

Infinity

During the night I dreamt that I was an SS officer and was in charge of the gas chamber selection. In the dream, the *Lager Commandant* asked me how I was doing. I answered that I felt as if every day I trampled underfoot thousands—tens of thousands—of ants on the flat stone, but it didn't seem to lead anywhere. I cannot destroy the breed of ants. The ants will go on living even when I trample a hundred times more under my feet. Then the commandant changed into a voice. It could speak, and listen, and it was omnipresent. I have had similar dreams in the camps many times already. Once I dreamt an octopus was reaching for me and every tentacled arm pulled me towards its mouth and I tried to resist. But it had the ability to speak and announced to me that the average life span in Auschwitz-Birkenau is fifteen minutes. During the course of the day I forget the dreams, but as I prepare for each night of sleep I fear what I will dream of.

We got the upper bunk for the three of us: Harry Cohen, Ervin Portman and myself. We did not have blankets. They were taken to the laundry in the Delousing Station because they were so full of lice and infected with typhus bacteria. We pressed against each other to make the most of our bodies' warmth. Portman was quietly repeating the number which was tattooed on his forearm, as he usually did before going to sleep, in order that he would remember it if someone woke him up in the middle of the night. He preferred to lie on his left side so that he could see the number, in case Rottenfuehrer Schiese-Dietz came to make his night selection.

Before sounding the taps, Rottenfuehrer Schiese-Dietz had made the rounds with his whip. It had a long handle like the whips used by coachmen driving teams of horses. The whip itself, twice the length of the handle, was braided leather made from human skin, fastened at the end with a double golden ring (cast from gold teeth), into which a Jewish jeweler in the camp workshop had engraved his initial. You could never be sure when Rottenfuehrer Schiese-Dietz would get the idea to come to the barracks. He'd learned to crack the whip like a lion tamer. It sounded like gunfire. If the tip of the whip happened to touch someone it would slice the skin. A little while ago, satisfied that the barracks were quiet and that he'd seen nothing unusual anywhere, he had returned to the SS quarters and played the piano. He could play Bach, Schumann or Mozart from memory, proud that he remembered so well everything he had learned. He had a different whip before, from somewhere in Saudi Arabia or

from some German enterprise exporting whips to the near Orient, to make camels go faster. He was told that a camel never forgets a blow, even a baby camel, and that they sometimes run away in the middle of the desert. This couldn't happen here. People never escaped. There was nowhere to go. He had worn out his camel switch by using it too often and too hard, to beat out of people their habit of asking futile questions about boredom, or why they were living or why they were born or, most often, why their life was so miserable. It was up to his whip to show them why they were still alive, and what had to be accomplished and why they were dissatisfied with their lives.

Somewhere in the night, a German voice called out: *Laufschritt! Laufschritt!* On the double! On the double! and again silence spread over the camp. Everywhere was mud. It was good to at least be under a roof.

A half hour later, Portman asked me: "Why aren't you asleep?"

"I'm cold," I said.

"Quit lying. What are you waiting for?" asked Portman.

"They'll begin soon," I blurted out.

"Get some sense into your head," Portman reprimanded me.

He must have known what I was waiting for, and he was right. I was waiting. I knew that he must have been waiting too, if he was not asleep. Maybe he waited for the same reasons I did and maybe at the same time it was because he wanted to refute what I wanted to verify for myself once it began. I felt a secret shame and didn't know exactly why. It encompassed many other shames, and all were present in one question: how and why were we born as we were born? And probably Harry Cohen was also waiting, although he said: "You shouldn't wait for it. It gets on your nerves. It isn't half as encouraging as it would seem."

"You'd better sleep," said Portman. "Be glad that we can sleep and they're not driving us to do some loading or unloading. In the mud it is obnoxious. It goes immediately through my rags." He trembled. "You keep wiggling. Who can put up with that?"

I did not answer. I did not want to be talking to Portman when they began. There were usual noises in the bunks. Someone was silently praying and somebody else reprimanded him to shut up and leave him alone and let him sleep in peace. And close to them, someone had a dispute with his Creator. The Creator didn't answer but the man had madness in his voice.

The wrangle finally stopped. Harry Cohen got a bit of gossip from his neighbor: that morning, the Grüppenfuehrer in the office of the Gestapo had been found dead, shot by his own hand.

Harry Cohen put his arm under his head. "That Chinaman who once said that the more a man knows, the luckier he is, was wrong," he whispered. "It's just the opposite. The more you know, the more your world is filled with misfortune. Shit. I think I am already dead. Don't let me over-sleep. Do you know for how long I haven't had a dream?"

"It's better to wait for the swallows to come back in the spring than to wait for *them*," said Portman.

He stretched out his arms. He had long arms. He believed that was a sign of luck, and that, when necessary, he could reach farther and easier than Harry Cohen or I. His ears stuck out and he was convinced that this was a sign of someone who was satisfied with his lot; he was always sleepy and tired, but at the same time he had great will-power, although not the best talent for choosing friends. He did not have much patience. It was good that Harry Cohen did. In his former existence, Harry Cohen had a lot of good luck, both in cards and in love, and was very successful in business undertakings. Portman considered my kind of patience morbid. He could not understand how I could go on waiting.

But Portman still wasn't asleep. Maybe he could still hear the Rottenfuehrer cracking his whip. Maybe he could imagine that golden ring cast from teeth that were knocked out of corpses and sometimes, just because it was gold, out of the living. Most of the gold went into sealed railroad cars to the underground safes of the Berlin State Bank, but quite a bit of it slipped through the fingers of the SS men. Perhaps Portman envied the dead just as you would envy the living. Yesterday he mumbled something in his sleep about Samson, and no one wanted to remind him of it. On Monday he dreamed that he had gotten typhus, on Tuesday that he had diarrhea and couldn't stop it, and Wednesday morning he realized that it had been both a dream and reality. It wasn't hard to figure out what brought Samson's name to his lips. Samson was definitely a last resort.

