

THE SUMMER was coming to an end. The Jewish year was almost over. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the last day of that cursed year, the entire camp was agitated and every one of us felt the tension. After all, this was a day unlike all others. The last day of the year. The word "last" had an odd ring to it. What if it really were the last day?

The evening meal was distributed, an especially thick soup, but nobody touched it. We wanted to wait until after prayer. On the *Appelplatz*, surrounded by electrified barbed wire, thousands of Jews, anguish on their faces, gathered in silence.

Night was falling rapidly. And more and more prisoners kept coming, from every block, suddenly able to overcome time and space, to will both into submission.

What are You, my God? I thought angrily. How do You compare to this stricken mass gathered to affirm to You their faith, their anger, their defiance? What does Your grandeur mean, Master of the Universe, in the face of all this cowardice, this decay, and this misery? Why do you go on troubling these poor people's wounded minds, their ailing bodies?

SOME TEN THOUSAND MEN had come to participate in a solemn service, including the *Blockälteste*, the Kapos, all bureaucrats in the service of Death.

"Blessed be the Almighty..."

The voice of the officiating inmate had just become audible. At first I thought it was the wind.

"Blessed be God's name..."

Thousands of lips repeated the benediction, bent over like trees in a storm.

Blessed be God's name?

Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers end up in the furnaces? Praised be Thy Holy Name, for having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine altar?

I listened as the inmate's voice rose; it was powerful yet broken, amid the weeping, the sobbing, the sighing of the entire "congregation":

"All the earth and universe are God's!"

He kept pausing, as though he lacked the strength to uncover the meaning beneath the text. The melody was stifled in his throat.

And I, the former mystic, was thinking: Yes, man is stronger, greater than God. When Adam and Eve deceived You, You chased

them from paradise. When You were displeased by Noah's generation, You brought down the Flood. When Sodom lost Your favor, You caused the heavens to rain down fire and damnation. But look at these men whom You have betrayed, allowing them to be tortured, slaughtered, gassed, and burned, what do they do? They pray before You! They praise Your name!

"All of creation bears witness to the Greatness of God!"

In days gone by, Rosh Hashanah had dominated my life. I knew that my sins grieved the Almighty and so I pleaded for forgiveness. In those days, I fully believed that the salvation of the world depended on every one of my deeds, on every one of my prayers.

But now, I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy. I was nothing but ashes now, but I felt myself to be stronger than this Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long. In the midst of these men assembled for prayer, I felt like an observer, a stranger.

The service ended with Kaddish. Each of us recited Kaddish for his parents, for his children, and for himself.

We remained standing in the *Appelplatz* for a long time, unable to detach ourselves from this surreal moment. Then came the time to go to sleep, and slowly the inmates returned to their blocks. I thought I heard them wishing each other a Happy New Year!

I ran to look for my father. At the same time I was afraid of having to wish him a happy year in which I no longer believed. He was leaning against the wall, bent shoulders sagging as if under a heavy load. I went up to him, took his hand and kissed it. I felt a tear on my hand. Whose was it? Mine? His? I said nothing.

Nor did he. Never before had we understood each other so clearly.

The sound of the bell brought us back to reality. We had to go to bed. We came back from very far away, I looked up at my father's face, trying to glimpse a smile or something like it on his stricken face. But there was nothing. Not the shadow of an expression. Defeat.

YOM KIPPUR. The Day of Atonement. Should we fast? The question was hotly debated. To fast could mean a more certain, more rapid death. In this place, we were always fasting. It was Yom Kippur year-round. But there were those who said we should fast, precisely because it was dangerous to do so. We needed to show God that even here, locked in hell, we were capable of singing His praises.

I did not fast. First of all, to please my father who had forbidden me to do so. And then, there was no longer any reason for me to fast. I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my ration of soup, I turned that act into a symbol of rebellion, of protest against Him.

And I nibbled on my crust of bread.

Deep inside me, I felt a great void opening.

