as examples. The inside of the Lager was an intricate and stratified microcosm; the "gray zone" of which I shall speak later, that of the prisoners who in some measure, perhaps with good intentions, collaborated with the authority, was not negligible. Indeed, it constituted a phenomenon of fundamental importance for the historian, the psychologist, and the sociologist. There is not a prisoner who does not remember this and who does not remember his amazement at the time: the first threats, the first insults, the first blows came not from the SS but from other prisoners, from "colleagues," from those mysterious personages who nevertheless wore the same striped tunic that they, the new arrivals, had just put on. This book means to contribute to the clarification of some aspects of the Lager phenomenon which still appear obscure. It also sets itself a more ambitious goal, to try to answer the most urgent question, the question which torments all those who have happened to read our accounts: How much of the concentration camp world is

dead and will not return, like slavery and the dueling code? How much is back or is coming back? What can each of us do so that in this world pregnant with threats at least this threat will be nullified?

I did not intend, nor would I have been able, to do a historian's work, that is, exhaustively examine the sources. I have almost exclusively confined myself to the National Socialist Lagers because I had direct experience only of these; I also have had copious indirect experience of them, through books read, stories listened to, and encounters with the readers of my first two books. Besides, up to the moment of this writing, and notwithstanding the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the shame of the Gulags, the useless and bloody Vietnam War, the Cambodian self-genocide, the *desaparecidos* of Argentina, and the many atrocious and stupid wars we have seen since, the Nazi concentration camp system still remains a *unicum*, both in its extent and its quality. At no other place or time has one seen a phenomenon so unexpected and so complex: never have so many human lives been extinguished in so short a time, and with so lucid a combination of technological ingenuity, fanaticism, and cruelty. No one wants to absolve the Spanish conquistadors of the massacres perpetrated in the Americas throughout the sixteenth century. It seems they brought about the death of at least sixty million Indios; but they acted on their own, without or against the directives of their government, and they diluted their misdeeds—not very "planned" to tell the truth—over an arc of more than one hundred years, and they were also helped by the epidemics that they inadvertently brought with them. And, finally, have we not tried to dispose of them by declaring that they were "things of another time"?

1

THE MEMORY OF THE OFFENSE

HUMAN memory is a marvelous but fallacious instrument. This is a threadbare truth known not only to psychologists but also to anyone who has paid attention to the behavior of those who surround him, or even to his own behavior. The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even grow, by incorporating extraneous features. Judges know this very well: almost never do two eyewitnesses of the same event describe it in the same way and with the same words, even if the event is recent and if neither of them has a personal interest in distorting it. This scant reliability of our memories will be satisfactorily explained only when we know in what language, in what alphabet they are written, on what surface, and with what pen: to this day we are still far from this goal. Some mechanisms are known which falsify memory under particular conditions: traumas, not only cerebral ones; interference from other "competitive" memories; abnormal conditions of consciousness; repressions; blockages.

Nevertheless, even under normal conditions a slow degradation is at work, an obfuscation of outlines, a so to speak physiological oblivion, which few memories resist. Doubtless one may discern here one of the great powers of nature, the same that degrades order into disorder, youth into old age, and extinguishes life in death. Certainly practice (in this case, frequent re-evocation), keeps memories fresh and alive in the same manner in which a muscle often used remains efficient, but it is also true that a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallized, perfected, adorned, installing itself in the place of the raw memory and growing at its expense.

I intend to examine here the memories of extreme experiences, of injuries suffered or inflicted. In this case, all or almost all the factors that can obliterate or deform the mnemonic record are at work: the memory of a trauma suffered or inflicted is itself traumatic because recalling it is painful or at least disturbing. A person who has been wounded tends to block out the memory so as not to renew the pain; the person who has inflicted the wound pushes the memory deep down, to be rid of it, to alleviate the feeling of guilt.

Here, as with other phenomena, we are dealing with a paradoxical analogy between victim and oppressor, and we are anxious to be clear: both are in the same trap, but it is the oppressor, and he alone, who has prepared it and activated it, and if he suffers from this, it is right that he should suffer; and it is iniquitous that the victim should suffer from it, as he does indeed suffer from it, even at a distance of decades. Once again it must be observed, mournfully, that the injury cannot be healed: it extends through time, and the Furies, in whose existence we are forced to believe, not

only rack the tormentor (if they do rack him, assisted or not by human punishment), but perpetuate the tormentor's work by denying peace to the tormented. It is not without horror that we read the words left us by Jean Améry, the Austrian philosopher tortured by the Gestapo because he was active in the Belgian resistance and then deported to Auschwitz because he was Jewish:

Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured. . . .
Anyone who has suffered torture never again will be able to be at ease in the world, the abomination of the annihilation is never extinguished. Faith in humanity, already cracked by the first slap in the face, then demolished by torture, is never acquired again.

Torture was for him an interminable death: Améry, about whom I will speak again in Chapter 6, killed himself in 1978.

We do not wish to abet confusions, small-change Freudianism, morbidities, or indulgences. The oppressor remains what he is, and so does the victim. They are not interchangeable. The former is to be punished and execrated (but, if possible, understood), the latter is to be pitied and helped; but both, faced by the indecency of the irrevocable act, need refuge and protection, and instinctively search for them. Not all, but most—and often for their entire lives.

By now we are in possession of numerous confessions, depositions, and admissions on the part of the oppressors (I speak not only of the German National Socialists but of all those who commit horrendous and multiple crimes in obedience to a discipline): some given in court, others during interviews, others still contained in books or memoirs. In my opinion, these are documents of the utmost importance. In general, the descriptions of the things seen and the acts

committed are of little interest: they amply coincide with what victims have recounted; very rarely are they contested; judgments have been handed down and they are by now part of history. Often they are regarded as well known. Much more important are the motivations and justifications: Why did you do this? Were you aware that you were committing a crime?

The answers to these two questions, or to others which are analogous, are very similar to each other, independently of the personality of the interrogated person, be he an ambitious and intelligent professional like Speer or a gelid fanatic like Eichmann, a short-sighted functionary like Stangl in Treblinka or Höss in Auschwitz, or an obtuse brute like Boger or Kaduk, the inventors of torture. Expressed in different formulations and with greater or lesser arrogance, depending on the speaker's mental and cultural level, in the end they substantially all say the same things: I did it because I was ordered to; others (my superiors) have committed acts worse than mine; in view of the upbringing I received, and the environment in which I lived, I could not have acted differently; had I not done it, another would have done it even more harshly in my place. For anyone who reads these justifications the first reaction is revulsion: they lie, they cannot believe they will be believed, they cannot not see the imbalance between their excuses and the enormity of pain and death they have caused. They lie knowing that they are lying: they are in bad faith.

Now, anyone who has sufficient experience of human affairs knows that the distinction (the opposition, a linguist would say) good faith/bad faith is optimistic and smacks of the Enlightenment, and is all the more so, and for much greater reason, when applied to men such as those just mentioned. It presupposes a mental clarity which few have and

which even these few immediately lose when, for whatever reason, past or present reality arouses anxiety or discomfort in them. Under such conditions there are, it is true, those who lie consciously, coldly falsifying reality itself, but more numerous are those who weigh anchor, move off, momentarily or forever, from genuine memories, and fabricate for themselves a convenient reality. The past is a burden to them; they feel repugnance for things done or suffered and tend to replace them with others. The substitution may begin in full awareness, with an invented scenario, mendacious, restored, but less painful than the real one; they repeat the description to others but also to themselves, and the distinction between true and false progressively loses its contours, and man ends by fully believing the story he has told so many times and continues to tell, polishing and re-touching here and there the details which are least credible or incongruous or incompatible with the acquired picture of historically accepted events: initial bad faith has become good faith. The silent transition from falsehood to self-deception is useful: anyone who lies in good faith is better off. He recites his part better, is more easily believed by the judge, the historian, the reader; his wife, and his children.

