

## **Synopsis**

### **Survival and Payback -- *The biography of Joe Brandt***

*by Burt Goldman*

At age 15, Joe Brandt is taken from his home in Romania to Auschwitz where he is assigned to work in a bomb factory. One of the Capo's, Karl Haupman, a sadistic overseer, kills the prisoners with impunity. When Joe is 16, Haupman, after months of tormenting his charges knocks Joe's front teeth out with a blow from the club he carried. He kills six of Joe's acquaintances as well.

A year after working and existing in Auschwitz the war is coming to a close and the workers, along with 20,000 others are sent to Berlin on what is ultimately to be known as the 'Death March.' Close to Berlin Joe escapes into the dark forest when a cloud, blown by a slight breeze, covers the moon. There he meets up with other survivors who are hiding in a forest. The Russian army closes in and Joe is captured. He escapes the Russian camp where he is taken. The war ends and Joe finds himself alone, wandering in Berlin. He is ultimately rescued by Americans and sent to Bergen-Belsen a former concentration camp being used for displaced persons.

Joe is offered a variety of countries to emigrate to and chooses the United States. Reaching New York he is placed with a family and learns to speak English. Hearing of opportunities in California he travels there and educates himself in civil engineering. Saving his pennies Joe opens a car wash and invents the spray wax process. He invests every spare dollar in property. It's the 60s and every property spurts up in value while Joe re-invests. He soon finds himself a wealthy man living in Beverly Hills with his wife Ella, herself a survivor of the concentration camps.

One day, while in line at a local movie house Joe sees a familiar face. It's Karl Haupman, his former tormentor. Investigating, Joe discovers that Haupman has changed his name to Andrew Thomas and is passing himself off as a survivor of Auschwitz even to having a number tattooed on his left arm. Joe decides to handle the man himself and hires Boswell Leach, a detective, to follow Haupman and report all his doings so that Joe can figure some form of payback for all the torments Haupman visited on his charges.

As the net closes in, Haupman escapes Joe's web of intrigue and disappears. Joe keeps Boswell on his payroll and assigns him to find Haupman. Feeling guilty about Haupman's escape Joe decides to build a memorial to his friends who did not survive the Holocaust and chooses Palm Desert, California, for the site. The memorial takes all of Joe's energies for years until its completion.

Boswell calls Joe during the building of the memorial with the news that he has located Haupman but that fate has taken a hand in the payback. Haupman has had an accident that has paralyzed him and he is in a hospital in Laredo, Texas. Joe feels a great emptiness on hearing that as he personally wanted vengeance. He travels to Laredo to see what he can do to make Haupman realize the extent of his evil past. When he arrives at the hospital and sees the helpless Haupman Joe comes to the realization of the phrase 'What goes around, comes around.'

Joe returns to California, completes the Holocaust Memorial, feels fulfillment and redemption and vows to spend his life speaking to groups around the country about his experiences.

## **Excerpt**

### **Survival and Payback**

#### **The biography of Joe Brandt**

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### **Chapter One**

#### **Auschwitz - January, 1945**

“Up, up! Everybody up! Quick, quick! Be quick about it!” The Bulvon shouted at the top of his lungs to overcome the squeak of a voice so out of place in that hulking body. The motley group began to stir. No one wanted to get up. I'd been sleeping on my side with the body at my back pushing me onto the one in front of me. I lay sandwiched between the Greek and the Pole. I could feel the Greek behind me move slightly. Sighing I thought, ‘Well he's still alive.’ But there was no movement from the Polish prisoner. I could feel warmth at my back but only putty like coolness from the body my chest and thighs were scrunched onto. If the Pole had died during the night there would only be four of us on the wooden bunk that evening.

I pushed the Pole on the back of his head and it rolled forward like a stone. He was a goner. There'd be one less on the boards, at least for tonight. I hadn't slept four on a pallet for weeks, not since Kater decided he couldn't handle it any more and took a dive into the fence to electrocute himself. Four on the sleeping pallet instead of six; maybe today would be a good one. I hoped so. There weren't many, bad days were normal. If we had to think about it even the most pessimistic would say that it couldn't get worse. But in the heart of winter, with icicles hanging from every corner of the barracks and the floor cold enough to burn your bare feet, it was worse. Up we got. The boards of the bunk rocked like a ship at sea as we untangled from one another. No one was ever fast enough for Haupmann though. He ran from cot to cot beating slowpokes with his bat. No matter that we were all jumping out of bed, shivering and standing at attention. He beat whoever was handy anyway. Try to get away from it. A mouse with a busted leg would have a better chance against a cat.

I thought of Haupmann, the bushy eyebrowed Capo in our barracks, as a Bulvon. A Bulvon is a demon from hell that looks like a human being. Our Capo fit that description perfectly. Haupmann was a prisoner himself. He didn't have a number tattooed on his forearm though, instead he wore a triangle on his shirt indicating that he was a murderer released from a German prison to help guard and torment the Jews who were concentrated in the various camps. The job the Germans gave him fit his personality to a T. I knew his name was Karl Haupmann but to call him by name was to signal the angel of destruction. Even eye contact was dangerous. We all avoided the Bulvon.

