

## Malkinia Station, Eastern Poland, August 24, 1942 · *Ian MacMillan*

IRENA SIEDLECKI pulls the children closer into the folds of her heavy skirt and says, “It will not be long now, my little ones.” Her feet flash pain up her legs, and her lower back aches. Zygmunt, the youngest, pulls his head away from her skirt and looks up at her, the blinking light coming in through the chinks in the boxcar’s planking flickering across his dirty, anxious face.

“Grandma, I’m—”

“Remember, we weren’t going to say that again, is that right?” She looks at Janusz, wedged into the corner with their shabby luggage. The oldest of the four of her grandchildren, he has recently been distant and surly, she thinks because of his beginning maturation. And of course there is the problem with his hearing, which she thinks is as much a strategy for him as it is a disability.

The railway car lurches violently, and the smaller children clutch at her dress. “Of course we are all thirsty.”

“Of course,” Janusz says. The fright on his face is tinged with a look of frustration and anger. She knows that at sixteen he will not accept her reassurances. Besides, she does not have the energy to shout at his surly, resistant face. That they are going to die is inevitable. She has heard the stories, that at Treblinka they murder everyone who comes on the trains. Irena Siedlecki looks at his face in the dim, shifting light of the railway car as it slowly increases speed. He has the beginning of a mustache, and pimples on his forehead and cheeks. In his square face she sees the features of her husband, his grandfather, who has been dead now—five years it is since the stroke which deadened and made drooling and slack the left side of his face.

Her heart begins to beat rapidly at the thought of how close they must be. That God has condemned them this way mystifies her. All that remains for her is to reassure the children so that their experience of it will be less painful. How can she tell them? No. She must accept His judgment. Her husband, in one of his more eccentric moods, would have granted it more devoutly: it is ours to pray that He multiply these travails a thousandfold.

“My hand!” Zygmunt says. For the past week he has had a sore in the palm of his left hand, and Irena Siedlecki has brooded and prayed over it, fearing that the infection might spread, and indeed, this morning she saw the redness around the sore beginning to leak up his wrist. He raises his hand, and the cut crowns a bright red lump, which has a kind of comet’s tail, the beginning of the infection’s spread.

“I hurt under my arm.”

She sighs. That is surely a sign.

The railway car rocks with a mournful sluggishness, and she feels her heart fluttering, so that her throat constricts painfully. She feels soiled, hot, and smells the odor of her fear rising off her clothes. Soon even the embarrassment at her own bodily filth will be obliterated by death. The children clutch at her legs, burying their faces in her skirt. They will have to endure their thirst, endure their deaths, and she will have to hold onto her composure. Only Janusz will remain an impediment to her charade, and she is briefly angry with him. He does not pray or show any regard for the children. And that he would use a common if not easily treated problem with his hearing as a means of irritating her!

“Of course it may not be true,” she says to him over the rumbling and creaking of the train.

“Don’t do that,” he snaps.

“Now there! You heard me, and I was not shouting,” she says. “Besides, you could at least show some concern for—”

“Why?” he says. “They are going to kill us!”

The children’s hands tighten on her legs. She leans over and says, “He’s only frightened. Don’t worry little ones. He’s convinced by these rumors.”

Now Janusz is crying, trying not to show it. “I am not the cause of this,” she says. “Why are you so cruel to your grandmother?”

He gives her a stare brief and almost violent with contempt, and she closes her eyes. The train lurches, producing a collective gasp from the people crowding against them. They look around at the air with expressions of fatalistic acceptance, and she can hear their prayers rising above the sound of the train. In one of the other corners of the car a family of Hasidim are gathered, and from time to time, when the heads near her move to open the way to her vision, she can see their heads bobbing in prayer. Her husband was fascinated by their fanaticism, and was prone to wish for himself the capability of such selfless devotion. He had been for years

muddled in his own vision of God because his father had converted to Catholicism in order to escape the miseries suffered by so many Jews, especially in the east. Then, in a horrible rift in the family, his son went the other way. He found the Hasidim boorish and repulsive and unenlightened. He married a Catholic, and tried to educate his children toward the way of *Haskala*, enlightened free-thinking in the manner of the great Moses Mendelssohn. Our Socrates, he had called him, waving an old book in his father's face. But with Janusz, much of his labor fell on deaf ears, and now he and his wife are gone, arrested and probably dead.

She puts her hands on the tops of two of the children's heads, the smaller of the three. Oh little ones, she thinks. My only grandchildren. She remembers, more than a year ago, when their parents were taken away. No one in the village ever learned where they were taken, and she heard rumors that they were in forced labor, or had been shot and buried near the village. And now this. That all life of this family, however bitterly misdirected and squabbling it might have been generation by generation, has funneled itself down to this place and this day, and now the string will be cut off forever.

For a few minutes she nearly sleeps, letting her body bounce with the movement of the train. When she awakens, she does not know how much time has passed. There, off in the corner, she sees the heads bobbing.

The train slows, the car jerking back with its slowing motion, so that the floor shifts under her shoes. Another siding, or the place itself? Janusz is now looking around at the dusty air like a cornered animal. The crowd sways as one, and one man nearby is trying to peek out into the bright slice of light that comes in through the door edge and creates a glittering plane of swirling dust.

There is an odor penetrating the air. Carrion. She pulls the children closer. The train now inches, screeching and moaning with its movement. Then it slams to a stop, jostling the people violently.