The further events fade into the past, the more the construction of convenient truth grows and is perfected. I believe that only by this mental mechanism is it possible to interpret, for instance, the statements made in 1978 to *L'Express* by Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, former commissioner of Jewish affairs in the Vichy government around 1942, and as such personally responsible for the deportation of seventy thousand Jews. Darquier denies everything: the photographs of piles of corpses are montages; the statistics of millions of dead were fabricated by the Jews, always

greedy for publicity, commiseration, and indemnities: there may perhaps have been deportations (he would have found it difficult to dispute them: his signature appears at the foot of too many letters giving orders for these very deportations, even of children), but he did not know where to or with what results; there were, it is true, gas chambers in Auschwitz, but only to kill lice, and anyway (note the coherence!) they were built for propaganda purposes after the end of the war. It is not my intention to justify this cowardly and foolish man, and it offends me to know that he lived for a long time undisturbed in Spain, but I think I can recognize in him the typical case of someone who, accustomed to dying in public, ends by lying in private, too, to himself as well, and building for himself a comforting truth which allows him to live in peace. To keep good and bad faith distinct costs a lot: it requires a decent sincerity or truthfulness with oneself; it demands a continuous intellectual and moral effort. How can such an effort be expected from men like Darquier?

Reading the statements made by Eichmann during the Jerusalem trial, and those of Rudolph Höss (the penultimate commander of Auschwitz, the inventor of the hydrocyanic acid chambers) in his autobiography, one can see in them a process of re-elaboration of the past, more subtle than Darquier's. In substance, these two defended themselves in the classical manner of the Nazi militia, or, better yet, of all militiamen: we have been educated in absolute obedience, hierarchy, nationalism; we have been imbued with slogans, intoxicated with ceremonies and demonstrations; we have been taught that the only justice was that which was to the advantage of our people and that the only truth was the words of the Leader. What do you want from us? How can you even think to expect from us, after the fact, a behavior

different from ours and that of all those who were like us? We were the diligent executors, and for our diligence we were praised and promoted. The decisions were not ours because the regime in which we grew up did not permit autonomous decisions: others have decided for us, and that was the only way it could have happened because our ability to decide had been amputated. Therefore we are not responsible and cannot be punished.

Even projected against the background of the Birkenau smokestacks, this reasoning cannot be considered purely the fruit of impudence. The pressure that a modern totalitarian state can exercise over the individual is frightful. Its weapons are substantially three: direct propaganda or propaganda camouflaged as upbringing, instruction, and popular culture; the barrier erected against pluralism of information; and terror. Nevertheless, it is not permissible to admit that this pressure is irresistible, especially in the brief twelve-year term of the Third Reich. In the affirmations and exculpations of men responsible for such serious crimes as were Höss and Eichmann, the exaggeration and, to an even greater degree, the manipulation of memory is obvious. Both were born and raised long before the Reich became truly "totalitarian," and their joining the Nazi party was a choice dictated more by opportunism than enthusiasm. The re-elaboration of their past was a later work, slow and (probably) not methodical. To ask oneself whether it was done in good or bad faith is naive. They too, so strong in the face of others' suffering, when fate put them before judges, before the death they deserved, built a convenient past for themselves and ended by believing in it, especially Höss, who was not a subtle man. As he appears in his writings, he was in fact a person so little inclined to self-control and introspection that he does not realize he is confirming

his coarse anti-Semitism by the very act in which he abjures and denies it, nor does he realize how slimy his self-portrait as a good functionary, father, and husband actually is.

As a comment on these reconstructions of the past (but not only on these: it is an observation that holds for all memories) one must note that the distortion of fact is often limited by the objectivity of the facts themselves, around which there exists the testimonies of third parties, documents, *corpora delicti*, historically accepted contexts. It is generally difficult to deny having committed a given act, or that such an act was committed; it is, on the contrary, very easy to alter the motivations which led us to an act and the passions within us which accompanied the act itself. This is an extremely fluid matter, subject to distortion even under very weak pressure; to the questions Why did you do this? or What were you thinking as you did it? no reliable answers exist, because states of mind are by nature labile and even more labile is the memory of them.

An extreme case of the distortion of the memory of a committed guilty act is found in its suppression. Here, too, the borderline between good and bad faith can be vague; behind the "I don't know" and the "I do not remember" that one hears in courtrooms there is sometimes the precise intent to lie, but at other times it is a fossilized lie, rigidified in a formula. The rememberer has decided not to remember and has succeeded: by dint of denying its existence, he has expelled the harmful memory as one expels an excretion or a parasite. Lawyers for the defense know very well that the memory gap, or the putative truth, which they suggest to their clients, tends to become forgetfulness and the actual truth. It is not necessary to trespass in the field of mental pathology to find human examples whose declarations perplex us: they are most certainly false, but we are unable to

detect whether the subject does or does not know he is lying. Supposing, absurdly, that the liar should for one instant become truthful, he himself would not know how to answer the dilemma; in the act of lying he is an actor totally fused with his part, no longer distinguishable from it. A glaring example of this during the days in which I am writing is the behavior in court of the Turk Ali Agca, the would-be assassin of Pope John-Paul II.

The best way to defend oneself against the invasion of burdensome memories is to impede their entry, to extend a *cordon sanitaire*. It is easier to deny entry to a memory than to free oneself from it after it has been recorded. This, in substance, was the purpose of many of the artifices thought up by the Nazi commanders in order to protect the consciences of those assigned to do the dirty work and to ensure their services, disagreeable even for the most hardened cutthroats. The *Einsatzkommandos*, who behind the front lines in Russia machine-gunned civilians beside common graves which the victims themselves had been forced to dig, were given all the liquor they wanted so that the massacre would be blurred by drunkenness. The well-known euphemisms ("final solution," "special treatment," the very term *Einsatzkommando*, literally, "prompt-employment unit," disguised a frightful reality) were not only used to deceive the victims and prevent defensive reactions on their part: they were also meant, within the limits of the possible, to prevent public opinion, and those sections of the army not directly involved, from finding out what was happening in all the territories occupied by the Third Reich.

At any rate, the entire history of the brief "millennial Reich" can be reread as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, falsification of reality, negation of reality. All of Hitler's biographies, while disagreeing on the

interpretation to be given to the life of this man so difficult to classify; agree on the flight from reality which marked his last years, especially beginning with the first Russian winter. He had forbidden and denied his subjects any access to truth, contaminating their morality and their memory; but, to a degree which gradually increased and attained complete paranoia in the Bunker, he barred the path of truth to himself as well. Like all gamblers, he erected around himself a stage set woven of superstitious lies and in which he ended by believing, with the same fanatical faith that he demanded from every German. His collapse was not only a salvation for mankind but also a demonstration of the price to be paid when one dismembers the truth.

Also in the certainly much vaster field of the victim one observes a drifting of memory, but here, evidently, fraud is not involved. Anyone who suffers an injustice or an injury does not need to elaborate lies to exculpate himself of a guilt he does not have (even though, due to a paradoxical mechanism of which we shall speak, he may well feel ashamed of it); but this does not exclude the fact that his memories may also be altered. It has been noticed, for instance, that many survivors of wars or other complex and traumatic experiences tend unconsciously to filter their memory: summoning them up among themselves, or telling them to third persons, they prefer to dwell on moments of respite, on grotesque, strange, or relaxed intermezzos, and to skim over the most painful episodes, which are not called up willingly from the reservoir of memory and therefore with time tend to mist over, to lose their contours. The behavior of Count Ugolino is psychologically credible when he becomes reticent about telling Dante of his terrible death; he agrees to do so not out of acquiescence but only out of a feeling of posthumous revenge against his eternal enemy.

When we say, "I will never forget that," referring to some event which has profoundly wounded us but has not left in us, or around us a material trace or a permanent void, we are foolhardy: in "civilian" life we gladly forget the details of a serious illness from which we have recovered, or those of a successful surgical operation.