THE SS OFFERED us a beautiful present for the new year.

We had just returned from work. As soon as we passed the camp's entrance, we sensed something out of the ordinary in the air. The roll call was shorter than usual. The evening soup was distributed at great speed, swallowed as quickly. We were anxious.

I was no longer in the same block as my father. They had

transferred me to another Kommando, the construction one, where twelve hours a day I hauled heavy slabs of stone. The head of my new block was a German Jew, small with piercing eyes. That evening he announced to us that henceforth no one was allowed to leave the block after the evening soup. A terrible word began to circulate soon thereafter: selection.

We knew what it meant. An SS would examine us. Whenever he found someone extremely frail—a "Muselman" was what we called those inmates—he would write down his number: good for the crematorium.

After the soup, we gathered between the bunks. The veterans told us: "You're lucky to have been brought here so late. Today, this is paradise compared to what the camp was two years ago. Back then, Buna was a veritable hell. No water, no blankets, less soup and bread. At night, we slept almost naked and the temperature was thirty below. We were collecting corpses by the hundreds every day. Work was very hard. Today, this is a little paradise. The Kapos back then had orders to kill a certain number of prisoners every day. And every week, selection. A merciless selection... Yes, you are lucky."

"Enough! Be quiet!" I begged them. "Tell your stories tomorrow, or some other day."

They burst out laughing. They were not veterans for nothing.

"Are you scared? We too were scared. And, at that time, for good reason."

The old men stayed in their corner, silent, motionless, hunted-down creatures. Some were praying.

One more hour. Then we would know the verdict: death or reprieve.

And my father? I first thought of him now. How would he pass selection? He had aged so much...

Our *Blockälteste* had not been outside a concentration camp

since 1933. He had already been through all the slaughterhouses, all the factories of death. Around nine o'clock, he came to stand in our midst:

"Achtung!"

There was instant silence.

"Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you." For the first time, his voice quivered. "In a few moments, selection will take place. You will have to undress completely. Then you will go, one by one, before the SS doctors. I hope you will all pass. But you must try to increase your chances. Before you go into the next room, try to move your limbs, give yourself some color. Don't walk slowly, run! Run as if you had the devil at your heels! Don't look at the SS. Run, straight in front of you!"

He paused and then added:

"And most important, don't be afraid!"

That was a piece of advice we would have loved to be able to follow.

I undressed, leaving my clothes on my cot. Tonight, there was no danger that they would be stolen.

Tibi and Yossi, who had changed Kommandos at the same time I did, came to urge me:

"Let's stay together. It will make us stronger."

Yossi was mumbling something. He probably was praying. I had never suspected that Yossi was religious. In fact, I had always believed the opposite. Tibi was silent and very pale. All the block inmates stood naked between the rows of bunks. This must be how one stands for the Last Judgment.

"They are coming!"

Three SS officers surrounded the notorious Dr. Mengele, the very same who had received us in Birkenau. The *Blockälteste* attempted a smile. He asked us:

"Ready?"

Yes, we were ready. So were the SS doctors. Dr. Mengele was holding a list: our numbers. He nodded to the *Blockalteste*: we can begin! As if this were a game.

The first to go were the "notables" of the block, the *Stubenalteste*, the Kapos, the foremen, all of whom were in perfect physical condition, of course! Then came the ordinary prisoners' turns. Dr. Mengele looked them over from head to toe. From time to time, he noted a number. I had but one thought: not to have my number taken down and not to show my left arm.

In front of me, there were only Tibi and Yossi. They passed. I had time to notice that Mengele had not written down their numbers. Someone pushed me. It was my turn. I ran without looking back. My head was spinning: you are too skinny... you are too weak... you are too skinny, you are good for the ovens... The race seemed endless; I felt as though I had been running for years... You are too skinny, you are too weak... At last I arrived. Exhausted. When I had caught my breath, I asked Yossi and Tibi:

"Did they write me down?"

"No," said Yossi. Smiling, he added, "Anyway, they couldn't have. You were running too fast...."