Someone behind me muttered something about the cold. It was the Greek. His shoes had been stolen the night before and his feet were freezing. He hadn't learned the trick of wrapping them in a piece of blanket for protection. The Bulvon heard him. He bulled past the front line-up hitting me on the shoulder as he knocked me aside with his bat to get to the Greek. My arm felt like a truck had banged into it as I scrambled out of his way. I should have known better than to stand there when I suspected he would come for the Greek.

No one spoke even in a whisper when Haupmann was around, not in the morning before roll call anyway. The Greek's eyes opened like saucers. He saw what was coming. The bat came down on his cheek, opening it like a pomegranate; another blow from the club smashed his neck. That one took all the starch out of him and he plopped down like a sack. But it didn't help; Haupmann's arm raised, the bat whistled down, and once again there was a sickening crunch as the Greek was struck on the top of his head. He lay on the floor, not moving, not moaning, breathing deeply.

The Capo drew his foot back and kicked the tip of his boot, with all his force, into the Greek's chest. There was a loathsome sound, a sigh, and I knew there would only be three of us on the bunk that evening.

Haupmann pointed his bat towards the door. Floodlights lit the grounds, drowning the stars with brightness. Snow covered everything, reflecting and magnifying the bright lights sweeping through the camp. "Out, get out. Quick." he repeated again and again. "Quick, quick, out of the barracks for the count." Everyone shuffled out. No one wanted to stand in the cold for twenty minutes while we went through the first count—but it was either that or die.

There were two hundred men in my barracks, Barrack 5; the other prisoners called it the luck barrack because we had running water.

We were workers and were rewarded with a dribble of moisture from three pipes in what might be called a wash room. There were also three showerheads if anyone wanted to take a chance on losing their clothes while washing themselves, which few would risk. With watchful eyes waiting to claim anything lying around, like a cap, or jacket I, like all the rest, was leery about getting into a shower. There was a toilet if you could call it that—twenty holes cut into the floor above a three foot deep trench. This for more than two hundred men. But what was in the stomach seldom left the body so it was no problem. A slice of bread and some watery soup—not much bulk in that. Starving bodies absorb nails. We didn't need many toilet facilities.

Of course when you had to go, you had to go. You never think about things that you have until you lose them, even the necessary ones. Who thinks about a place to park your backside when the need comes up? I never did. But that morning in Auschwitz I really had to take a dump. My stomach was upset even more than usual. It was all I could do to hold it in. I couldn't get to the holy ground as we called the toilet and Haupmann was just outside the door waiting to whack the last few coming out just on general principle.

Looking around frantically I finally ran to a corner of the barracks, pulled down my pants and with an explosion of relief was saved. The whole job took less than three seconds. Yanking up my pants on the run, I pushed in front of two goners and escaped the club one more morning.

In a normal society, after doing your business, you wipe yourself. But in Auschwitz that was never a consideration. Toilet paper wasn't only not available, it was no longer imaginable. Some of the prisoners did keep a rag around. Younkell Shoukof was one of those. He was the only person I avoided because of his smell. The place stank so badly that our smellers were virtually destroyed, but Younkell, with his rag, was the exception; him I could smell. We hardly noticed the odor in the barrack except when we came back from work. Even then it was only during a breezy day when the stench of the ovens was dissipated.

"Five's, five's. Line up by five's. Quick. You there be quick about it. Line up, line up! Hey there are only four of you. Five's I said. Dammit stay in line. Quick, quick."

By the time the Capo lined us up at least twenty bodies were bruised black and blue with a few heads sporting lumps the size of small lemons. These were the lucky ones. Hauptmann killed one or two of us every day. He didn't dare murder any more than that, as they would be short laborers for the factory. But the guards, that was a different story. They could kill as many as it pleased them to. I stayed as far from the guards as I could get.

I almost broke my right leg once when a guard came towards me from the left the day after the Bulvon hit me in the face with his club. My teeth had shattered and an eye had swollen shut. I didn't see the guard until he was ten feet from me. Leaping backwards to get out of his way, I tripped over my feet and lay there twisted and helpless in the frozen mud. I must have looked funny. That's what saved my life.

The guard swung the rifle off his shoulder and was about to crush me with the butt when he started to laugh. He laughed so much and so hard that another guard ran up to him. The first guard pointed to me and they both laughed till tears came into their eyes. I just lay there on the frozen ground, not daring to move—hardly daring to breathe. They left and I got up and went about my business. I never got that close to a guard since. Getting close to a guard was a sure way to get out of Auschwitz but I wasn't ready for that exit yet.

Finally the count was finished. It included those who had died or were killed by fellow inmates for a piece of hoarded bread the poor soul had hidden hoping to nibble a crumb or two during the night when hunger became too much to bear.

Breakfast for the worker barracks was being served. I spoke Hungarian and Romanian and a few other languages but not Polish. There were only thirty of us in my barracks who spoke the languages I knew, the rest were Poles so there wasn't much talking although most did speak Yiddish which was the common language of European Jewry.

I managed to make it known that I wasn't going to be pushed away from the slop pot again. Two days before, the Polish Jews had ganged up and grabbed double helpings of bread before one of the Capo's noticed. Haupmann pushed in, the bat swinging like a sickle in front of him and they dispersed. By the time it came to me there wasn't a crumb left. I had to be content with a cup of the chicory flavored water they called coffee.