For purposes of defense, reality can be distorted not only in memory but in the very act of taking place. Throughout the year of my imprisonment in Auschwitz I had Alberto D. as a fraternal friend: he was a robust, courageous young man, more clear-sighted than the average and therefore very critical of the many who fabricated for themselves, and reciprocally administered to each other, consolatory illusions ("The war will be over in two weeks," "There will be no more selections," "The English have landed in Greece," "The Polish Partisans are about to liberate the camp," and so on, rumors heard nearly every day and punctually given the lie by reality). Alberto had been deported together with his forty-five-year-old father. In the imminence of the great selection of October 1944, Alberto and I had commented on this event with fright, impotent rage, rebellion, resignation, but without seeking refuge in comforting truths. The selection came, Alberto's "old" father was chosen for the gas, and in the space of a few hours Alberto changed. He had heard rumors that seemed to him worthy of belief: the Russians are close by, the Germans would no longer dare persist in the slaughter, that was not a selection like the others, it was not for the gas chamber, but had been made to choose the weakened but salvageable prisoners, in fact like his father, who was very tired but not ill; indeed, he even knew where they would be sent, to Jaworzno, not far away, to a special camp for convalescents fit only for light labor.

Naturally his father was never seen again and Alberto

himself vanished during the evacuation march from the camp, in January 1945. Strangely, without knowing about Alberto's behavior, his relatives who had remained hidden in Italy, escaping capture, behaved in the same way, rejecting an unendurable truth, constructing a different one for themselves. As soon as I was repatriated, I considered it my duty to go immediately to Alberto's hometown to tell his mother and his brother what I knew: I was welcomed with courteous affection; but as soon as I began my story the mother begged me to stop: she already knew everything, at least as far as Alberto was concerned, and there was no point in my repeating the usual horror stories to her. She *knew* that her son, he alone, had been able to slip away from the column without being shot by the SS. He had hidden in the forest and was safe in Russian hands; he had not yet been able to send any word, but he would do so soon, she was certain of it; and now, would I please change the subject and tell her how I myself had survived. A year later I was by chance passing through that same town, and I again visited the family. The truth was slightly changed: Alberto was in a Soviet clinic, he was fine; but he had lost his memory, he no longer even remembered his name; he was improving though and would soon return—she had this from a reliable source.

Alberto never returned. More than forty years have passed. I did not have the courage to show up again and to counterpose my painful truth to the consolatory "truth" that, one helping the other, Alberto's relatives had fashioned for themselves.

An apology is in order. This very book is drenched in memory; what's more, a distant memory. Thus it draws from a suspect source and must be protected against itself.

So here then: it contains more considerations than memories, lingers more willingly on the state of affairs such as it is now than on the retroactive chronicle. Furthermore, the data it contains are strongly substantiated by the imposing literature that has been formed around the theme of the man submerged (or "saved"), also through the collaboration, voluntary or not, of the culprits of that time; and in this corpus the concordances are abundant, the discordances negligible. As for my personal memories, and the few unpublished anecdotes I have mentioned and will mention, I have diligently examined all of them: time has somewhat faded them, but they are in good consonance with their background and seem to me unaffected by the drifting I have described.

with the exception perhaps of the insects. Besides, it is at least probable that a third world war, even conventional, even partial, would be fought on our territory between the Atlantic and the Urals, between the Mediterranean and the Arctic. The threat is different from that of the 1930s: less close but vaster; linked, in the opinion of some, to a demonism of history, new, still undecipherable, but not linked (until now) to human demonism. It is aimed at everyone, and therefore especially "useless."

So then? Are today's fears more or less founded than the fears of that time? When it comes to the future, we are just as blind as our fathers. Swiss and Swedes have their anti-nuclear shelters, but what will they find when they come out into the open? There are Polynesia, New Zealand, Tierra del Fuego, the Antarctic: perhaps they will remain unharmed. Obtaining a passport and entry visa is much easier than it was then, so why aren't we going? Why aren't we leaving our country? Why aren't we fleeing "before"?

8

LETTERS FROM GERMANS

S*urvival in Auschwitz* is a book of modest dimensions, but, like a nomadic animal, for forty years now it has left behind it a long and intricate track. It was published for the first time in 1947, a run of two thousand five hundred copies, and was well received by the critics but sold only in part: the six hundred unsold copies stored in Florence in a remainder warehouse were drowned in the autumn flood of 1969. After ten years of "apparent death," it came back to life when the Einaudi publishing company accepted it in 1957. I have often asked myself a futile question: What would have happened if the book had immediately had a wide distribution? Perhaps nothing special. Probably I would have continued my hard working life as a chemist who turned into a writer on Sunday (and not even every Sunday); or perhaps, on the other hand, I might have let myself be dazzled and, with who knows what luck, hoisted the banners of a life-sized writer. As I said, the question is futile: the business of reconstructing the hypothetical past, the what-would-have-happened-if is just as discredited as that of foreseeing the future.

Despite this false start, the book had made its way. It has been translated into eight or nine languages, adapted for radio and theater in Italy and abroad, discussed in innumerable schools. One stage of its itinerary was of fundamental importance for me: its translation into German and its publication in West Germany. When, around 1959, I heard that a German publisher (Fischer Bücherei) had acquired the translation rights I felt overwhelmed by the violent and new emotion of having won a battle. In fact, I had written those pages without a specific recipient in mind. For me, those were things I had inside, that occupied me and that I had to expel: tell them, indeed shout them from the rooftops. But the man who shouts from the rooftops addresses everyone and no one; he clamors in the desert. When I heard of that contract everything changed and became clear to me: yes, I had written the book in Italian, for Italians, for my children, for those who did not know, those who did not want to know, those who were not yet born, those who, willing or not, had assented to the offense; but its true recipients, those against whom the book was aimed like a gun were they, the Germans. Now the gun was loaded.

One must remember that only fifteen years had passed since Auschwitz: the Germans who would read me were "those," not their heirs. Before they had been oppressors or indifferent spectators, now they would be readers: I would corner them, tie them before a mirror. The hour had come to settle accounts, to put the cards on the table. Above all, the hour of colloquy. I was not interested in revenge. I had been intimately satisfied by the symbolic, incomplete, tentative, modern morality in Nuremberg, but it was fine with me that the very just hangings should be handled by others, professionals. My task was to understand them. Not that handful of high-ranking culprits, but them, the

people, those I had seen from close up, those from among whom the SS militia were recruited, and also those others, those who had believed, who not believing had kept silent, who did not have the frail courage to look into our eyes, throw us a piece of bread, whisper a human word. I remember very well that time and that climate, and I believe I can judge those Germans without prejudice or anger. Almost all, but not all, had been deaf, blind, and dumb: a mass of "invalids" surrounding a core of ferocious beasts. Almost all, though not all, had been cowardly. And right here, as a breath of fresh air and to prove how alien I am to global judgments, I would like to recount an episode: it was exceptional, and yet it happened.

In November 1944 we were at work in Auschwitz. Together with two companions I was in the chemical laboratory I have described elsewhere. The air raid alarm sounded and immediately the bombers were visible: there were hundreds, the raid promised to be monstrous. In the camp there were several large bunkers, but they were for the Germans and off limits to us. We had to make do with the fallow grounds, by now already covered with snow, within the enclosure. All of us, prisoners and civilians, ran down the stairs headed for our respective destinations, but the head of the laboratory, a German technician, held us *Häftlinge* chemists back: "You three come with me." Astonished, we followed him at a run toward the bunker, but at the entrance stood a guard with a swastika on his armband. He said: "You can go in; the others beat it." The head of the laboratory answered: "They are with me: it's either everyone or no one," and tried to force his way inside: a boxing match ensued. The guard, who was a strong fellow, certainly would have won, but fortunately for everyone the all-clear sounded: the raid was not for us, the airplanes had

continued north. If—another if! but how to resist the fascination of bifurcated paths?—if anomalous Germans, capable of such modest courage, had been more numerous, that time's history and today's geography would be different.