"The rabbis know what they're talking about when they say that Noah was wrong to send out a pair of doves to bring the news that the flood had subsided. Maybe it drove him mad," Harry Cohen said. "To go mad—that's not the worst there is. The worst is when you know it. This afternoon when we were coming back from the soccer field, they were picking out women who had no shoes and those that were sick. The deaf and dumb are gone already and so is that shipment of war invalids from Vienna."

"Did you think they would be feeding them white bread and milk here?" asked Portman.

"Half of the people that they added to make up the count for the transport were healthy and strong—something was going on," added Harry Cohen. "They're in a hurry now. But why do they want to get rid of the women first?"

"The Nazis don't like women," said Portman. "They're dead set in their belief that women are the source of all evil, just as we are. I heard Rottenfuehrer shouting at the women in the laundry that they like to screw, especially when they are menstruating, so that they can infect everyone with syphilis and other infectious diseases. He yelled at them that here they would lose all their bad blood. He told them that he knew a woman could not wash laundry properly when she had her period and then he threatened to send them all to the bath and burn them with their dirty rags. And then, he said point blank that he would shoot down any woman who got closer than three steps to him or dared to touch him."

"There are places where the men believe that if you glance at a menstruating woman your bones will go soft and you will lose the ability to have children," said Harry Cohen.

“I hope it happens fast,” I added to what Harry Cohen said. “At least without having to stand in the snow and mud.” I liked Harry for never complaining about anything. Whenever they beat him he never moaned a minute after. Maybe he believed human dignity lies in never speaking of pain, especially afterwards. In Prague he left an Aryan girl, Maruschka. Sometimes at night he was looking at the stars and on his big lips was a tender smile like on the lips of the Mona Lisa. Once, Rottenfuehrer caught him with that tender smile and beat him to chase it away. Cohen had open lips, but didn’t complain.

“Why don’t you both go to sleep?” Portman said.

I couldn’t sleep. I waited for them to begin. Maybe they wouldn’t.

When the killing came so close that he couldn’t pretend not to see it, Portman would always get nervous. The blood would rise to his brain, and he would take it out on me. I could imagine that he was putting the blame on both the living and the dead, on people who had already gone through it, as well as those who were still waiting. I did not confide in him that for the last few nights I had been seized by a vision of crashing stars that in a fraction of a second would crush the whole camp and the planet on which the Germans had built this camp with our hands. It was a strange wish and it actually had something to do with Samson—only it was not just a matter of a few columns holding up the roof of an ancient palace. My vision encompassed the destruction of everything and everybody: the crushing of the earth, down to the very last pebble. It embraced the transformation of the planet into stardust—together with all and with everything, down to the last crow and to the last ant. It was a very disturbing yet comforting obsession, and I knew it would depart with the first sleep of when the women from the adjoining camp would begin. It was safe as long as the Germans only killed new transports and picked out the sick and those people who were guilty of being old, of having gray hair or wearing glasses. The old-timers still held on to some hope or illusion which turned into a new truth when the Germans started killing even the healthiest and strongest, those who could still work for them.

I did not want to miss it when the women from the adjoining camp began. It was always the beginning of something else as well. The beginning and the continuation of something that had no end even when it was over.

There were two women’s camps. One was for Jewish women from Hungary and Slovakia and the other was for both Jewish and non-Jewish women from other occupied countries. They worked in the hospital ward, in the showers where water actually flowed from the sprinklers and in the delousing station where they exterminated lice and insects with Cyclon B. The latter came from the same cans as those which were used in the underground showers next to the disrobing stations and the crematoria from number one to number five, and was used in fourteen-hour cycles, necessary for the proper extermination of vermin. The women also worked in cleaning stations, laundries, and kitchens and in the warehouses where shoes, gems, underwear, hair, orthopedic devices, and costume jewelry were stored. These women also had opportunities to work through all seasons as performers in the whorehouse or in the concert hall. Polish and Ukrainian henchmen and guards and German criminals

wearing purple triangles took their opportunities in the brothel, although they had to pay two Reichmarks from their wages or other remuneration for the services. One mark was for the whore, and the other went into a special account which the commander of Auschwitz I, II, and III had been ordered from above to keep aside.

In the family camp B2b, which was burnt to ashes during the night of March 8th, there were kindergartens and nursery schools and their teachers, before being killed, had rehearsed theatrical productions and gymnastic performances which the SS would come to watch.

Would they begin? They really ought to begin. If they were planning to, they should begin now.

As far as Portman was concerned, I had not been behaving like a normal person for the last few days. It was not the first time he had caught me waiting for them to begin. He knew why I had stared at the wooden ceiling with my eyes open, why I stared at the open, glassless window under the roof where I could see the stars or the moon or snow or smoke, waiting all the time. Sometimes my teeth would chatter with the cold and Portman would hear it and it would upset him because we lay so close to get heat from each other. He would blame me for not sleeping because I waited for the women to begin. He was mad at the women for what the camp had done to them instead of being mad at the camp. He thought that the women were crazy. Their faces had become coarse and some had hair growing on their cheeks, which made them look old.