I began to laugh. I was happy. I felt like kissing him. At that moment, the others did not matter! They had not written me down.

Those whose numbers had been noted were standing apart, abandoned by the whole world. Some were silently weeping.

THE SS OFFICERS left. The *Blockalteste* appeared, his face reflecting our collective weariness.

"It all went well. Don't worry. Nothing will happen to anyone. Not to anyone ..."

He was still trying to smile. A poor emaciated Jew questioned him anxiously, his voice trembling:

"But... sir. They *did* write me down!"

At that, the *Blockälteste* vented his anger: What! Someone refused to take his word?

"What is it now? Perhaps you think I'm lying? I'm telling you, once and for all: nothing will happen to you! Nothing! You just like to wallow in your despair, you fools!"

The bell rang, signaling that the selection had ended in the entire camp.

With all my strength I began to race toward Block 36; midway, I met my father. He came toward me:

"So? Did you pass?"

"Yes. And you?"

"Also."

We were able to breathe again. My father had a present for me: a half ration of bread, bartered for something he had found at the depot, a piece of rubber that could be used to repair a shoe.

The bell. It was already time to part, to go to bed. The bell regulated everything. It gave me orders and I executed them blindly. I hated that bell. Whenever I happened to dream of a better world, I imagined a universe without a bell.

A FEW DAYS passed. We were no longer thinking about the selection. We went to work as usual and loaded the heavy stones onto the freight cars. The rations had grown smaller; that was the only change.

We had risen at dawn, as we did every day. We had received our black coffee, our ration of bread. We were about to head to the work yard as always. The *Blockälteste* came running:

"Let's have a moment of quiet. I have here a list of numbers. I shall read them to you. All those called will not go to work this morning; they will stay in camp."

Softly, he read some ten numbers. We understood. These were the numbers from the selection. Dr. Mengele had not forgotten.

The *Blockälteste* turned to go to his room. The ten prisoners surrounded him, clinging to his clothes:

"Save us! You promised... We want to go to the depot, we are strong enough to work. We are good workers. We can... we want..."

He tried to calm them, to reassure them about their fate, to explain to them that staying in the camp did not mean much, had no tragic significance: "After all, I stay here every day..."

The argument was more than flimsy. He realized it and, without another word, locked himself in his room.

The bell had just rung.

"Form ranks!"

Now, it no longer mattered that the work was hard. All that mattered was to be far from the block, far from the crucible of death, from the center of hell.

I saw my father running in my direction. Suddenly, I was afraid.

"What is happening?"

He was out of breath, hardly able to open his mouth.

"Me too, me too... They told me too to stay in the camp."

They had recorded his number without his noticing.

"What are we going to do?" I said anxiously.

But it was he who tried to reassure me:

"It's not certain yet. There's still a chance. Today, they will do another selection... a decisive one..."

I said nothing.

He felt time was running out. He was speaking rapidly, he wanted to tell me so many things. His speech became confused, his voice was choked. He knew that I had to leave in a few moments. He was going to remain alone, so alone...

"Here, take this knife," he said. "I won't need it anymore. You may find it useful. Also take this spoon. Don't sell it. Quickly! Go ahead, take what I'm giving you!"

My inheritance...

"Don't talk like that, Father." I was on the verge of breaking into sobs. "I don't want you to say such things. Keep the spoon and knife. You will need them as much as I. We'll see each other tonight, after work."

He looked at me with his tired eyes, veiled by despair. He insisted:

"I am asking you... Take it, do as I ask you, my son. Time is running out. Do as your father asks you..."

Our Kapo shouted the order to march.

The Kommando headed toward the camp gate. Left, right! I was biting my lips. My father had remained near the block, leaning against the wall. Then he began to run, to try to catch up with us. Perhaps he had forgotten to tell me something... But we were marching too fast... Left, right!

We were at the gate. We were being counted. Around us, the din of military music. Then we were outside.