I did not trust my German publisher. I wrote him an almost insolent letter: I warned him not to remove or change a single word in the text, and I insisted that he send me the manuscript of the translation in batches, chapter by chapter, as the work gradually proceeded. I wanted to check on not merely its lexical but also its inner faithfulness. Together with the first chapter, which I found very well translated, I received a letter in perfect Italian from the translator. The publisher had shown him my letter; I had nothing to fear, neither from the publisher nor, even less, from him. He introduced himself: he was exactly my age, had studied in Italy for several years, besides being a translator he was an Italianist, a scholar who specialized in Goldoni. He too was an anomalous German. He had been called up for the army, but he found Nazism repugnant; in 1941 he had simulated an illness, had been sent to a hospital, and had managed to spend his putative convalescence studying Italian literature at the University of Padua. He then had been given a deferral, remained in Padua, and came into contact with the anti-Fascist groups led by Concetto Marchesi, Meneghetti, and Pighin.

In September 1943 came the Italian armistice, and in two days the Germans had militarily occupied northern Italy. My translator had "naturally" joined the Paduan Partisans of the Justice and Liberty groups, who fought in the Colli Euganei against the Fascists of the Republic of Saló and against his compatriots. He had no doubts, he felt more Italian than German, a Partisan and not a Nazi, and yet he

knew what he was in for: hardships, dangers, suspicions, and discomforts; if captured by the Germans (and he had in fact been informed that the SS was on his trail) an atrocious death; and moreover, in his own country he would be considered a deserter or even a traitor.

At the end of the war he settled in Berlin, which at that time was not split in two by the wall, but governed by a very complicated condominium regime of the "Big Four" of the time (the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France). After his Partisan adventure in Italy he was perfectly bilingual, spoke Italian without the trace of a foreign accent, and began to do translations, first Goldoni because he loved him and because he knew the Venetian dialect well, and for the same reason Agnolo Beolco Il Ruzante, until then unknown in Germany, but also modern Italian authors, Collodi, Gadda, D'Arrigo, and Pirandello. It was not well-paid work, or more accurately, he was too scrupulous and therefore too slow for his working day to be justly recompensed; nevertheless, he could never make up his mind to take a steady job with a publisher. For two reasons: he loved his independence, and besides, subtly, by indirect routes, his political past was held against him. Nobody ever told him in so many words, but a deserter, even in Bonn's superdemocratic Germany, even in quadripartite Berlin, was *persona non grata*.

He was enthusiastic about translating *Survival in Auschwitz*. He had an affinity with the book; it substantiated by its contents his love for freedom and justice, translating it was a way to continue his daring and silent struggle against his misled country. At the time we were both too busy to travel, and a friendly exchange of letters sprung up between us. We were both perfectionists: he by profession; I because, although I found an ally and a valuable ally, I was

afraid that my text would lose color, lose pregnancy. For the first time I was caught up in the always burning, never untaxing adventure of being translated, of seeing one's thoughts manhandled, refracted, one's painstakingly chosen word transformed or misunderstood, or even invigorated by some un hoped for resource in the host language.

From the very first installment I was able to see that in reality my "political" suspicions were unfounded: my partner was as much an enemy of the Nazis as I, his indignation was as great as mine. There remained, however, the linguistic suspicions. As I mentioned in the chapter on communication, the German that my text needed, above all in dialogue and quotations, was much coarser than his. He, a man of letters and refined education, did in fact know the German of the barracks (after all, he had had a few months of military service), but *per force* he did not know the degraded, often satanically ironic jargon of the concentration camps. Each of our letters contained a list of proposals and counterproposals, and at times a vehement discussion, was set off by a single word. For example, the one I described in this book on page 101. The pattern was general: I indicated a thesis to him, the one suggested to me by the acoustic memory to which I referred before; he presented me with an antithesis, "this is not good German, today's readers would not understand it"; I retorted that "'down there' we said exactly this"; finally we arrived at the synthesis, that is, a compromise. Experience then taught me that translation and compromise are synonymous, but at that time I was driven by a scruple of superrealism; I wanted that in that book, particularly in its German guise, nothing should be lost of its harshness and the violence inflicted on the language, which for that matter I had made an effort to reproduce as best I could in my Italian original. In a certain

sense, it was not a matter of a translation but rather of a restoration: his was, or wanted to be, a *restitutio in primum*, a retroversion to the language in which events had taken place and to which they belonged. More than a book, it should be a tape recording.

The translator understood quickly and well, and the result was an excellent translation from all points of view; of his fidelity I myself could be the judge, and his stylistic flair was later praised by all reviewers. The question of a preface came up: Fischer the publisher asked me to write it myself. I hesitated, then I refused. I had a feeling of confused reluctance, repugnance, an emotional block that choked off the flow of ideas and words. In short, I was asked to append to the book—that is, to the testimony—a direct appeal to the German people, a peroration, a sermon. I was expected to raise my voice, climb on the podium, change from witness to judge, preacher; set forth theories and interpretations of history; divide or set apart the pious from the impious; pass from the third person to the second. All these were tasks that went beyond me, tasks I would gladly have delegated to others, perhaps the readers themselves, whether German or not.

I wrote to the publisher that I did not feel up to drafting a preface that would not denature the book, and I proposed an indirect solution to him; to place before the text, instead of an introduction, a passage from the letter which in May 1960, at the end of our laborious collaboration, I wrote to the translator to thank him for his work. I reproduce it here:

And so we are finished: I am glad of it and satisfied with the result, and grateful to you and also a little sad. You understand, it is the only book I have written, and now

that we are finished transplanting it into German I feel like a father whose son has reached the age of consent and leaves and one can no longer look after him.

But it is not only this. Perhaps you have realized that for me the Lager, and having written about the Lager, was an important adventure that has profoundly modified me, given me maturity and a reason for life. Perhaps it is presumption: but there it is, today I, prisoner no. 174517, by your help, can speak to the German people, remind them of what they have done, and say to them: "I am alive, and I would like to understand you in order to judge you."

I do not believe that man's life necessarily has a definite purpose; but if I think of my life and the aims I have until now set for myself, I recognize only one of them as well defined and conscious, and it is precisely this, to bear witness, to make my voice heard by the German people, to "answer" the *Kapo* who cleaned his hand on my shoulder, Dr. Pannwitz, and those who hung Ultimo [people described in *Survival in Auschwitz*] and by their heirs.

I am sure that you have not misunderstood me. I never harbored hatred for the German people. And if I had felt that way, I would be cured of it after having known you. I do not understand, I cannot tolerate the fact that a man should be judged not for what he is but because of the group to which he happens to belong. . . .

But I cannot say I understand the Germans: Now something one cannot understand constitutes a painful void, a puncture, a permanent stimulus that insists on being satisfied. I hope that this book will have some echo in Germany, not only out of ambition, but also because the nature of this echo will perhaps make it possible for me to better understand the Germans, to placate this stimulus.

The publisher accepted my proposal, to which the translator had agreed with enthusiasm, so this page forms the in-

roduction to all German editions of *Survival in Auschwitz*: indeed, it is read as an integral part of the text. I became aware of this precisely because of the "nature" of the echo which I allude to in the last lines.

The echo takes material shape in about forty letters written to me by German readers during the years 1961-64; that is, during the crisis which led to the building of that Wall which to this day splits Berlin in two and represents one of the most intense points of attrition in today's world: the only one, besides the Bering Strait, where Americans and Russians directly face each other. All these letters reflect an attentive reading of the book, but all of them answer, or attempt to answer, or deny there is an answer to, the question implicit in the last paragraph of my letter, that is, *whether it is possible to understand the Germans*. Other letters reached me piecemeal during the following years, when the book was reprinted, but the more recent they are, the more pallid they become: the writers are by now the children and grandchildren, the trauma is no longer theirs, it is not being lived in the first person. They express vague solidarity, ignorance, and detachment. For them, that past is truly the past, hearsay. They are not specifically German: with some exceptions, their letters could be confused with those I continue to receive from their Italian contemporaries, so I will not examine them in this review.