Sometimes Portman would get furious, though at the same time he was afraid to vent his fury. That made him stutter, although maybe it was because he could not speak loud. Yesterday, for some unknown reason, he had broken a tooth and thought he would die of it. Harry Cohen mentioned that people who had such widely spaced teeth as Portman did would always have to look for their good fortune far away from home. Well, as long as he was here, he was far enough from home, but what good fortune could he have when his teeth were crumbling, even though they had not sent him to the showers yet? Sometimes he became speechless when I waited for the women, but not now. He also feared he had tuberculosis. He believed that he would pull through if he could make it through the next month, unless Rottenfuehrer Schiese-Dietz spoiled everything with his next selection, being in need of one more figure for the showers. It was already the 27th of October. He told himself that October was not a good month for those who have TB, and he fixed his mind on November. Portman sometimes blamed it all on his mother, whom he had never known because she left when Portman was born. Sometimes the thought came to him that it would be rather ironic if his mother had not been Jewish. He also believed that he could get rid of his suspicion of tuberculosis if he could take one gulp of milk.

It was strange that the image of women was associated in his mind with the image of milk, but I preferred not to mention this to Portman. My back drew the heat from Portman's belly and I pressed my stomach and chest against Harry Cohen's back. That afternoon I had given Portman a piece of my bread and blood sausage because I knew what he was afraid of. He gulped it down at once. Now he had the hiccups.

Everything was permeated by the smoke which rose toward the sky during the day

and during the night, smoke from the dead who would not have a grave. I remembered what Rabbi Gans once told us in the Vinohrady synagogue: that when they were in the Sinai desert, Moses had ordered his successor, Joshua, to bury him in the ground so that no one would find his grave. The Germans were now doing it on a grand scale.

Portman hiccupped again. "I washed my rags in the latrine and the Rottenfuehrer came there and whipped me out of the hole. He yelled at me in his Bavarian German: '*Höre doch auf, Mensch!*' He told me to stop it or he'd take the handle of his whip and press me out through the hole in the planks to see if I could swim."

"They should have started," I said.

Portman yawned. "It's better if they stay quiet. It won't help the dead. And the living should stick with common sense. You don't want them to run into bayonets, do you?" Then he added: "It brings them bad luck, just like the night air. Don't they know that? It's making their brains soft. Or they've gone crazy already. They sound like men. I don't miss it. And most of them don't have periods anymore even if they're sixteen."

Harry Cohen was feeling his chest, his body, the last thing that he owned. He was at rock bottom. He had used up his last bit of will-power and self-control to pretend otherwise. He did not say that here in Auschwitz-Birkenau everything, even breathing the wind, a draft, or still air brought people bad luck. The good luck of one always meant the bad luck of another. Everyone who lived, lived at the expense of someone who lived no more. It was not his fault. It was the German's organized way of killing. There were batches that were sent up the chimney for punishment, and the rest were picked to feed the crematoria according to numbers. And so that there would be no cheating, these numbers were tattooed on each person's forearm. People could live in the camp only until it was their turn to go to the showers or into the furnaces and crematoria, because even the best German engineers could not figure out how to burn them all at once. The Germans loved order and kept better discipline than the Frenchmen, Englishmen, Italians, Czechs, Belgians and other nationalities, who the Germans deported to this camp for liquidation. Even those Germans who had no more than a seventh-grade education, like Rottenfuehrer Schiese-Dietz, managed to command order, even when the situations got very confusing.

Harry Cohen lay with his lips closed not only because he did not want to waste energy talking, but in order to breath through his nose so as not to inhale the germs of typhus and tuberculosis. Neither his former nor his future elegance were of any use to him here. Every memory of the past which could be uplifting was at the same time depressing. Everything that could heal could also wound. Once in Theresienstadt, Faiga Tannenbaum-Novakova ruminated about the omnipotence of the devil. The devil now seemed like an amateur compared to what the German Nazis had dreamt up in Auschwitz-Birkenau and its subsidiaries. Harry Cohen felt the skin in the middle of his chest with the balls of his fingers trying to ascertain how much skin there was; it was thinner than wrapping paper, and he wondered how long it could last. He was probably thinking of all those things the tired, frightened minds were thinking, all those who hadn't as yet managed to fall asleep.

“They’re burning the old Hungarian women who came Monday,” said Portman. “The Polish and Romanian railway engineers who brought them were completely drunk because the women stank so much. Somebody said he’d never seen women so full of lice. When the old women stripped at last, because they did not understand what they were supposed to do—since most of them did not understand a word of German, just like the Italians or Frenchmen—the barbers asked for double disinfection before they started cutting their hair.”

His words became lost in the thick air of the barracks. Words were the first thing to become silent, and lose their meaning. There were no innocent or inexperienced people among us. We had all been there too long, even a single day or a single night. None of the people believed any longer that they were going to take a bath, even if they actually went to baths to be deloused and disinfected before the journey. Nor did they believe that the Germans would send them to work in one of their dominions because they were experienced tailors, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, or automobile mechanics—or that they could find work in the German armaments industry. Everyone knew where he was going if the order was to take the road to the left or turn on the road to the right. The road to the right led out of the camp, into a room which had doors without door handles, and they knew that no one who entered the room came out alive. No one was fooled by the notices about cleanliness and health, by the cursing and light banter of the Nazis.

“The dental technicians had a hell of a job prying the gold teeth out of those old women,” Portman added. “As usual, they searched everywhere, up and down, back and front, to see if they didn’t have some hidden gold, bank notes, or diamonds. Most of them had used them at home. A couple of them were beaten just because nothing could be found on them in any of the places that women tend to hide things.”

The words faded again. They were lost in the rotation of the earth—which did not fall between the two crashing stars as I had wished—and in the thickness and smell of emaciated bodies, covered with sweat, but at the same time getting numb, because it was already the end of October and it was cold, made more so by the wind. Most of the men were quiet. This silence sounded like the dried up language of the dumb, like the very last silence of the earth as it will one day be heard by the last human generation, even without Auschwitz-Birkenau, when the sun will approach with its enormous ball of fire, and all that is human will turn into fire, ashes and ice, before the planet earth turns into an infinite night, like this night, but much more desolate, much more silent, and much more cold. In my imagination it came sooner.