Hunger was a constant, the feeling so familiar that few of us realized we were starving to death. It was just a gnawing feeling we'd gotten used to. But I felt hunger. I craved food that day like a fish craves water. It wasn't going to happen again. Not if I could help it.

Shoving my way through a gang of forty I yanked a bowl from inside my pants where it hung from a hook I'd contrived. I held it out just in time to get a ladle full of coffee. It was hot, brown, and tasted like something different than water. It warmed the gut for a few minutes even though it was gulped while standing in ankle deep snow. After coffee it's line-up for bread ration. That's what kept us workers alive, bread. Black, coarse, and mealy, with a crust like concrete. But it was life itself. Bread was what we lived for. Bread was our steak, our baked potato and sour cream. Bread was roast turkey with gibleet gravy, it was a rich chicken soup with globules of fat floating thickly on top. Bread was our everything. It was all.

Bread. One food. That's all we had and all we could ever hope to have. Oh there was soup, but that was practically colored water. I mean a solid food that could be chewed and swallowed, not drunk. I loved it. I worshipped it. Every morsel from every bite went into my body with a rush. That black, coarse bread, with a crust like stone, was my everything. It was to me everything I was to have or hope to get.

My riches were a slice of bread. It was dumped into the bowl I held out like a Buddhist mendicant begging alms and I snuck over to a corner with my prize. It was a place I knew where few prisoners went, and no guards. There I munched on a corner of the bread. I was lucky. My front teeth were shattered but I could still chew with my back molars, slowly of course, until some sort of taste appeared. But then again, who ate for taste? We weren't looking for taste. How could we when we would have killed for the body of a dead rat? Rat, especially if you can roast it a little over a fire, is a special treat when your life depends on a few grains of baked wheat.

I finished most of my bread, saving only a small piece of the crust to shovel out some of the farina I was hoping to get later in the day from one of the women at the factory. Farina, now there was food. Nothing like it to stick to your ribs. But as I had no spoon it was hard to get out of the bowl. It's great to have a lump of hard bread to scrape out a bowl with.

It was almost 6:00 a.m. and soon we'd have to march four miles to the factory. Only a little more time left to get anything done for myself. These morning minutes were precious. When we returned at night, we were so exhausted that it was all we could do to fall into our bunks and drop immediately into blissful sleep. But anyone who knew

anything about camps could do himself some good in the morning when he still had some energy to do with.

Those Capos were tough but they weren't all brutes from the depths of hell although most were. There was a Capo in the next barracks who looked at me like I was almost a human being. I heard one of the guards yell at him one day and call out his name, it was Werner. I discovered Hauptmann's name the same way. Names were something we didn't forget in the camps. You never knew, one day there might be a reckoning and a name could be a diamond. But you never asked a name; to ask was to ask for death. I wouldn't even call Werner by name. A dog doesn't call his master. The master calls the dog. And this puppy wanted to live. Why, I had no idea. It seemed as though the camp was forever.

I walked boldly to the next barracks, boldly so that it would look as though I had business there. Werner was leaning on the side of the building. He'd managed to scrounge a cigarette. Amazing. I hadn't seen one for weeks. Not that I wanted one. I didn't smoke. But a cigarette was like an emerald necklace. For a cigarette I could get three or four slices of bread. For a cigarette, I could even get to sleep by myself for a night or two. I watched Werner as he drew in the smoke, his eyes closing with the inhale; he wanted to get the full feel of it. You could almost see him get light headed as he puffed. He must have felt eyes on him because without looking towards me he asked almost gently, "What do you want?"

"I thought I might clean your boots sir, if I may." I said in my humblest manner.

He nodded and stuck out a foot. I ran over to him and pulled off my neck cloth. My neck would freeze for a few minutes but who knows what could come from this? Werner rested his foot on a rock and kept smoking while I dusted, wiped, and polished his boots with spit and enthusiasm. I finished. Werner pinched off the end of the cigarette and handed me the butt. He turned, walked off, and I went back to my barracks richer by a day's ration at least.

I had been in Auschwitz for eight months. A long time to keep yourself alive with the conditions that prevailed. But I was young, had what might be called a cute way of carrying myself, and apparently had developed the type of personality that could survive the savage treatment. I felt it was just something to live through.

The fact of man's inhumanity to man never entered my mind. To me, the German was the monster and all other Europeans were fodder for the monster's maw. As long as I kept away from those gapping jaws I would be all right. I didn't think about the future, nor did I consider the past. The now was all that concerned me, as every moment was critical.

I was with prisoners from twelve different countries who spoke seven different languages, we could barely communicate with one another, it was a barracks of Babel.

We slept on wooden pallets with a bottom, middle, and top bunk. Six were assigned to each level—eighteen prisoners to each triple tier. We lay together like squashed bananas with the two on the end constantly pushing themselves towards the middle to

avoid falling to the floor. It seems a bestial arrangement but if the truth were to be known we didn't mind. In winter, with temperatures approaching freezing, our bodies generated a cozy warmth and this saved us many a night of shivering during sleep.

You couldn't turn over or lie on your back or even get up to take an occasional nocturnal piss. If you had to go, squeezed together as we were, you simple pissed in your pants and enjoyed the momentary warmth. What's the difference? You'd be dry in the morning anyhow. Of course the fellows in the bunk below didn't appreciate that but they had more to be concerned with than a bit of yellow rain. We had no undergarments, no socks, no overcoats and few had caps. Not many had shoes. We were constantly jumping up and down and beating our arms against our chests to keep warm.