The first letters, those which count, are almost all from young people (who say they are or who appear to be young from the contents) with the exception of one, which in 1962 was sent to me by Doctor T. H. of Hamburg and which I present here first because I am in a hurry to get rid of it. I translate its salient passages, respecting their clumsiness:

Dear Dr. Levi:

Your book is the first among the stories by Auschwitz survivors that has come to our knowledge. It has deeply moved my wife and myself. Now, since you, after all the horrors you have lived, once again address the German people "to understand," to "awaken an echo," I will dare attempt an answer. But it will only be an echo; nobody can "understand" such events! . . .

. . . everything is to be feared from a man who is not with God: he has no brakes, no restraints! The word from Genesis 8:21 is then appropriate for him: "Because the wisdom of the human heart is evil since youth," explained in modern times and proven by the dreadful discoveries of Freud's psychoanalysis in the field of the unconscious which certainly are known to you. In our times it has happened "that the Devil was unleashed," without restraint, without meaning: persecutions of Jews and Christians, the extermination of entire populations in South America, of Indians in North America, of the Goths in Italy under Narses, horrendous persecutions and massacres during the French and Russian revolutions. Who will be able to "understand" all this?

But you certainly expect a specific answer to the question why Hitler came to power, and why afterward we did not shake off the yoke. Now, in 1933 . . . all moderate parties disappeared, and there remained only the choice between Hitler and Stalin, National Socialists and Communists, whose forces were approximately equal. We knew the Communists because of the large revolts that took place after World War I. Hitler appeared suspect to us, it is true, but decisively as the lesser evil. That all his beautiful words were falsehood and betrayal we did not understand at the beginning. In foreign policy, he had one success after another; all states maintained diplomatic relations with him, the Pope was the first to make a concordat. Who could suspect that we were riding (sic) a criminal and a traitor? And, in any case, no guilt can certainly be attributed to the betrayed: the traitor alone is guilty.

And now the more difficult question, his insensate hatred for the Jews: well, this hatred was never popular. Germany deservedly counted as the country most friendly to the Jews in the entire world. Never, so far as I know and have read, during the Hitlerian period until its very end, did one ever hear of a single case of spontaneous outrage or aggression against a Jew. Always only (very dangerous) attempts of help.

Now I come to the second question. It is impossible to rebel against a totalitarian state. The entire world, when the time came, was unable to help the Hungarians. . . . Much less could we [resist] all by ourselves. It must not be forgotten that, aside from all the resistance struggles, on July 20, 1944, just on one day, thousands and thousands of officers were executed. It certainly was not a matter of a "small clique," as Hitler said afterward.

Dear Dr. Levi (I take the liberty to address you like this, because anyone who has read your book cannot but hold you dear), I have no excuses. I have no explanations. The guilt weighs heavily on my poor betrayed and misguided people. Rejoice for the life that has been given to you again, the peace of your beautiful country that I too know. Also Dante and Boccaccio have their place on my shelf. Your most devoted,
T. H.

To this letter, probably without her husband's knowledge, Frau H. had added the following laconic lines, which I also translate literally:

When a people realizes too late that it has become a prisoner of the devil, from it follows certain psychic alterations.

(1) All that is evil in men is stimulated. The results of this are the *Pannwitzs* and the *Kapos* who clean their hands on the shoulder of the defenseless.

(2) From this results, in contrast, also the active resistance against injustice which sacrificed itself and its family (sic) to martyrdom but without visible success.

(3) There remains the great mass of those who, to save their own lives, keep silent and abandon their brother in danger. This is what we recognize to be our guilt before God and mankind.

I often thought about this strange couple. He seems to me a typical specimen of the large mass of the German upper middle class: a not fanatical but opportunistic Nazi who repented when it was opportune to repent, stupid enough to believe that he can make me believe his simplified version of recent history, and dares to have recourse to Narses's and the Goths' retroactive reprisals. She seems to me a little less hypocritical than her husband but more bigoted.

I answered with a long letter, perhaps the only irate one I ever wrote. That no church offers indulgences to those who follow the Devil or accepts as justification the attribution of one's sins to the Devil. That one must answer personally for sins and errors, otherwise all trace of civilization would vanish from the face of the earth, as in fact it had vanished from the Third Reich. That his electoral data might be good for a child: in the elections of November 1932, the last to be freely held, the Nazis, true enough, obtained one hundred ninety-six seats in the Reichstag, but alongside the Communists with one hundred seats, the Social Democrats, who certainly were not extremists and indeed were detested by Stalin, had obtained one hundred twenty. That, above all, on *my* shelf next to Dante and Boccaccio I kept my *Mein Kampf*, "My Struggle," written by Adolf Hitler many years before coming to power. That dread man was not a traitor, he was a coherent fanatic whose ideas were extremely clear: he never changed them and never concealed them. Those who voted for him certainly voted for his ideas. Nothing is lacking in that book:

the blood and the land, the living space, the Jew as the eternal enemy, the Germans who embody "the highest form of humanity on earth," the other countries openly regarded as the instruments of German domination. These are not "beautiful words"; perhaps Hitler also uttered other words, but he never retracted these.

As for the German resisters, all honor to them but to tell the truth the conspirators of July 20, 1944, bestirred themselves a bit too late. And, finally, I wrote:

Your most audacious statement is the one regarding the unpopularity of anti-Semitism in Germany. It was the foundation of Nazi doctrine from its beginnings: it was of a mystical nature; the Jews could not be "the people elected by God" since that's what the Germans were. There's neither a page nor a speech of Hitler's in which hatred against the Jews is not reiterated to the point of obsession. It was not marginal to Nazism: it was its ideological center. And so: how could the people "most friendly toward the Jews" vote for the party and praise the man who called the Jews Germany's first enemy and claimed that the prime objective of their politics was "strangling the Judaic hydra"?

As for outrages and spontaneous aggressions, your sentence is truly outrageous. In the face of millions of dead people, it seems idle and odious to discuss whether or not it was a matter of spontaneous persecution: and in any case, Germans are not much inclined to spontaneity. But I might remind you that nothing obliged German industrialists to hire famished slaves if not their profit; that no one forced the Topf Company (flourishing today in Wiesbaden) to build the enormous multiple crematoria in the Lagers; that perhaps the SS did receive orders to kill the Jews, but enrollment in the SS was voluntary; that I myself found in Katowitz, after the liberation, innumerable packages of forms by which the heads of German families were authorized to draw clothes and shoes *for adults and for*

children from the Auschwitz warehouses; did no one ask himself where so many children's shoes were coming from? And did you never hear about a certain 'Crystal Night'? Or do you think that each single crime committed that night was imposed by force of the law?

That there were attempts to help, I know, and I know that they were dangerous; and in the same way, having lived in Italy, I know "that it is impossible to rebel in a totalitarian state"; but I know that there exist a thousand ways, much less dangerous, to manifest one's solidarity with the oppressed, that these were frequent in Italy even after the German occupation, and that in Hitler's Germany they were carried out much too infrequently.

The remaining letters are very different: they delineate a better world. But I must point out that, even with the best will to absolve, they cannot be considered a "representative sample" of the German people of that time. In the first place, that book of mine was published in some tens of thousands of copies and was therefore read by one out of every thousand citizens of the Federal Republic: a few must have bought it by chance, the rest because they were somehow predisposed to a collision with facts, sensitized, permeable. Among these readers only about forty, as I mentioned, decided to write to me.