For the third time Portman said: “I’ll bet anything, including your bread and blood sausage, that they will beat it out of them five minutes after they’ve begun.”

Harry Cohen did not say anything. He was, as always when in the rare moments of quiet, concerned with the number of possibilities every situation offered, while really only offering one. It encompassed all possible endings.

“It’s not worth it,” Portman repeated. “They should be glad that they had time to undress. They wouldn’t even have to bother dressing again.”

Women over forty, just like girls under fifteen, usually went into the furnace right away, directly from the ramp, or by the first or second selection. They had to wait

only if the dressing rooms and the crematoria did not have time to process all of them. Although it was cold now—not like during the summer heat—the Germans were afraid that the corpses might decompose and epidemics would start, and so the old women had waited since Monday afternoon. Their lice-infested underwear, clothes, and shoes were burned. And so they had to wait naked, some for hours, some for days and nights, in the wind, rain and snow, and no one bothered to give them water or anything to eat. About two hundred thousand Hungarian Jewish women had come here since the summer. It was said that in Hungary there remained, until the beginning of the year 1944, about eight hundred thousand Jewish men, women, and children, and the Germans had now decided to liquidate them quickly, just in case Hungary decided to change sides in the war.

In a few hours the Hungarian women stopped asking what happened to their husbands, their children, and their families. They wanted to go into the showers and get it over with. When the women were undressed and their belongings taken away, they did not have poison they could take, nor knives with which to cut their wrists.

“What’s today? It must be Friday. Right, it’s Friday,” said Portman.

“Or maybe it’s already Saturday,” said Harry Cohen. “And it will begin all over again. But actually, why should it?”

No one had a watch. A watch was the first thing the Germans stole from you in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The first day here, Harry Cohen made up his mind whether he should lie and tell them that he was a trained watchmaker in order to get a cushy job, but fortunately he did not do it.

“You were probably born like a rabbit, with open eyes,” Portman grumbled in my direction. “Or do you sleep with your eyes open?”

I didn’t say anything. I was waiting for the women to begin. Portman probably debated with himself whether he should continue his talk about food. Talking about food, he knew as well as anyone, made one hungry. Someone would tell him to shut up. Once, when Portman served as Rottenfuehrer Schiese-Dietz’s orderly, he got outside the camp and carried back an image of deep and silent woods that only here and there were fenced with barbed wire. These were endless woods, pines, firs, and sometimes deciduous trees, full of game and silence. The SS men went out to hunt, but they did not shoot deer, does, and hares—they shot people.

Outside, the flames cut through the night and the snow. The sparks flew out of the darkness. The wind howled. Now and then you could hear the crows across the evening sky. They were evil omens. They were flying to the left. That, according to Portman, was the worst. If they flew to the right, that meant that he was to be cautious. And he could make a wish, like when you see a falling star. All sorts of superstitions came back, and many of them resembled crows. Crows were always an omen of death, of the worst there is. In the night I could imagine the curved flight-path of the crows. Portman believed that they talked to each other. But according to him, they talked only because some farmer and some village children had slit open their tongues. The crows held court and they sentenced individuals from their ranks; and a male and a female carried out the sentence together, pecking the culprit to death either in flight or on the ground. But Portman would reverse this sometimes and

insist that crows are capable of helping the weakest ones in the flock, the young ones and the weary. A squadron of crows will send out a patrol from its midst to save the weak, the falling ones or the ailing ones. And they know how to warn others of danger.

Already on Monday, before it got dark, Portman, Harry Cohen, and I saw the old Jewish women who spoke Hungarian or Yiddish. We knew what awaited them. We hoped it would be quick. But our wishes did not matter. I also wished that the crows would fly somewhere else with their cawing and hoped they would fly in a straight line without detours. Their sounds reminded me of the worst things: of humiliation, hunger, cold, and of illness, weakness, and helplessness. I envied them—their life, their flight, their freedom. I couldn't understand how they could live one hundred and fifty years. But it occurred to me that they could collect endless secrets in that time. I thought of all that they had lived through and wondered where they could take it in their flight.

Portman talked only about living. He pretended that he had never seen the dead in the camp, as if there weren't any dead here, not to mention the dying. He did not see them. He did not look. Or maybe he looked elsewhere. He forced his hungry red eyes not to see, his brain not to comprehend, as if he had heard about the dead only secondhand.

I wasn't even thinking about the selection which Rottenfuehrer Schiese-Dietz had come to perform. He made the prisoners walk over the long stable-chimney that had run horizontally about knee-high all the way through the barracks ever since the days of the Austro-Hungarian empire when the cavalry was garrisoned here. The prisoners had to walk over the chimney bricks naked, so that the overseers could quickly discern their healthy or sickly condition. Men whose penises had turned black, who were skin and bone, or those with exalted feverish eyes went at a trot down the whole length of the chimney; and only the healthy ones, when the thumbs-up sign was given, could jump off and go back to their bunks. The others who did not get the thumbs-up were selected to continue to the end of the chimney and then through the back entrance down a plank to be loaded onto a truck which took them to the showers. If someone's penis got hard as he was running down the square chimney, either from excitement, from fear or cold, or some nervous disorder, he had to run to the end of the chimney down the plank, into a car and into the disrobing rooms where Germans would make short shrift of his Jewish lust as well as of him, in the surest possible way.