Capos were, for the most part, Polish, occasionally, like Hauptmann, they were German. Prisoners also, but in charge of other prisoners. Usually a bad guy transferred from a German prison. Murderers, rapists, child molesters—these were our immediate keepers. German soldiers assigned to Auschwitz were chosen from the sadists of the German army. If they were a bit insane, overly aggressive, or mentally incompetent it was a sure bet they would be assigned to one of the camps to oversee Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other stains on the German consciousness.

The Capo had his own room near the only door to the outside. His was the only heating element in the barracks, a small stove that produced pleasant warmth when he deigned to leave his door open. The bunks near the Capo's room were both lucky and unlucky. The area was warmer true, but the men were also closest to the Capo's bat and as for myself I'd rather be blue from the cold than black and blue from the bat.

There was a hospital at Auschwitz. I say 'hospital' for that's what it was called but it was really a halfway house to an oven more than a place of healing. Inmates who visited the hospital never seemed to make it back to barracks. One day it all came out. The 'hospital' was a room where prisoners were processed, shoved onto a stretcher, injected with cyanide and dumped into an oven. They got over their illness in a hurry.

By December of 1944 it seemed as though the war would go on forever. We knew others were involved as occasionally, an American or British bomber would raid the area but we were safe from them. Not that we didn't all pray that the camp would be bombed, we did. But it never was. It seems that the Allies were under orders not to 'waste' bombs on the camps. It was ridiculous. Every time there was an air raid Auschwitz would fill up with German officers who ran to the safety of the Charnel house. Occasionally some of the people in the nearby town who happened to be in the vicinity during a raid would run to get close to the fence knowing the planes would not bomb the camp.

I hear people claim they didn't know what was going on during that period. Bullshit. They knew. They would have to be deaf and blind not to have known. They were propagandized to where many of them believed they were ridding the world of vermin.

Now, when I think that the Christian religion is based on the God of the Jews, as is the Moslem, (after all Abraham is father of all three religions) and we are all created in

His image—it is incomprehensible to me that there is so much hate in the world. I must believe that one-day, in retrospect, perhaps in a millennium, it will be clear.

We were lining up fast but still the whistles blew and voices yelled, “Quick, quick. Line up by five’s. Line up, line up.” It was time to march to the factory. Another day of work was starting. “Shnell, shnell”. I’ll hear those words till my dying day. They’re carved into my brain. A thousand times a day, from every mouth they came. Whatever we were doing, walking, working, eating, marching, it was always under the command of the Capo singing out, “Shnell.” But we weren’t quick. How could we be living on a diet and a caloric intake that wouldn’t keep a cat alive? We didn’t walk we shuffled. We didn’t march, we staggered, we didn’t work, we simply went through the motions. But somehow, some of us survived.

Finally we were ready for the march. We stumbled through the gates and under the sign: ‘Work Makes You Free.’ On we went, eyes fixed on the striped jacket of the man directly in front of us. Each man conserving as much energy as possible for the job ahead.

We passed the end of the camp. There was a square wire fence enclosing the children’s experimental section. Every day I vowed I would not look in that direction, and every day I broke my vow. The faces stared over hands hanging on the wire. Wide owl eyes in faces older than time. Five and six year old ancient faces with eyes that followed us as we moved en mass to our daily chore.

An inmate broke out of the line, ran over to the fence and handed a scrap of bread to one of a score of outstretched hands that appeared at his approach. A guard took off after him immediately and before he could return to his place his skull was crushed by the butt of the guard’s rifle, the dog was released and growling he grabbed the lifeless neck and shook it like a rag doll. The children hadn’t moved. Not one of them cried out or was shocked by the sudden, brutal act. The only movement came from one of the children whose jaws were moving slowly as she stared straight ahead, thinking thoughts only God was privy to while she chewed her scrap of bread.

The prisoner lay where he fell, blood slowly seeping from his head, brightly coloring the pure, clean, new fallen snow. The dog lifted a leg and sprayed the unfortunate’s body. The guard watched the action unsmiling. He looked at the column of us trudging along, every eye straight ahead. To catch his eye, was to catch death.

The column of five’s created a soft roar as thousands of feet shuffled through the snow. Some feet were bare, some wrapped with torn pieces of blanket, and a few lucky ones with shoes. Lucky were those whose shoes fit them. Luckier still were those who had shoes large enough to allow for a wrap or two of material. I was one of the lucky ones, being very slight of stature I had tiny feet and my shoes were four or five sizes too large for me. Just right for my blanket wrap. My feet were almost warm sometimes.

Every now and again one of the guards, a fat, bull of a man, with stomach hanging over his belt, would tie his dog to a tree, run over to the outside line and bang his rifle butt down on the bare foot of a poor soul he had picked out for some reason known only

to himself. Every time he did this he would yell out, "Shnell, shnell." But his cries to walk faster were useless. His victim was always in the center of the column and couldn't walk any faster if he wanted to. I never found out the guard's name. We called him Schmidt. He walked back to his dog and resumed his overseer duties.