In forty years of practice, I have by now become familiar with this singular personage, the reader who writes to the author. He can belong to one of two clearly distinct constellations, one pleasing, the other disagreeable; the intermediate instances are rare. The former give joy and teach. They have read the book attentively, often more than once; they have loved and understood it, at times better than the author himself; they declare themselves enriched by it; they present their views with great clarity and occasionally their criticism; they thank the author for his work; often they

explicitly exempt him from writing a reply. The latter are irksome and a waste of time. They exhibit themselves; parade their merits, often have manuscripts in their drawer, and let it become clear that their intention is to climb with the help of the book and the author, as ivy climbs up tree trunks; or they also may be children or adolescents who write out of bravado, on a bet, to obtain an autograph. My forty German correspondents, to whom I dedicate these pages with gratitude, all belong (except for the Dr. T. H. mentioned earlier, who is a case apart) to the first constellation.

L. I. is a librarian in Westphalia; she confesses to having been violently tempted to close the book halfway through "to escape the images evoked in it," but was immediately ashamed of this selfish and cowardly impulse. She writes:

In your preface you express the desire to understand us Germans. You must believe us when we tell you that we ourselves are incapable of conceiving of ourselves or of what we have done. We are guilty. I was born in 1922, grew up in Upper Silesia, not far from Auschwitz, but at the time, in truth, I knew nothing (please do not consider this statement as a convenient excuse, but as a fact) of the atrocious things that were being committed, actually a few kilometers away from us. And yet, at least until the outbreak of the war, I happened to meet here and there people with the Jewish star and I did not welcome them into my home nor did I offer them hospitality as I would have done with others, did not intervene on their behalf. That is my crime. I can come to terms with this terrible levity of mine, cowardice, and selfishness only by relying on Christian forgiveness.

Furthermore, she says she is a member of *Aktion Sühnezeichen* ("Expiatory Action"), an evangelical association of

young people who spend their vacations abroad, rebuilding the cities most grievously damaged by the German war (she went to Coventry). She says nothing about her parents, and this is a symptom: either they knew and did not talk to her; or they did not know, and in that case they had not talked to those who "down there" must certainly have known—the railroad personnel of the convoys, the warehouse workers, the thousands of German workers in the factories and mines where the slave-workers were worked to death, in short, anyone who did not hold his hand over his eyes. I repeat: the true crime, the collective, general crime of almost all Germans of that time was that of lacking the courage to speak.

M. S. from Frankfurt says nothing about himself and cautiously searches for distinctions and justifications: this too is a symptom.

You write that you do understand the Germans. . . . As a German, sensitive to the horror and shame and who will continue to be aware until the end of his days that the horror itself took place by the hand of men of his country, I feel called upon directly by your words and wish to reply.

I too do not understand men like that *Kapo* who wiped his hand on your shoulder, men like Pannwitz, like Eichmann, and all the others who executed inhuman orders without realizing that one cannot evade one's own responsibility by hiding behind that of others. Or that in Germany there were so many material executors of a criminal system and that all this could take place precisely thanks to the great number of people thus disposed and willing, who would not, insofar as they were German, be afflicted by all this.

But are they "the Germans"? And is it permissible in any case to speak "of Germans" as a single entity, or "English" or "Italians" or "Jews"? You mentioned certain exceptions to the

Germans whom you do not understand. . . . I thank you for these words of yours, but I beg you to remember the innumerable Germans . . . who suffered and died in their struggle against iniquity. . . .

With all my heart I wish that many of my compatriots will read your book, so that we Germans will not become lazy and indifferent, but on the contrary that there will remain vivid in us the awareness of how low man can fall when he becomes a torturer of his fellow man. If this will happen, your book will contribute to all this never happening again.

I answered M. S. with perplexity: the same perplexity, for that matter, which I experienced in answering all these polite and civil interlocutors, members of a people who exterminated mine (and many others). What is at stake, essentially, is the same embarrassment experienced by dogs studied by neurologists, conditioned to react in one way to the circle and in another way to the square, so that when the square became rounded and began to resemble a circle, the dogs were blocked and presented the signs of neurosis. I wrote to him, among other things:

I agree with you: it is dangerous, wrong, to speak about the "Germans," or any other people, as of a single undifferentiated entity, and include all individuals in one judgment. And yet I don't think I would deny that there exists a spirit of each people (otherwise it would not be a people) a *Deutschtum*, an *italianità*, an *hispanidad*: they are the sums of traditions, customs, history, language, and culture. Whoever does not feel within himself this spirit, which is national in the best sense of the word, not only does not entirely belong to his own people but is not part of human civilization. Therefore, while I consider insensate the syllogism, "All Italians are passionate; you are Italian; therefore you are passionate," I do however believe it legitimate, within certain limits, to expect from Italians taken

as a whole, or from Germans, etc., one specific, collective behavior rather than another. There will certainly be individual exceptions, but a prudent, probabilistic forecast is in my opinion possible. . . .

. . . I will be honest with you: in the generation that is over forty-five, how many are the Germans truly conscious of what happened in Europe in the name of Germany? To judge from the disconcerting outcome of a number of trials, I feel they are few: along with heartbroken and compassionate voices, I hear others, discordant, strident, too proud of the power and wealth of today's Germany.

I. J. from Stuttgart is a social worker. She says:

That you were able to prevent an irremediable hatred against us Germans from seeping through your writings is truly a miracle and should induce us to shame. For this I would like to thank you. Unfortunately there are still among us many who refuse to believe that we Germans really committed such inhuman horrors against the Jewish people. Naturally, this denial springs from many diverse motives, perhaps even only from the fact that the intellect of the average citizen refuses to consider the possibility of such profound evil among us "Western Christians."

It is good that your book was published here and can thus bring light to many young people. It will also be possible to put it in the hands of some older people, but to do this, in our "sleeping" Germany, a certain amount of civil courage is necessary.

I answered her:

That I do not feel hatred against the German surprises many, and it should not. In reality, I do understand hatred, but only *ad personam*. If I were a judge, even though repressing what hatred I might feel, I would not hesitate to inflict the most

severe punishment or even death on the many culprits who still today live undisturbed on German soil or in other countries of suspect hospitality; but I would experience horror if a single innocent were punished for a crime he did not commit.

W. A., a physician, writes from Württemberg:

For us Germans, who carry the heavy burden of our past and (God knows!) of our future, your book is more than a moving tale: it is a help. It is an orientation for which I thank you. I can say nothing to exculpate us; nor do I believe that culpability (*this culpability!*) can easily be obliterated. . . . Much though I try to remove myself from the evil spirit of the past, I still remain a member of this people whom I love and who in the course of centuries has given birth in equal measure to works of noble peace and to others filled with demonic peril. In this converging of all the different times in our history, I am conscious of being implicated in the greatness and culpability of my people. I therefore stand before you as an accomplice of those who did violence to your destiny and the destiny of your people.

W. G. was born in 1935 in Brema; he is a historian and sociologist, a militant member of the Social Democratic party:

At the end of the war I was still a child; I cannot take upon myself any share of guilt for the frightful crimes committed by Germans; and yet I am ashamed of them; I hate the criminals who made you and your companions suffer, and I hate their accomplices, many of whom are still alive. You write that you cannot understand the Germans. If it is your intention to allude to the executioners and their helpers, then I too cannot understand them; but I hope I will have the strength to fight them if they should appear again on the stage of history. I spoke of

"shame": I meant to express this feeling—that what was perpetrated by German hands at that time should never have happened, nor should it have been approved of by other Germans.