In the women's barracks there had been today—like every day including Saturday and Sunday—two, three, perhaps even five routine selections. For the Germans, it was both a necessity and a pastime. Naked women, in the presence of two or three well-built and elegant SS men, would run or walk along the chimney as if on a stage, waiting for the sign of the thumb. Women with sagging or dried-up breasts, the skinniest ones who had turned old overnight or all of a sudden, women weakened by menopause and with fear of illness or female nervousness in their eyes, women without husbands and children, swollen or again thinner than dying mares, women with male traits and beards which they had no time to pluck out, women who were bleeding in the groin but could not clean themselves up, or just women who were splat-

tered with mud and dust—they all waited for the sign of the thumb. They had enough women so that among the three hundred and thirty-three, each one could choose his own figures. Each time it was ten or twenty women who got the sign to walk or run to the back entrance at the back of the truck.

“Now,” said Harry Cohen all of a sudden, just one second before I wanted to come out with it.

“I know,” I said. “I can hear them.”

“They’re like swans,” said Portman. “Women are always faithful beyond the grave to someone, just like swans. Or maybe like geese. But they’re wrong if they think they’re laying golden eggs in the darkness. How will this help them? I bet they haven’t eaten. Are you telling me that you both knew they’d begin, as if nothing had broken them?”

Sometimes, after the selection, the women would sing. They would wait for darkness to cover the camp, when everything except the fires had died down. No one could guess how long it would go on. Sometimes the guards sicced dogs on them, and sometimes the guards would fire a few volleys from a machine gun from the door to silence them. Sometimes a few shots were enough, sometimes a few magazines. It was always only a question of time. But before that there was the question whether they would begin, or whether they would give up even this, the very last thing they had. And now they began. It evoked horror that most people could no longer sense. It gave a new birth to something that had perished long ago. They filled the void which spreads from space, like waves over a calm surface rippled by a wind out of nowhere. It was like a stone which had been given a voice.

“The heat from the chimneys gets on some people’s brains,” said Portman. “They must all be mad, or they wouldn’t be asking for it. Do they want to drive everybody crazy?”

I could not yet identify the words or the melody, but I felt how they filled the space of the camp and of the whole night, the space of the world and beyond, extending into infinity, the incomprehensible void, which they filled with their voices, with their melody that was only beginning to take shape. I imagined a labyrinth, bodies, voices, wooden bunks in the dark, a maze from which the women tried to find a way out—like all the blind, deaf and dumb, drugged or poisoned, tottering from blows to the head, driven nearly out of their minds.

“All the rats have left the women’s barracks,” said Portman.

The women sang for all those who had lost someone, someone selected at daylight to be sent up the chimney and now no longer among the living; they sang to distract the bereaved from thoughts of the fires and for those who were alive only a few hours ago. The women who sang belonged to the Cleaning Outfit which scrubbed even the trucks, scrubbing them clean of the dirt left behind by the condemned ones. The singing filled the night with double voices. Double darkness. Double eyes. Double blood. Double snow, and far above the snow clouds, in a double star-filled sky. Double memory. Double hope and illusion. It filled it with all the things that man possesses only once in his life and loses.

“They make me nervous like a cat,” said Portman.

You could not see the flames, you could only hear them. The women who had lost someone already—yesterday, the day before, last week or last month—sang for the mothers who had lost a daughter, for the daughters who had lost a mother, for the sisters without sisters, and for friends without friends and acquaintances who had lost someone they knew. At first the singing was low, then louder, and finally quite loud. They would sing for a short time and sometimes longer, although never too long, and their singing was joined by those who were afraid at first. Finally they were joined by those that were stricken, until in the end, everybody was singing.

“If you sing at night or in bed, that’s bound to bring you bad luck,” Portman said again. “If you sing at night, you’ll be crying before dawn. If you’re singing because you don’t have a reason for doing it, someone will give you hell for it.”

The whole month Portman had argued that even here there were good days and bad days. And that only children and old people could not survive their uselessness.

I waited, as did all the men in the camps, for the first tune—just as you wait for the first evening star, making believe that it has some special significance for you. I tried to imagine the faces or figures of the women from Norway, Belgium, and Holland, the women and girls from Rome, Warsaw, or Sofia, women and girls from Berlin, Paris, or the island of Corfu, who had come here by boat and then by train, half dead with thirst. That which they were singing was, at least for the moment, beyond the reach of the hierarchy of the ruling and the humiliated, those who condemned them while they still had the chance to do the condemning. It reminded one of a fortress crumbling invisibly, even though its ramparts were strong and remained tall and unassailable. The singing came from the darkness distorted, as if from a great distance. I felt something that no one could understand. It contained everything that I had ever waited for, everything I was afraid of and which filled me with mystery and fear, as well as with the wonder of life, because death had become simple, comprehensible, and ordinary. This is the world in which the killers were born together with us, but by killing would live without us; this was the world in which each one of us was the last in the world, before he disappeared and left behind a sliver of ash in the museum of an extinct race, remembered as someone who happened to appear for a couple of thousand years on the surface of this earth. It filled me with something resembling chloroform, which knocks you out like a fragment of a dream.

I waited to hear it interrupted by the rattle of the train on the ramp or a volley from a machine gun or a revolver. At the same time I hoped it would not stop. I wished that the women would sing, just as I wished to see the only thing that would make up for the destruction of justice: my image of two stars flying towards each other before they crash and crush the world which had culminated in this camp and in the killing of innocence in the name of an idea. It embraced something that I never could explain and which I probably would never be able to explain. Everything that man is and is not.