ALL DAY, I PLODDED AROUND like a sleepwalker. Tibi and Yossi would call out to me, from time to time, trying to reassure me. As did the Kapo who had given me easier tasks that day. I felt sick at heart. How kindly they treated me. Like an orphan. I thought: Even now, my father is helping me.

I myself didn't know whether I wanted the day to go by

quickly or not. I was afraid of finding myself alone that evening. How good it would be to die right here!

At last, we began the return journey. How I longed for an order to run! The military march. The gate. The camp. I ran toward Block 36.

Were there still miracles on this earth? He was alive. He had passed the second selection. He had still proved his usefulness... I gave him back his knife and spoon.

AKIBA DRUMER HAS LEFT us, a victim of the selection. Lately, he had been wandering among us, his eyes glazed, telling everyone how weak he was: "I can't go on ... It's over ... " We tried to raise his spirits, but he wouldn't listen to anything we said. He just kept repeating that it was all over for him, that he could no longer fight, he had no more strength, no more faith. His eyes would suddenly go blank, leaving two gaping wounds, two wells of terror.

He was not alone in having lost his faith during those days of selection. I knew a rabbi, from a small town in Poland. He was old and bent, his lips constantly trembling. He was always praying, in the block, at work, in the ranks. He recited entire pages from the Talmud, arguing with himself, asking and answering himself endless questions. One day, he said to me:

"It's over. God is no longer with us."

And as though he regretted having uttered such words so coldly, so dryly, he added in his broken voice, "I know. No one has the right to say things like that. I know that very well. Man is too insignificant, too limited, to even try to comprehend God's mysterious ways. But what can someone like myself do? I'm neither a sage nor a just man. I am not a saint. I'm a simple creature

of flesh and bone. I suffer hell in my soul and my flesh. I also have eyes and I see what is being done here. Where is God's mercy? Where's God? How can I believe, how can anyone believe in this God of Mercy?"

Poor Akiba Drumer, if only he could have kept his faith in God, if only he could have considered this suffering a divine test, he would not have been swept away by the selection. But as soon as he felt the first chinks in his faith, he lost all incentive to fight and opened the door to death.

When the selection came, he was doomed from the start, offering his neck to the executioner, as it were. All he asked of us was:

"In three days, I'll be gone ... Say Kaddish for me."

We promised: in three days, when we would see the smoke rising from the chimney, we would think of him. We would gather ten men and hold a special service. All his friends would say Kaddish.

Then he left, in the direction of the hospital. His step was almost steady and he never looked back. An ambulance was waiting to take him to Birkenau.

There followed terrible days. We received more blows than food. The work was crushing. And three days after he left, we forgot to say Kaddish.

WINTER HAD ARRIVED. The days became short and the nights almost unbearable. From the first hours of dawn, a glacial wind lashed us like a whip. We were handed winter clothing: striped shirts that were a bit heavier. The veterans grabbed the opportunity for further sniggering:

"Now you'll really get a taste of camp!"

We went off to work as usual, our bodies frozen. The stones were so cold that touching them, we felt that our hands would remain stuck. But we got used to that too.

Christmas and New Year's we did not work. We were treated to a slightly less transparent soup.

Around the middle of January, my right foot began to swell from the cold. I could not stand on it. I went to the infirmary. The doctor, a great Jewish doctor, a prisoner like ourselves, was categorical: "We have to operate! If we wait, the toes and perhaps the leg will have to be amputated."

That was all I needed! But I had no choice. The doctor had decided to operate and there could be no discussion. In fact, I was rather glad that the decision had been his.

They put me in a bed with white sheets. I had forgotten that people slept in sheets.

Actually, being in the infirmary was not bad at all: we were entitled to good bread, a thicker soup. No more bell, no more roll call, no more work. From time to time, I was able to send a piece of bread to my father.

Next to me lay a Hungarian Jew suffering from dysentery. He was skin and bones, his eyes were dead. I could just hear his voice, the only indication that he was alive. Where did he get the strength to speak?