The guards and capo's were beyond understanding. Their actions were outside of cruelty, they were senseless to any rational person. We looked at them as some sort of natural disaster we had been unfortunate enough to get in the way of. Hauptmann was an avalanche, a tornado, an earthquake. It was senseless to fight it; you just got out of its way if you could. For us, the only hope was obeying every order as fast as possible, and to wait it out hoping our bodies would outlast the war.

We were nearing the radio station; it was our first point of reference. At the rate we walked, drained of strength, devitalized and enervated, the four mile walk took well over an hour. The guards kept prodding and yelling, "Shnell, shnell." For the guards, well fed and shod, with heavy overcoats bundling them from the biting cold it was an easy walk on a level, snow covered road. But for us, it was uphill all the way.

"Joseph," someone whispered alongside me. I took a chance and threw a quick glance to the man who spoke. It was a Hungarian prisoner, Benny. I never knew his other name. I cleared my throat but didn't answer. "Joseph," he whispered again. I struck him lightly with an elbow showing him I heard but that I didn't want to answer. Schmidt was only five or six feet in front of us, keeping a tight rein on his dog.

Once again Benny spoke, I was getting edgy, this could be big trouble if Schmidt noticed him. "Why is God doing this to us Joseph?"

I didn't answer. There was no answer. I didn't believe there was a God. How could there be if all this was taking place? I didn't think that anyone in particular was responsible. We just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like I said, a natural disaster. I didn't even blame the Germans. I grew up with a couple of German kids for friends. They were nice enough. They were pretty much like me, except they spoke Romanian with a little accent. Most of us had a tendency to judge Germany by the sadistic crud that we had contact with. I suppose there is some rationale for this. I suppose that the character of a class is sometimes measured by its lesser elements. But that would be unfair. It would stand to reason that the minority on top as well as the one on the bottom should be thrown out when making the determination of a people.

A class should really be judged by its middle element. And those people we had no contact with at all.

I had to believe that the people I was coming into contact with were a special group, lower than even the dregs of a normal society. The world had turned into a kaleidoscope of sadism, and brutality, and a person's worth was measured by the degree of his cruelty. We were living in a bizarre cartoon where good was bad and evil was divine. We were in a world where torture and murder was the preferred norm. The wonder of it all was that every prisoner didn't go insane. Many did. But many did not. Benny was on the

edge and had been for weeks. I edged away from him not wanting to be near when the hammer finally fell.

Benny was quiet for a few minutes and I sighed with relief. We were nearing the rail tracks and our journey would soon be over. My hand slipped over the pocket of my uniform shirt. My two treasures were there. The cigarette butt I hoped to trade for food, and the crust of bread I was saving for the noon meal. Strange how treasures change. For some, security and comfort is a home, six figures in the bank, and a loving family. For me it was a scrap of bread and the butt of a cigarette. But if you want the full truth, nothing that came after ever gave me the comfort those two things resting in the pocket of a thin, striped, uniform shirt did. I walked with chin high and almost felt a bit of smugness. You won't understand that, how could you? You can't tell a person with wealth about poverty, how can they understand? You can't get a person who's warm to feel your cold. And you can't get a person who has eaten three meals a day all their lives to understand hunger. As well try to explain an airplane to a rabbit.

The front of the column had crossed the track. My group was nearing the rails when Benny did it. Dancing like a marionette gone mad, he hopped out of the column singing and throwing his arms up to the sky. Whatever unseen wires connect sanity with reality there were, had broken. He had joined the madness of his oppressors, but without their means. The column undulated away leaving him with his mad cavorting. He pranced by Schmidt who stared at him seriously for a long moment. Then smiling he released the shepherd. Who knows who trains these dogs? Whoever it is, they are as responsible for the animals' actions as the dog itself. It was a weapon under the control of its keeper. I suppose their rationale would be that the man who creates the bomb and the bullet and the bayonet is not responsible for its use.

When a tool is created whose only application is that of destroying life, then the creator of the tool is just as responsible as the user. Its keeper was the finger on the trigger. Schmidt spoke a command into the beast's ear and he flew at Benny like a furry javelin. There was a scream and a roaring growl and then another dog, released by one of the other guards joined in the fun. The column was halted for a moment so that the guards could enjoy the show. It was over in a few seconds. The dogs knew their business. Benny's throat no longer existed and he was at rest, finally. Benny was seventeen. You had to be young to put up with the lack of nourishment and torments we endured. Our innocent minds just couldn't process the information we were receiving. It would be many years later when the memories would come, usually waking us at four in the morning in a cold sweat. Then the dusty picture postcard scenes of the graphic violence would intrude on consciousness and the event would be relived, but from a vast distance.

I felt no great loss when Benny left the column. It was just another face I wouldn't be seeing again. My mind went back to my left shirt pocket and during the rest of the walk it remained there, tasting and re-tasting the bread. I walked gathering all sorts of mental riches from the trading of the cigarette butt as well.

Shnell, Shnell, God dammit, hurry up there.” The guards were getting anxious; it must have been close to eight o’clock. I heard that when we weren’t in the factory by the dot of eight the guards would have to face the music when we got back to camp. The snow was particular deep this day and the column crept along at a snails pace in spite of the prodding by the guards and the threat of the dogs. We had lost two other men besides Benny. The other two had fallen and were simply shot. The guards didn’t like to waste bullets on us but we were losing time and it was faster than beating one of us to death or setting a dog to do the job.