With H. L. from Bavaria, a student, matters became complicated. She wrote to me for the first time in 1962; her letter was singularly alive, free of the leaden gloom that characterizes almost all the others, even the best intentioned. She assumed that I expected "an echo" above all from important official persons, not from a young girl, but "she feels called upon personally as heir and accomplice." She is satisfied with the education she receives in school, and with what she has been taught about her country's recent history, but she is not sure "that one day the lack of measure that is typical of Germans will not explode again, in a different guise, and directed at other goals." She deplors the fact that her contemporaries reject politics as "something dirty." She reacted in a "violent and rude manner" to a priest who maligned the Jews and to her Russian teacher, a Russian woman who claimed the Jews were responsible for the October Revolution and considered the Hitlerian slaughter a just punishment. At such moments, she experienced "an indescribable shame at belonging to the most barbaric of peoples." "Even though outside all mysticism or superstition," she is convinced "that we Germans will not escape a just punishment for what we committed." She feels somehow authorized, indeed duty-bound, to declare that "we, the children of a generation laden with guilt, are fully conscious of it, and will try to alleviate yesterday's horrors and sufferings so as to avoid their being repeated tomorrow." Since she seemed to me an intelligent, unprejudiced, and "new" interlocutor, I wrote and asked her for more precise information about the situation of the Germany of

that time (this was the Adenauer period); as for her fear of a collective "just punishment," I tried to convince her that a punishment, if it is collective, cannot be just, and vice versa. By return post she sent me a card on which she told me that my questions required a certain amount of research; I should be patient, she would answer me exhaustively as soon as possible. Twenty days later I received from her a twenty-three-page letter: in short, a thesis, compiled thanks to a frenzied work of interviews carried out by phone and letter. So this nice girl, too, even though for a good end, had a propensity for *Masslosigkeit*, that lack of measure she herself had denounced, but with comical sincerity she apologized: "I didn't have much time, so many things that I could have said more briefly remained as they were." Since I am not *masslos* I confine myself to summing up and quoting the passages which to me seem most significant.

I love the country where I've grown up, I adore my mother, but despite my efforts the German as a particular human type does not appeal to me: perhaps because he still seems to be too marked by those qualities which in the recent past manifested themselves so rigorously, but perhaps also because in it I detest myself, recognizing that in essence I am like him.

To a question of mine about her school, she answers (with documents) that the entire teaching body was at the proper time put through the sieve of "de-Nazification" demanded by the Allies, but conducted in an amateurish, dilettantesque manner and widely sabotaged. Nor could it have been otherwise: an entire generation would have had to be banished. Recent history is being taught in the schools, but there is little talk about politics; the Nazi past surfaces here and there in varying tones: a few professors boast about it, a

few hide it, very few declare themselves immune from it. A young teacher has declared to her as follows:

Pupils are not very interested in this period, but immediately pass to the opposition if one speaks to them about a collective German guilt. Many indeed state that they've had enough of the *mea culpa* of the press and their teachers.

H. L. comments:

It is precisely in the resistance of the young people to the *mea culpa* that one can see how for them the problem of the Third Reich remains just as unresolved, irritating, and typically German as for those who lived before them. Only when this emotionalism has ceased will it be possible to reason objectively.

Elsewhere, speaking of her own experience, H. L. writes (very plausibly):

The professors did not avoid the problems; on the contrary, documenting them with newspapers of the period, they demonstrated the propaganda methods of the Nazis. They told how, when they were young, they had followed the new movement without criticisms and with enthusiasm: youth rallies, sports organizations, etc. We students attacked them strongly, wrongly as I think today: how can one accuse them of having understood the situation, and foreseen the future, behaving no better than the adults? And we, in their place, would we have unmasked better than they the satanic methods with which Hitler conquered the youth for his war?

It should be noted: the justification is the same as that put forward by Dr. T. H. of Hamburg, and at any rate no witness of the time ever denied Hitler a truly demonic talent for persuading, the same talent that favored him in his political contacts. It can be accepted from young people, who, understandably, try to exculpate their fathers' entire

generation, but not from the older people compromised and falsely penitent who try to limit the guilt to a single man.

H. L. sent me many more letters, arousing in me bifidous reactions. She described for me her father, a restless musician, shy and sensitive, who died when she was a little girl: was she searching for a father in me? She swayed between documentary seriousness and childish fantasy. She sent me a kaleidoscope and with it she wrote:

About you too I have constructed for myself a well-defined image: it is you who, having escaped a terrifying destiny (forgive my presumption), wanders about our country, still estranged, as in a bad dream. I thought I ought to sew a suit for you like those donned by the heroes of legend, a suit that will protect you from all the world's dangers.

I could not recognize myself in this image; but I did not write her that. I answered that such suits cannot be given away as gifts: one must weave and sew them for oneself. H. L. sent me two novels of Heinrich Mann's *Henry IV* cycle, which unfortunately I never found the time to read; I arranged for her to receive the German translation of *The Reawakening*, which had appeared in the meantime. In December 1964, from Berlin where she had moved, she sent me a pair of gold cufflinks made by a girlfriend of hers who was a goldsmith. I did not have the heart to return them; I thanked her but asked her not to send me anything else. I sincerely hope I did not offend this intimately gentle person; I hope she understood the reason for my defensiveness. Since then I have received no further news from her.

I have left for last my exchange of letters with Mrs. Hety S. of Wiesbaden, my contemporary, because it represents an episode apart both in quality and quantity. By itself, my H. S. dossier is more voluminous than that in which

I keep all the other "letters from Germans." Our correspondence extends over sixteen years, from October 1966 to November 1982. It contains, besides about fifty of her letters (often four or more pages long) and my answers, also the onionskins of at least as many letters she wrote to her children, friends, other writers, publishers, local organizations, newspapers or magazines, copies of which she considered important enough to send me, and, finally, newspaper clippings and book reviews. Some of her letters are "circulars": a half page is a photocopy, the same for several correspondents, the rest is blank and filled in by hand with more personal information or questions. Mrs. Hety S. wrote to me in German and did not know Italian; at first I answered her in French, then I realized that she understood it with difficulty and for a long time I wrote to her in English. Later, with her amused consent, I wrote to her in my uncertain German, in duplicate; she would return one copy to me with her corrections, carefully explained. We met only twice: at her house during a hurried business trip of mine to Germany, and in Turin during just as hurried a vacation of hers. These were not important encounters: the letters count for much more.

Also her first letter took as its point of departure the question of "understanding," but it had an energetic, resentful tone that distinguished it from all the others. My book had been given to her as a gift by a common friend, the historian Hermann Langbein, but very late, when the first edition was already sold out. As cultural assessor of a regional government, she was trying to have it reprinted immediately and wrote to me:

You will certainly never be able to understand "the Germans": even we are unable to do so, because at that time there hap-

pened things that, under no circumstances, should have happened. As a result, for many among us words like "Germany" and "Fatherland" have forever lost the meaning they once had: the concept of the "Fatherland" has been obliterated for us. . . . What absolutely is not permissible is to forget. Hence for the new generation books like yours that describe the inhuman in such a human manner are important. . . . Perhaps you do not fully realize how many things a writer can implicitly express about himself—and thus about Man in general. It is precisely this that confers weight and value to every chapter of your book. More than all the rest, I was dismayed by your pages on the Buna laboratory: this then was how you prisoners saw us free people!

A little further on, she tells about a Russian prisoner who during the winter delivered coal to her cellar. Speaking to him was forbidden: she slipped food and cigarettes into his pocket, and he to thank her shouted: "Heil Hitler!" On the other hand, she was not forbidden (What a labyrinth of hierarchies and differentiating prohibitions the Germany of that time must have been! The "letters from Germans" and hers in particular also say more than one might think) to speak with a young French "volunteer" worker: she would pick her up at her camp, bring her home, even take her to a few concerts. In camp the girl was unable to wash herself properly and she had lice. Hety did not dare tell her, she felt embarrassed and was ashamed of her embarrassment.

To this first letter of hers I answered that my book had, it is true, some resonance in Germany, but actually among the Germans who least needed to read it: I had received penitent letters from the innocent, not the guilty. These, understandably, were silent.