"Don't rejoice too soon, son. Here too there is selection. In fact, more often than outside. Germany has no need of sick Jews. Germany has no need of me. When the next transport arrives, you'll have a new neighbor. Therefore, listen to me: leave the infirmary before the next selection!"

These words, coming from the grave, as it were, from a faceless shape, filled me with terror. True, the infirmary was very small, and if new patients were to arrive, room would have to be made.

But then perhaps my faceless neighbor, afraid of being among

the first displaced, simply wanted to get rid of me, to free my bed, to give himself a chance to survive... Perhaps he only wanted to frighten me. But then again, what if he was telling the truth? I decided to wait and see.

THE DOCTOR CAME TO TELL ME that he would operate the next day.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Everything will be all right."

At ten o'clock in the morning, I was taken to the operating room. My doctor was there. That reassured me. I felt that in his presence, nothing serious could happen to me. Every one of his words was healing and every glance of his carried a message of hope. "It will hurt a little," he said, "but it will pass. Be brave."

The operation lasted one hour. They did not put me to sleep. I did not take my eyes off my doctor. Then I felt myself sink...

When I came to and opened my eyes, I first saw nothing but a huge expanse of white, my sheets, then I saw my doctor's face above me.

"Everything went well. You have spunk, my boy. Next, you'll stay here two weeks for some proper rest and that will be it. You'll eat well, you'll relax your body and your nerves..."

All I could do was follow the movements of his lips. I barely understood what he was telling me, but the inflection of his voice soothed me. Suddenly, I broke into a cold sweat; I couldn't feel my leg! Had they amputated it?

"Doctor," I stammered. "Doctor?"

"What is it, son?"

I didn't have the courage to ask him.

"Doctor, I'm thirsty..."

He had water brought to me... He was smiling. He was ready to walk out, to see other patients.

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Will I be able to use my leg?"

He stopped smiling. I became very frightened. He said, "Listen, son. Do you trust me?"

"Very much, Doctor."

"Then listen well: in two weeks you'll be fully recovered. You'll be able to walk like the others. The sole of your foot was full of pus. I just had to open the sac. Your leg was not amputated. You'll see, in two weeks, you'll be walking around like everybody else."

All I had to do was wait two weeks.

BUT TWO DAYS AFTER my operation, rumors swept through the camp that the battlefield had suddenly drawn nearer. The Red Army was racing toward Buna: it was only a matter of hours.

We were quite used to this kind of rumor. It wasn't the first time that false prophets announced to us: peace-in-the-world, the-Red-Cross-negotiating-our-liberation, or other fables... And often we would believe t h e m ... It was like an injection of morphine.

Only this time, these prophecies seemed more founded. During the last nights we had heard the cannons in the distance.

My faceless neighbor spoke up:

"Don't be deluded. Hitler has made it clear that he will annihilate all Jews before the clock strikes twelve."

I exploded:

"What do you care what he said? Would you want us to consider him a prophet?"

His cold eyes stared at me. At last, he said wearily:

"I have more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He alone has kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people."

THAT AFTERNOON AT FOUR O'CLOCK, as usual, the bell called all the *Blockälteste* for their daily report.

They came back shattered. They had difficulty opening their mouths. All they could utter was one word: "Evacuation." The camp was going to be emptied and we would be sent to the rear. Where to? Somewhere in deepest Germany. To other camps; there was no shortage of them.

"When?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Perhaps the Russians will arrive before..."

"Perhaps."

We knew perfectly well they would not.

The camp had become a hive of activity. People were running, calling to one another. In every block, the inmates prepared for the journey ahead. I had forgotten about my lame foot. A doctor came into the room and announced:

"Tomorrow, right after nightfall, the camp will start on its march. Block by block. The sick can remain in the infirmary. They will not be evacuated."

That news made us wonder. Were the SS really going to leave hundreds of prisoners behind in the infirmaries, pending the arrival of their liberators? Were they really going to allow Jews to hear the clock strike twelve? Of course not.