Finally the factory came into view. The column moved perceptibly faster. By this time we were all frozen and the factory was warm. We were shuffling faster until it was almost a quick march. Snow had started to fall on top of everything else and we couldn’t wait to get inside. But it was not to be. Not yet anyhow. There was, first of all, the inevitable count.

”Line up. Line up. You there, get your group together.” A whistle blew. It was the eight o’clock call from the factory. They couldn’t keep us much longer. But the count was essential. If one body couldn’t be accounted for it would go hard on the guards in charge. We were counted off and were four short. That tallied. Four had dropped on the march. And inside the factory we went. A mass of workers to fall upon the various machines we were assigned to like locusts fall on a crop of wheat.

We had arrived. I soon found myself at the lathe. My assignment was making bomb cones. The work was tedious—the floor cold and hard. My home was a 4 x 8 wood pallet that I shared with four strangers. But I was a fighter, and I had an attitude that was for the most part, keeping me sane—it was hate. I hated capos and guards like I hated roaches. No, I hated them more. Roaches at least have some redeeming features. Capos have none especially Haupmann. And yet I loved one of the guards. Here I was a victim in the purest sense of the word, thinking pleasant thoughts about one of my tormentors.

It was Werner. Why did I love him? He was the only person in that entire inferno of hate, sadism, and burnt hair and flesh who ever gave me anything, or looked sympathetically at me. I shined his shoes—I fawned and praised his generosity to the sky, and in my heart I felt a warm burst of pleasure every time he came into view.

I was a captive in a prison town. My world was a room only a little larger than my parent’s living room. My possessions were taken from me, even to my underwear and socks. The only thing that covered my naked body was a long, thin shirt along with a thin pair of pants—no underclothes. I lived in that room with a hundred strangers who also had on a long, thin, shirt and pants. I had been in that room for six months living on 1 slice of mealy bread, and 2 bowls of watery soup per day. Every afternoon at three o’clock or thereabouts, the Bulvon would get his kicks and run into the room with his bat to beat one of us to death, right in front of everyone. Every morning I would leave that room and go for a long walk, on frozen ground covered with snow, to a factory job.

I saw, at least four times a week, 6 bodies hanging from a gibbet about 25 feet from where I slept. Oh how I wanted to speak to one of the guards about the treatment I was receiving but if I did—it was a certainty that guard would pick up his rifle, smash it on the side of my face, and wallop various parts of my body until bones broke. If I was lucky the beating would kill me, because if it didn't, I would die slowly, and painfully.

Werner saved my sanity—he was a contradiction. If a contradiction existed then maybe the mold was wrong. What happened was that every now again, perhaps once a week, Werner would slip me chunks of bread, a slice of meat—horse to be sure, but protein, good substantial life preserving protein. And for this I shined his boots whenever I could. I would have licked them as well if I had to.

A secure person doesn't know what it's like to be enslaved, to be the victim whenever your master feels a bit of anger, frustration, or resentment—which was often.

A lathe was my job. I hated the repetitious work, but the alternative was to be in the barracks at the whim of the Capo. And that would have been good-bye to Joe Brandt. So I turned the handles on my lathe and produced nice shiny bomb cones to be dropped only God knew where. The morning passed moderately well, I was fresh from a night's sleep with black bread filling some of the holes in my stomach. Also there was lunch to be looked forward to. The tasty meal of the day. Generally watery soup composed of grass, a bit of cabbage and occasionally a bit of boiled rat, or horsemeat floating on top. In my pocket was a crust for a finishing scoop, my mouth watered when I thought about it. Also there was a cigarette butt to be traded for who knows what?

I looked around cautiously. No guards in sight, everyone was working diligently. Not even a whisper of a human voice. I looked over to Masham the Hungarian. He worked on the next lathe to mine, it was against the wall, where mine was closer to the middle of the area. Masham would occasionally duck under his lathe for a quick drag of a cigarette if he were lucky enough to snag one somewhere. He was a sure client for my butt. Anyone who would risk his life for one drag was a sure customer. Masham wasn't to be seen. Sure enough he must be braving the fates again. I looked over to the can to see if maybe he had to piss or something, but he was not there either. A real puzzle. No one just walked away from a lathe, not unless he was suicidal. He had to be puffing away under the lathe.

I looked around again to spot any guards. Still it was clear. I took a few quick jumps till I was at one end of the lathe. Holding my head down I whispered his name as loud as I dared. "Masham."

No answer. The mystery deepened. I looked around again before I walked around the lathe to see if he was under it when I spotted a guard about to turn down my aisle. Quick as a fox I hopped back to my place and turned to the tool. Staring at the long curl of metal slowly gathering at the burl, I turned the set handle to draw back a bit when I heard a yell of "Verdamnt!" Then there was a scream from a woman. There was the sound of a blow and I heard Masham cry out, "Ge volt, Gevolt."

More blows and cries and a shuffle of movement as other guards converged on the spot. As for me, my eyes never once lifted from the ever glistening bomb cone, not for a minute, not for a second. But when three of the guards stomped by, right in front of my lathe, dragging a man and a woman along the floor—the man by the arm, the woman by her foot with her head bouncing on the concrete as they walked by, I couldn't help but see. How I wish I hadn't.