In those women’s voices I heard all that is insignificant as well as all that is great, that which is pitiful and full of a silent glory, that which is comprehensible and incomprehensible, like every man and everything he has gone through and still must go through in the future. I understood that man in his smallness and misery is part

of something greater, something that has had and will have many names, something that is unfathomable and great like the sea and the earth, the clouds, and trillions of stars or galaxies, and at the same time lost like a grain of sand in the desert, or a fish, or drop of water or salt in the ocean; that for which man wants to live, even in a place like this, permeated with death and killing, just as the sky is permeated with stars, or a snowy night with snowflakes. I understood why man has the strength to die when it is his turn, so that someone else will not have to die in his place; and what he will share, when he has nothing left but his body heat and a spoon carved from an alder branch so that he can eat his soup and not lap it up like some dog, wolf, or rat.

I expected to hear the barking of dogs from the darkness of the night. I felt a different kind of fear and anxiety, different from what I experienced in the afternoon while I looked at the barbed wire, at the German uniforms, at the whip with the golden ring in the hand of the Rottenfuhrer Schiese-Dietz. When I closed my eyes, I had the feeling that I was witnessing the birth of a new planet which was yet to be peopled, a feeling of going way back into time, into the very oldest times when the cooled-off planet Earth had just become inhabited. I felt a new infinity, that infinity upon which man trespasses now and again with every breath, word, act or even the blinking of an eye. Something closer than closeness and more distant than distance, something so loud that it deafened me, and something so soft that it was like an incomprehensible whisper.

“Who cares about this,” Portman growled. “I’d give them a better idea.”

It probably seemed to him that he was watching how they would beat or shoot his mother, if he had ever known her. I don’t know. Harry Cohen, too, let Portman’s words float by as if Portman had not said anything the whole evening. This bothered Portman. It was a funeral rite, the singing which was born here and was not performed elsewhere, nor would be in the future. It probably both comforted and disturbed him that there would never be witnesses anywhere of this funeral singing that sounded like a martial song and like a suicide challenge, the invisible gauntlet thrown into the face of the enemy, because those who sang were in mortal danger. I don’t know, I really don’t know. For me it was something that I had lacked, so I could perceive my life as less incomplete, and it was something that I do not understand to this day, somewhat like perceiving an echo that exists only in the memory, or a shadow that fell long ago, or a cry that memory has blurred.

“I don’t want to hear them sing so I won’t have to hear them cry,” Portman added.

The women’s voices were still mixing with the snowflakes, with the fire and the darkness. The singing came out of the wild night into which the women had brought it, to subdue this night, when people were being killed, like every night, every day, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, on high holidays and on every working day, before the stars came out and when they were already fading in the sky. It came out of the night where words meant less than wind, snow, slivers, or clumps of ash before they disintegrate, out of the night where innocent people were being killed in one part of the world, while in another part make-shift barracks were being slapped together for more and more prisoners, until all of Europe was German.

Not very far from us was a warehouse to which prominent Jewish prisoners,

henchmen and informers and Jewish collaborators were occasionally admitted. We hated and despised them and at the same time feared them almost more than we feared the Germans. A little further away there was another brothel for the soldiers, and yet a few steps further, mothers and wives of the soldiers and clerks of the Tokenkopf SS garrison (entrusted by the Nazis with the cars of the prisons and prison camps), were reading fairy tales to their children about Hansel and Gretel and about the brave Siegfried. In one block, German doctors cut pieces of skin from healthy prisoners for grafting on frostbitten German soldiers from the Eastern front, or frozen airmen who they had fished out of the English Channel. In another block, two Jewish women pianists, before being sent up the chimney, played a concert of Beethoven sonatas. The prisoners and the jailers slept under the same stars.

The voices of the women came from the openness and closeness of the night, flowing together like a refuge created from nothing, like a shelter where you can hide for a moment without fleeing, where you can rest and gather strength or save the remainder of your strength. Their voices became a battleground upon which danger, for a few seconds, did not seem so dangerous. For just a moment, pain changed to painlessness and indifference to solidarity.

Over Auschwitz-Birkenau, below the low-lying snow clouds, in the thick smoke of the chimneys of the five crematoria, the singing of unknown women continued. Their singing came from the darkness, for a few seconds, almost a minute, two minutes or three, from the ever renewing sea of life and death, from the darkness and out of the wind, from the lips of women and from the depth or shallowness of the universe.

I was afraid that the women would stop. Then everything would be quiet. And then the only sound in the night would be that of ashes, snow, and wind.

“They’re probably feeding the dogs in the kennels now,” Portman mused.

Harry Cohen plucked out hair from his nostrils and his ears, so that he would look all right in the morning line-up.

The singing of the women sounded like a river overflowing its banks. It colored the night the way the flames colored it or the red morning sky for those who are still alive to see it and for those who can only imagine it before they perish. It marked the night with a forgotten strength, forgotten tenderness, forgotten defiance, and forgotten understanding.

“How can anyone in Germany today expect a thousand years or ten thousand years from now that this will be forgotten?” Harry Cohen asked.

“I can’t stand the realization that all that remains of them is song and ashes,” Portman said. He did not say that he divided people into those who’d already gone through it and those that were still waiting. He divided women into those whose families had perished long ago and those who had lost them to the trucks only this afternoon or at dusk.

“It’s like catching sparrows in a cage,” Portman added. “Everyone knows what to expect for that.” His voice was full of anger and death. “I wish they’d shove it,” he added.

Harry Cohen held a piece of bread and a bloody pork sausage under his ragged jacket. Was he about to eat it? He had to be hungry. But he did not eat. Was he

waiting for the women to stop, just as I was, in the same way as before, when we waited for them to begin?

“They’ve lost their minds,” Portman said. “They’re more stubborn than I thought. They’re more persistent than salt.”

I could imagine the way the women looked. Some were swollen from hunger and irregularity, while others for the same reasons lost weight. Some sold themselves for a piece of bread, while others sold a piece of bread for a bowl of water so that they could wash. Sometimes I saw them humiliated because they had to strip naked before the SS soldiers or the Ukrainian guards, or doubly humiliated because their heads had been shaved, destroying their femininity. They had already lost their capacity for bearing children. But now they were singing.