"All the patients will be finished off on the spot," said the faceless one. "And in one last swoop, thrown into the furnaces."

"Surely, the camp will be mined," said another. "Right after the evacuation, it will all blow up."

As for me, I was thinking not about death but about not wanting to be separated from my father. We had already suffered so much, endured so much together. This was not the moment to separate.

I ran outside to look for him. The snow was piled high, the blocks' windows veiled in frost. Holding a shoe in my hand, for I could not put it on my right foot, I ran, feeling neither pain nor cold.

"What are we going to do?"

My father didn't answer.

"What are we going to do?"

He was lost in thought. The choice was in our hands. For once. We could decide our fate for ourselves. To stay, both of us, in the infirmary, where, thanks to my doctor, he could enter as either a patient or a medic.

I had made up my mind to accompany my father wherever he went.

"Well, Father, what do we do?"

He was silent.

"Let's be evacuated with the others," I said.

He didn't answer. He was looking at my foot.

"You think you'll be able to walk?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Let's hope we won't regret it, Eliezer."

AFTER THE WAR, I learned the fate of those who had remained at the infirmary. They were, quite simply, liberated by the Russians, two days after the evacuation.

I DID NOT RETURN to the infirmary. I went straight to my block. My wound had reopened and was bleeding: the snow under my feet turned red.

The *Blockälteste* distributed double rations of bread and margarine for the road. We could take as much clothing from the store as we wanted.

It was cold. We got into our bunks. The last night in Buna. Once more, the last night. The last night at home, the last night in the ghetto, the last night in the cattle car, and, now, the last night in Buna. How much longer would our lives be lived from one "last night" to the next?

I didn't sleep. Through the frosty windowpanes we could see flashes of red. Cannon shots broke the silence of night. How close the Russians were! Between them and us—one night—our last. There was whispering from one bunk to the other; with a little luck, the Russians would be here before the evacuation. Hope was still alive.

Someone called out:

"Try to sleep. Gather your strength for the journey."

It reminded me of my mother's last recommendations in the ghetto. But I couldn't fall asleep. My foot was on fire.

IN THE MORNING, the camp did not look the same. The prisoners showed up in all kinds of strange garb; it looked like a masquerade. We each had put on several garments, one over the other, to better protect ourselves from the cold. Poor clowns, wider than tall, more dead than alive, poor creatures whose ghostly faces peeked out from layers of prisoner's clothes! Poor clowns!

I tried to find a very large shoe. In vain. I tore my blanket and wrapped it around my foot. Then I went off to wander through the camp in search of a little more bread and a few potatoes. Some people said we would be going to Czechoslovakia. No: to Gros-Rosen. No: to Gleiwitz. No: to ...

TWO O'CLOCK in the afternoon. The snow continued to fall heavily.

Now the hours were passing quickly. Dusk had fallen. Daylight disappeared into a gray mist.

Suddenly the *Blockälteste* remembered that we had forgotten to clean the block. He commanded four prisoners to mop the floor...One hour before leaving camp! Why? For whom?

"For the liberating army," he told us. "Let them know that here lived men and not pigs."

So we were men after all? The block was cleaned from top to bottom.

AT SIX O'CLOCK the bell rang. The death knell. The funeral. The procession was beginning its march.

"Fall in! Quickly!"

In a few moments, we stood in ranks. Block by block. Night had fallen. Everything was happening according to plan.

The searchlights came on. Hundreds of SS appeared out of the darkness, accompanied by police dogs. The snow continued to fall.

The gates of the camp opened. It seemed as though an even darker night was waiting for us on the other side.

The first blocks began to march. We waited. We had to await the exodus of the fifty-six blocks that preceded us. It was very cold. In my pocket, I had two pieces of bread. How I would have liked to eat them! But I knew I must not. Not yet.

Our turn was coming: Block 53 ... Block 55 ...

"Block 57, forward! March!"

It snowed on and on.