In her subsequent letters, little by little, in her indirect way, Hety (for the sake of simplicity I will refer to her like

this even though we never reached a first name footing) gave me a portrait of herself. Her father, a pedagogue by profession, was a Social Democratic activist as early as 1919; in 1933, the year Hitler seized power, he immediately lost his job, perquisitions and financial difficulties followed, and the family was forced to move to smaller lodgings. In 1935 Hety was expelled from the lyceum because she had refused to become a member of the Hitler Youth Organization. In 1938 she married an IG-Farben engineer (hence her interest in "the Buna laboratory"!) by whom she immediately had two children. After the attempt on Hitler on July 20, 1944, her father was deported to Dachau, and her marriage underwent a crisis because her husband, even though he wasn't a party member, would not tolerate Hety's endangering herself, him, and the children in order to "do what must be done," that is, take some food every week to the gates of the camp in which her father was imprisoned: "He thought that our efforts were absolutely lunatic. Once we held a family council to see whether there were any possibilities for aiding my father, and if so what they were; but he only said: 'Set your heart at rest: you'll never see him again.'"

Instead, at the end of the war, her father returned, but he looked like a ghost (he died not many years later). Hety, who was very close to him, felt duty-bound to continue his activity in the reborn Social Democratic party; her husband did not agree, there was a quarrel, and he asked for and obtained a divorce. His second wife was a refugee from Eastern Prussia who, because of the two children, kept up a discreet relationship with Hety. Once, with regard to her father, Dachau, and the Lagers, she said to her:

Do not take it in bad part if I cannot bear to read or listen to these concerns of yours. When we had to escape it was terrible;

and the worst thing was that we were forced to go down the route by which the Auschwitz prisoners had been evacuated. The road ran between two hedges of dead bodies. I would like to forget those images and I cannot: I continue to see them in my dreams.

Her father had just returned when Thomas Mann spoke on radio about Auschwitz, the gas, and the crematoria.

We all listened, deeply perturbed, and were for a long time silent. Papa paced back and forth, taciturn, brooding, until I asked him: "But does it seem possible to you that people can be poisoned with gas, burnt, their hair, their skin, their teeth utilized?" And he, even though he did come from Dachau, answered: "No, it is not thinkable. A Thomas Mann should not give credence to such horrors." And yet it was all true: a few weeks later we had proof of it and were convinced.

In another letter of hers she had described their life in "internal emigration":

My mother had a very dear Jewish friend. She was a widow and lived alone, her children had emigrated, but she could not resolve to leave Germany. We too were persecuted, but we were "political": it was different for us, and despite the many dangers we were fortunate. I will never forget the evening on which that woman came to us, in the dark, to tell us: "Please, don't come to see me any longer, and excuse me if I do not come to see you. You understand, I would endanger you. . . ." Naturally, we continued to visit her until she was deported to Theresienstadt. We never saw her again and we "did" nothing for her: what could we have done? And yet the thought that nothing could be done still torments us: I beg you, try to understand.

She told me that in 1967 she had attended the Euthanasia Trial. One of the defendants, a physician, had declared in

court that he had been personally ordered to give poison injections to the mental patients, and that he had refused because of his professional conscience; by contrast, operating the gas spigot had seemed disagreeable to him, but in fact tolerable. On returning home, Hety found her cleaning woman, a war widow, intent on her work, and her son cooking. They all three sat down at the table and she told the son what she saw and heard at the trial. And suddenly

the woman put down her fork and interrupted aggressively: "What is the point of all these trials they're having now? What could they do about it, our poor soldiers, if they gave them those orders? When my husband came on furlough from Poland, he told me: 'Almost all we did was shoot Jews, shoot Jews all the time. My arm hurt from so much shooting.' But what was he supposed to do, if they had given him those orders?" . . . I discharged her, stifling the temptation to congratulate her on her poor husband fallen in the war. . . . So there, you see, here in Germany even today we live in the midst of this sort of people.

Hety worked many years for the Ministry of Culture of the Land Hessen: she was a diligent but impulsive functionary, the author of polemical reviews, the "impassioned" organizer of conventions and meetings with young people, and just as impassioned about her party's victories and defeats. After her retirement, in 1978, her cultural life became even richer: she wrote to me about travels, lectures, linguistic debates.

But above all, and throughout her life, she was avid, even famished for human encounters: the one with me, durable and fertile, was only one of many. "My destiny drives me toward men with a destiny," she wrote to me once: but more than a destiny what drove her was a vocation. She

searched for such persons, found them, put them in touch with one another, extremely curious about their encounters or collisions. It is she who gave me the address of Jean Améry and mine to him, but on one condition: that we both send her carbon copies of the letters we exchanged (we did). She also played an important role in helping me track down that Dr. Müller, the chemist in Auschwitz, later my supplier of chemical products and the penitent about whom I spoke in the Vanadium chapter in *The Periodic Table*. He had been a colleague of her ex-husband's. She also had asked for copies of the Müller dossier, to which she had a right; and she wrote intelligent letters to him about me and to me about him, with dutiful cross-mailings of all copies—"for your information."

Only on one occasion did we (or at least I) perceive a divergence. In 1966 Albert Speer was released from the Inter-Allied Spandau jail. As is known, he had been Hitler's court architect, but in 1943 he was appointed minister of the war industry; in that position he was to a great extent responsible for the organization of the factories in which we died of overwork and hunger. At Nuremberg he had been the only one among the defendants to plead guilty, also for things he had not known about; indeed, precisely for not having wanted to know about them. He was sentenced to twenty years' confinement, which he employed in writing his prison memoirs, published in Germany in 1975. Hety at first hesitated, then she read them, and was profoundly perturbed by them. She asked Speer for a meeting, which lasted two hours. She left him Langbein's book on Auschwitz and a copy of *Survival in Auschwitz*, telling him that it was his duty to read them. He gave her a copy of his Spandau diaries for Hety to send on to me.

I received and read these diaries, which bear the mark of

a cultivated and lucid mind and a change of heart that seems sincere (but an intelligent man knows how to simulate). In them Speer comes through as a Shakespearian character of boundless ambition, so great as to blind and contaminate him, but not a barbarian, coward or serf. I would gladly have eschewed this reading, because for me judging is painful, particularly as regards Speer, a not simple man, and a culprit who has paid. I wrote to Hety with a trace of irritation: "What impelled you to visit Speer? Curiosity? A sense of duty? A 'mission'?"

She answered:

I hope you understood the correct meaning of the gift of that book. Your question is also correct. I wanted to look into his face: look at how a man is made who allowed himself to be the succubus of Hitler, and became his creature. He says, and I believe him, that for him the Auschwitz slaughter is a trauma. He's obsessed by the question of how he could "not want to see or know," in short, block everything out. I do not think he's trying to find justification; he would like to understand what, for him, too, it is impossible to understand. He appears to me as a man who does not falsify, fights loyally, and torments himself over his past. For me, he has become a "key": he is a symbolic personage, the symbol of German aberration. He read Langbein's book with great pain, and he promised me that he would also read yours. I will keep you informed of his reactions.

These reactions, to my relief, never arrived: if I had been forced (as is the custom among civilized persons) to answer a letter from Albert Speer, I would have had some problems. In 1978, apologizing to me because of the disapproval she had scented in my letters, Hety visited Speer a second time and came back disappointed. She found him senile,

egocentric, pompous, and stupidly proud of his past as a Pharaonic architect. Thereafter the substance of our letters moved toward subjects which were more alarming because more current: the Moro affair, the escape of Kappler, the sudden death of the Baader-Meinhoff terrorist gang in the Stammheim super-jail. She was inclined to believe the official thesis of suicide; I was doubtful. Speer died in 1981, and Hety, unexpectedly, in 1983.

Our friendship, almost exclusively epistolary, was long and fruitful, often cheerful; strange, if I think of the enormous difference between our human itineraries and the geographic and linguistic distance between us, less strange if I recognize that among all my German readers she was the only one "with clean credentials" and therefore not entangled in guilt feelings, and that her curiosity was and is mine, leading her to rack her brains over the same themes I have discussed in this book.