“What’s the good of it?” Portman asked. “Why don’t the smarter ones make them shut up?”

“With what? With ashes?” Harry Cohen asked.

“It makes my teeth hurt,” Portman said. He was afraid that he would get another toothache and that without his teeth he would never be the same.

Did he huddle up so that he would not hear them? Did he pretend that the song no longer interested him? Was he interested only in his own breath? I no longer understood Portman and probably neither did Harry Cohen. The more we exposed our lives, the less we understood each other.

The women sang lullabies which they had brought from their homes, songs about love and joy, about the freshness of children. Their voices brought back a world which no longer existed.

“Yesterday Schiese-Dietz picked out the redheads,” said Portman. “He probably knew why.”

Portman feared who the Rottenfuehrer would pick out in the morning. Sometimes he picked out people who had prominent chins, or those who had small receding chins—sometimes people with white teeth and sometimes just the opposite. He’d picked out people with small heads and small brains, or with big heads in which he expected big brains, even though the selected one would stare at him with the eyes of an idiot. Portman did not know when Schiese-Dietz would start selecting people with big ears or untrimmed fingernails, with thin or flat lips, with thick or sparse eyebrows, cross-eyed ones and people with long fingers.

But Portman sometimes dreamt about being selected for the *Canada* commando special unit, who cleared the arriving transports and had lots of food and drink, at least for a day, for themselves and their friends—bacon and bread and strawberry or plum jam, and thermoses with coffee, cocoa or hot tea and vodka or schnapps or French cognac. He dreamt about this in spite of the fact that it also meant clearing the ramp and the railroad cars of dead infants and small choked children, carrying a bunch of them at once like bananas or shot hares or killed or choked hens. Portman dreamed, around the clock, of a full belly, but there was no chance of his making it into the Canada commando.

“It’s my father’s birthday today and the anniversary of his death,” Harry Cohen said. “I am as old today as he was when he died. He died in his bed. He was reading a book, closed his eyes, and whispered that the end had come.”

“Congratulations,” replied Portman. “Do you think this has some special meaning here? That is perhaps some kind of prophecy and you have a right not to let me sleep?”

Suddenly I realized that I was holding on to Harry Cohen’s elbows and wrists and that Portman was pressed between us. Our lice crawled from one collar to another. I took their warmth and they took mine.

The unknown women had sparked an image of what could be, because it had been once before. From time to time, the wailing wind interrupted the singing. Then the voices became clearer again, although the wailing wind did not die down. They floated through the network of electrified barbed wire, somewhere into infinity. I no longer waited for what Portman would say to mask his envy of the living and the dead. He was sometimes afraid of the dark so he had to talk, so as to hide his even greater fear of the Germans. The singing roused something in him that he thought was dead. It was somewhere on the limits, the nakedness of everything that was still living. It was the heart of his existence, on the thin border of his moral and physical strengths, like the moments of selection, dependence upon decisions made by someone else, but also upon his own decisions on how to accept it. Only he and his consciousness, no traitor to himself.

“I’ll give them another minute,” said Portman. Suddenly it sounded as if he did not have enough air in his lungs. Maybe he had tuberculosis already. “Count to sixty.”

The women were singing a popular German song: *In den Sternen steht es alles geschrieben, du sollst küssen, du sollst lieben*. . . . Probably those who went into the chimney were German or Austrian Jewish women. It was an old coffeehouse hit, but in this moment it carried some immediate, close, pure and direct sincerity and courage, some surprising truth, about who is who, no matter where or when. There was in that song now everything that was still unselfish or honorable, even when it was weak and abased.

“Well, really, who cares? When it takes so long it’s no good,” Portman added. He was being sarcastic about the thought that someone here was singing about kissing and passion or the desire from which children are born.

I held onto my wish that the women would not stop. Did Portman want them to stop because he feared for them? Besides the fact that in the end he turned his anger upon himself?

“Do you want to cry for them?” Portman asked. “This is idiotic solidarity and does no one any good. It just makes the Germans madder. The women have paid for it a couple of times already, as far as I know. Wouldn’t it be better to let the Germans sleep at night at least? Do they want to test whether it’s true that the devil never sleeps at night? Do they think they’re in America—where they can sing whenever and whatever they please?”

Portman turned his face to the planks of the bunk. “They’ll knock their teeth out if not worse. I’ve seen a lot of toothless ones here. And then later I did not see them anymore, precisely because they had lost their teeth.”

I held on to the last bits of the melody, which was already becoming blurred against the night. My brain, along with hunger, and the smell of human bodies in the barracks, was floating off into the numb wakefulness that precedes sleep. I suddenly

realized that I needed to have Ervin Portman beside me, even with his anger and superstitions and fear, and I needed Harry Cohen, just as they both needed me. Even when people—both the living and the dead—get on each other's nerves because they have nothing to offer each other and just vegetate, even on the way to the showers. What makes a man forgive others is not born of weakness or of strength, but from the fact that human life is irreplaceable and that nothing else matters.

Portman was bothered by my lice and by Harry Cohen's fleas. Portman picked them out from the ends of his short hair before it would be cut again for blankets and army coats. He pinched them with his nails and threw them down from the bunk in a curve resembling the flight of crows. When someone below grumbled, as though he'd swallowed them, Portman stopped. I felt Portman's hot breath, just as Harry Cohen felt mine.

"When I was a kid, my mother used to believe that if two people started singing the same song it brought them luck," Harry Cohen said.