After that the hours passed ponderously. It was slow going at best, but with Masham gone, and you could guess to what fate, the time crawled by. I was looking at my work but you could bet that my mind was on a puzzle. Who was the woman? What was she doing with Masham under the lathe? It wasn't easy for me to figure out what was what. Not then. I was a teen-age kid who knew more about fireflies than I did about sex. And there were no fireflies in my village.

Here's a girl, maybe nineteen years old, who was very pretty. In a normal world to be nineteen and pretty is a blessing, but in my world it was a curse. Worst than that—it was a sentence of degradation and worse. The girl, whose name I never knew, had not known a moment of compassion or love for three years. She was taken from her family and passed over to the officers prostitute club for their pleasure and had spent eighteen months there. Her young, eager, innocent mind had simply worn out. When her haggardness began to show they gave her to Heldigar Utterstein, a notorious sadist. After six months with Heldigar, to the factory—where she had the option of working, or dying.

Her lathe assignment was not far from Masham's and they somehow managed to seek each other out at occasional lunches, and moments of opportunity. Without ever so much as touching one another, they had fallen in love. True, unadulterated, maddening love. They managed to meet a few times, whispering their feelings as best they could until, one day, their bodies clashed together uniting the two loneliest people in the world in a cocoon of love and closeness. A closeness neither of them had felt in as long as memory served.

For a brief moment—perhaps two minutes, certainly no longer, the risk was far too great—they clung to one another and then got up and went to their respective lathes. Was anything ever consummated? I don't know. I don't want to know. It was one of the things that affected me deeply, the discovery of Masham and his lady.

They committed a crime punishable by death. Imagine what the German guards did to them if a person could be killed for not marching in a straight line. Come to think about it don't imagine it.

The whistle blew. The machines stopped. There was a sudden quiet. It was time for soup. I felt for the crust of bread and patted the small bulge in my shirt jacket. I knew the cigarette butt was secure but I had hoped to sell it to Masham for part of his morning bread ration. Now I would have to find someone else. Standing in line, thinking, I touched my thigh where the bowl hung, lightly scraping my leg. It was a good feeling. That bowl was worth more to me than your house is to you. Some of the men had a

plate. Try catching a ladle full of soup in a plate. It's no joke. They had a problem. Usually solved by tipping it and keeping the soup from overflowing by cupping hands on the edge. But if they were near the front of the line the hot soup would burn their hands. What was more important, food, or hands? Both were needed. There was a lot of hoping around by the plates as I called them. That's why I protected my bowl like I did. It would disappear in a second if I turned my head.

I reached the cooks ladling out lunch. Holding out my bowl I watched to see if he scooped the top like he sometimes did, dishing out nothing but hot water, or did he dig the ladle deep. I let my breath out with a sigh. He dug deep. I got a good measure. It was going to be a good day.

We ate outside no matter what the weather. The day was cold—not excessive, although those who had no shoes might argue the point. There was about a foot of snow on the untrammelled ground, and a mud like consistency on the pathways. I walked over to a tree and leaning on it drank from my bowl. I had no spoon. I looked longingly over at the women's slop pot. They were getting hot cereal. It looked like farina. I loved farina. It stayed with you for hours. I had a sudden thought. I gulped the rest of my soup, barely chewing on the bit of vegetable, what kind I had no idea. I threw some snow in the bowl, scrubbed it briefly and hung it back inside my pants.

Now to get within whispering distance of one of the ladies. We only had twenty minutes but as I was one of the first in line there was still plenty of time for what I had in mind. As nonchalant as I could be I walked to the women's section. It was separated from us only by a series of planks on barrels every ten feet or so. Some of the women were eating off the planks. I put the cigarette butt between my lips and moved my head from side to side, slowly, like I was advertising what was in my mouth. Sure enough, a string bean with a long shirt, came over to me. We were separated only by the plank. Looking around to see if any curious guards were watching, (they weren't,) she held out her bowl. It contained about a third of its height in farina. Caviar.

I whipped the butt out of my mouth and handed it to her, at the same time taking out my bowl and placing it on the plank. She reached into her bowl and with the flat of her hand swept the farina into my dish with a flourish, giving me a wink in the bargain. She would have been something on the outside, with a family, and about fifty additional pounds on her frame. Another sweep of her hand and the trade was done. Nodding her thanks she licked the remnants of cereal from her hand and walked away with her treasure.

Back to my tree. I pulled the chunk of bread out and started shoveling farina into my mouth. Ambrosia. Pushing the last of the cereal past my teeth I scrapped the bowl clean with the crust and popped it onto my tongue. I chewed slowly and carefully, getting the last lick of sustenance out of it. As I swallowed the last bit, the whistle blew and back to my lathe I went, almost content.

In just half a day, I had witnessed a suicide, three murders by bludgeoning, a man killed and ripped apart by dogs, an attack on two people who were also murdered, one of

them a friend—and here I am, content because I just ate a scrap of bread and some farina that a person on the outside would have thrown into the garbage had they but smelled it. Surely the world was mad. What was on the bottom was on the top and what was on the top was on the bottom. What was good was bad, and what was bad was good. I couldn't think about the philosophy of the present. It was a world created by mad gods.