"I never sing or whistle when I can play cards," Portman said. "That's sure to make you lose. I don't rush headlong into hell if I can remain at least a little while at hell's entrance. I prefer to look at smoke instead of looking straight into the fire. That's one thing they've taught me: that it's better to have your hand in the water than to have it in the fire."

"Hell isn't down below, in the center of the earth, in the crevices of mountains, rocks, and passes. It's up above, on the surface of the earth, like scales on the body of a fish. It's in every man, under the stars, under the snow, under the enormous firmament," Harry Cohen said. "It's in every uniform, in every whip, bullet, or dog that is set against people. I think that hell exists five-fold—in each of the five crematoria. Or in the eight-meter pits, in which they burn people when it's not snowing or raining."

"They're still singing. They're more persistent than salt," I said. "They're braver than geese or wild swans. I wish I had their marrow in my bones."

"A lot of good it would do you. You'd really end up in a fine mess then," Portman said. "Don't count on me."

The uniqueness and worthlessness of human life—like two sisters—floated through the night, over the camp and over all of the camps of Germany and the occupied territories. This is what in five, six years the German war had done. This is what made one doubt man and his existence, victory and defeat, good and evil. What caused the first to be last and the last to be first. The wind distorted the singing of the women. It drove the snow against the wall of the barracks and filled its enormous arms with ashes which it carried away farther or closer, spreading them on all sides—ashes that will remain on the face of the planet like a birthmark, even if every last Jewish man, Jewish woman, or Jewish child should perish.

The ashes silenced the echo of the first shot. It lasted only a few seconds. Definitely less than half a minute. The singing mixed with the shooting, then there was only shooting and its echo. It definitely was nothing unexpected: Portman was right about that. It sounded like the Rottenfuehrer's switch for camels. Last time, Harry Cohen remembered that a camel will never forget if somebody wrongs it. But, Harry Cohen

added, they never forget the good that someone does for them, either. I was sure that he was not in his mind with that Aryan girl in Prague, Maruschka. Maybe she could read his mind, but she could never know what he knew.

In the air, among the snowflakes, a kind of echo remained from the shooting of the machine gun. It was all ordinary, just like the snowflakes. Like the smoke from the chimneys. Like mud.

“They could have figured it out,” Portman said. “Unless they’ve become blind, like moles in the winter.”

“Maybe they did figure it out,” Harry Cohen replied. “But I don’t believe it, just as I don’t believe that moles go blind in the winter.”

“I’ll go to sing with them, once they get the idea of throwing rocks at the Rottenfuehrer and at the Scharfuehrer at the same time,” Portman said. And then he added: “No one will give a damn.”

Someone went to the bucket. Nothing had changed in the least in the daily routine of the barracks. From the sounds of the steps and movements you could tell who had diarrhea, who had dysentery or even typhus, who had tuberculosis, pneumonia or only asthma—who would not make it till morning or midnight and who would manage to infect his bedfellows before he died.

I bid farewell to the singing of the women and looked forward to tomorrow’s, just as I had looked forward to my grandmother’s bedtime fairy tales. Where does a man find strength when all that he has is weakness?

“Schiese-Dietz believes that Jewish children are born hairy, like animals,” Portman said. “He also selects the hairy girls first, even before those who are skin and bones.”

I knew that I would be able to hear the women singing again, and yet it occurred to me that they would be singing when I wouldn’t be there—nor Portman nor Harry Cohen. I thought about life and death in Auschwitz-Birkenau. What is the purpose of human existence? Why is man plagued by feelings of futility and worthlessness? How do you find out how to do the right thing when it comes to it? It was again a moment of unanswerable questions. But there was some change in the air, even if there were no answers. How many people had they shot? What would the women appeal to tomorrow with their singing? I was lost in the echo of their chorus. I felt the snow, the ashes, and the silence around me. I felt the urge to go outside, for which the guard would immediately shoot me before I got to the barbed wire. I wanted to touch with my lips a sliver of ash or snowflake I listened. Others cried themselves to sleep. And still others had been shot into an eternal sleep.

“At last,” said Portman.

It did not sound like relief or satisfaction, though sometimes Portman thought that women had nine lives, like cats. Perhaps he hoped that it was true. Everything that had to do with cats Portman believed to be ill-fated, an echo or foreboding of misfortune, even when it was born only in his head.

“Couldn’t they have gone to sleep long ago?” Portman asked. “Tomorrow they’ll be dropping like flies, even those who were not hit.” And then he continued: “There’s no sense in wasting your time or your strength. It’s a waste of every drop of blood when you spill it on your own and for nothing.”

I tried to call back the echo of the women's voices, the image of birth, of something that for me was always connected with women, something which I knew little about and probably never understood. I felt the familiar shame, but for the first time, maybe knowing why.

"Do you have the shakes or what?" Portman addressed me. And finally, added: "They'll drive me nuts with their singing."

Portman curled up to sleep. I wished the remaining women would fall asleep and not be cold. Harry Cohen began to chew his bread and blood sausage. He was, maybe, concerned with the number of possibilities everything and everybody had, or should have had, or didn't have at all. He wished to be somewhere else, someone else, where people did not live a miserable life, where they didn't have to ask every other second why they were born, about things for which there were no solutions.

Portman's fleas and lice were feasting on me. The smoke rose slowly toward the sky. Black snow was falling. I have never forgotten the black snow with ashes in Auschwitz-Birkenau, which that night I had seen for the first time in my life, before I fell asleep.

"Good night," Portman said in a conciliatory tone. He repeated to himself the tattooed number on his right forearm. He probably no longer envied the dead.

"Good night," Harry Cohen said. It was one of the possibilities.

"Good night," I managed sleepily.

We were swallowed by silence into which Samson once disappeared and in which every night and every man seems to be the last. Infinity engulfed us.