The only thing that did make sense to me was a plot that I was aware of. I didn't want to think about it as it was certain death for anyone who had even nodded at the conspirators if they were caught. Mender was the only one whose name I knew. The other three I knew nothing about. It was a plot conceived by Mender. He tried to recruit me but I said no. I knew there were four of them because of something that Mender had said. "Yussel," he always called me by my Jewish name, "with you, there will be five and that's as many as we want. Join us. We may get killed, but at least we'll strike a blow."

That's what got to me. We'll strike a blow. How I would have liked to have struck a blow. I did it plenty of times, but only in my imagination. To actually do it was to commit suicide. When you're swimming in a river of alligators and there's no way to get to the shore you're better off pretending you're a log.

Mender was a stuffer. That is he worked the machinery that stuffed gunpowder into the shell casings. His plan was to steal two hundred pounds of gunpowder and blow up the crematorium.

Personally, I couldn't see the sense of it. There would be retaliations and things would get worse. What a laugh. I was fighting blowing up a place that existed solely to burn hundreds of thousands of people up and turn the cream of Jewry into ashes. Why did I resist? There would be many sleepless nights over that question.

About four in the afternoon, I was hunched over my lathe, concentrating on a curl, thinking about how nice it would have been to be home, walking in a park, or eating something, when all of a sudden there was a tremendous explosion. All the windows on one side of the factory popped out and shattered with a scream of breaking glass. Work stopped but nobody dared to move, or even talk, much less to cry out. Only the guards were yelling and running about looking for someone to hit, even before they found out what was the cause of the explosion.

It was Mender. Along with his gang of three. And my only thoughts? "Uh oh. There goes my good day."

But they never caught Mender. He was back at his job, lining up the casings looking like nothing at all happened. He got away with it. Don't ask me how. He just did. Sometimes, things like that happened. We were slaves yes, we were victims yes, subjugated yes, but we were still men; we were still human beings. In spite of everything that was happening to prove to us that we could not some fought back in whatever way they could.

The workers weren't punished much. The guards vented their rage on the poor souls waiting to die. Our punishment was short rations. For the next two weeks, soup

only every other day. That was a hardship we would live through. But this day I was feeling good. Great, now that I knew Mender had pulled it off—and better yet, that he had gotten away with it. My belly was full. A man with a full belly doesn't complain about hunger.

There was an odor that hung over Auschwitz. It was the smell of burning hair and flesh. When you first got there, if there was any food at all in your stomach, up it would come. You couldn't help it, the smell was beyond your capacity to accept. You wanted to hold your breath so you wouldn't take it in, but how long can that go on? You breathed. You sniffed. You gagged. You got used to it. When the wind blew from the South the smell of the ovens caressed the town like the breath of Satan. Don't tell me the townspeople didn't know what was going on in the camp!

Finally, the factory whistle blew, as eventually it always did, and we tramped outside for the count. It was a dance macabre—almost comical. Men and women in thin shift like jackets. Some with no shoes, simply a piece of cloth wrapped around their feet. All jumping up and down but without the energy to jump. More of a jerking to keep warm.

"Five's, form up in five's. Schnell. Make it quick. Five's."

The quicker we formed the faster we got back to Auschwitz. Imagine being in a hurry to get to Auschwitz. But that was where the warmth was. We couldn't go back into the factory. We couldn't escape. We couldn't even get a foot out of the line we were in or a bullet would greet us. Where else was there to go?

Night had fallen. There was a fresh crispness in the air. We all felt it. And the smell this far from Auschwitz was wonderful. It was almost worth being in the snow at night just for that smell. Every day, the one thing every worker slave would agree on was that getting away from the smell of Auschwitz was worth working our heads off for.

We trudged back, tired to our bones. Our souls were tired. We so tired that occasionally someone would simply plop down in the snow and refuse to move. Everyone who saw would say a quiet yiskadal because it would only be a few seconds later when a shot would ring out and another name would be added to the six million.

I didn't even pay attention. My stomach was empty and I didn't have a scrap to fall back on, but to tell the truth, I wasn't that hungry. I'd eaten good. But lord I was tired. I walked with my head rolling around my neck like a ball bearing in a box. My muscles were sapped. Only God knows how I could keep putting one foot in front of the other. Four miles. It could have been four feet, or forty miles, it was all the same. I was unaware of anything. In a daze I walked. Oh it wasn't the first time. I felt like that a lot. That didn't make it better.

Finally, after trudging for what seemed like hours, I smelt that familiar smell. That stink of oil and hair and flesh matted and burned. The cold stink that all but strangled you. Carried by the smoke and the southeast wind the stink conveyed the weight of all the souls who were murdered that day. The air we breathed sent the smell right up into our nostrils where it would remain until we left for the factory the next morning.

Another line up by five's, another count and finally, finally, back to the barracks. I stumbled to my pallet, two men were already stretched out and fast asleep. I plopped onto the pallet behind one of them, eyes already closing. I wrapped a cloth around my feet and hugged my chest with my arms. How good it was to rest. How good it was not to have to do anything. Just lie there. Not doing anything. Just resting. Only that.

My friends were gone. My family had been murdered, dispersed, or were in the same boat I was in. Most of them were dead. I had no peers. I had no teachers. I had no parents. I had no acquaintances. I had no possessions. I did not know one single person I could call friend.

I was sixteen years old.