The railway car door slides open, letting in light so harsh that it momentarily blinds her. She hears people screaming, and then the shouts of men. "We're getting off the train now," she says. "Remember, we don't say any more about water. They'll have water here." Jadwiga looks up, her face pale with a fatigue so deep that it overcomes her fear. "Jadwiga," she says, "keep the little ones together. Hold Zygmunt's right hand."

"I know what is happening," Jadwiga says.

"You cannot be sure, I told you."

“I know.”

Space opens up, and Janusz shuffles toward the bright opening, sliding one large box behind him and carrying the old suitcase in his left hand. We are here then, she thinks. Father usher us to our death gently. Do not allow the children to know.

She has heard the stories from her brother-in-law Berek: they will be fooled into thinking that they are taking showers, and will be gassed then. If she can keep the little ones' spirits up until that moment, then it will remain only to breathe deeply the cloud of material that will kill them. She adjusts the strap of her heavy bag, which holds family photographs, papers, some money.

Moving toward the door, holding the little ones against her thighs, she smells the odor again, and sees those at the opening dropping into the violent light. She hears the sounds of people being struck, of moans and stifled shrieks of pain.

“*Alle hieraus!*” a soldier yells. She is at the opening.

“Come, grandmother,” a boy who seems to be a porter says to her. Janusz is already on the ground, struggling with the luggage. The crowd moves toward some buildings. “Come down, be careful.” The boy, who is handsome, with beautiful eyes, helps each of the children down. “Pay no attention to those on the ground,” he says. “They died in the trains.”

“Yes,” she says. She stoops, but her knees buckle, and the boy catches her under the arms and pulls her down to the ground. Her closeness to the boy embarrasses her because of the odor of her clothes. Off to her left, along the cars, she sees bodies on the ground. Further away—or do her eyes deceive her?—lies a nude body with a cloud of flies hovering over it. The smell is stronger now. Uniformed guards herd the people toward the buildings. The children clutch at one another, also understanding the source of the smell. Other tattered porters pull people off the car behind theirs, and those being pulled off appear either unconscious or dead. Yes, the cars behind their own were hitched on at the Malkinia siding. She and the children are pushed toward the crowd. The strap of her bag digs into her neck. “Grandmother!” Jadwiga whispers. “There’s a dead man—”

“Yes,” she says. “He did not do what he was told. We must do what we are told and then we’ll get water.”

Janusz is ahead of her, looking around, his face ashen and stilled with awe. He understands. The more he looks around, the more bodies he sees.

She steps toward the crowd. Feeling something sticky under her shoes, she looks down. It is partly dried blood, a dark brick color, almost black at the edges, thick as paste in the center. She shudders, feeling nauseated, as if she will heave her empty stomach out her mouth.

Protected inside the crowd, she and the children move with it, while at the edges, guards appear to be hitting people, mostly the men, with sticks and gunstocks. Janusz has made his way to the center of the moving crowd also, and keeps his head down. A porter has dragged the luggage off to the side and piled it on the blanket rolls, boxes, rope-tied suitcases belonging to the other people.

Ahead something is happening. It is the men. They move to the right, the women and children go straight, into a building. Janusz moves away from her with the men. The children whimper and shuffle with her, staring at the ground under them. "Soon now," she whispers, patting Jadwiga's shoulder. She can no longer see Janusz.

Inside the building the women and children are undressing. She is suddenly hot with shame—that this sagging old body will now be visible to everyone. She is glad Janusz is not in the building with her. The guards posted around the undressing women and children stare above their heads, as if thinking of something other than what they are doing. Two guards toward the middle of the long room are laughing and pointing, apparently at a young woman. She looks around the shoulder of the woman in front of her and sees that they laugh because the woman is fat. One young Pole wearing a grey pajama-like smock walks along next to the undressing women saying, "Please tie your shoes together, and bundle your clothes in one bundle. You'll get these things after your shower. Put your valuables in the box ahead."

When she has enough space, she begins to undress. The children do too, and when she removes her undershirt her hanging breasts are visible, and she sees them staring at them open-mouthed. "Hurry now," she whispers. Her breath is high and shallow in her chest. Zygmunt struggles with his clothes, his hand out to his side. "Jadwiga," she says. Jadwiga helps Zygmunt with his clothes.

The children stand with their arms crossed over their little, round bellies, gazing up at her with awed, questioning eyes. "Well," she says. "This is not something we're used to." Jadwiga laughs ruefully and looks at the other two.

“My hand,” Zygmunt says.

“It’s always worse during the middle of the day,” she says, picking up the bag of family things. It is true. Infections reach their zenith in the late afternoon.

“We’ll get alcohol for it,” she says. “Then you’ll see a change.” But it is clear to her that it may be beyond their control. The red patch at the base of the palm of his hand has now extended up the thin, delicate cords of his wrist. She could not see it before on the train.

“I see Zygmunt’s peepee,” Krystyna says.

“Be quiet,” Jadwiga says. “Maybe—”

The naked people move toward a door. Through it Irena Siedlecki sees one woman holding a towel and a bar of soap.

“There’s a woman with soap,” she says to Jadwiga.

That the woman would have soap strikes her as a sign, perhaps that after all death is not the business of this place. Why then would the woman have soap?

“We have no soap,” Jadwiga says.

Something else is happening near the door. One man in a dirty, drab looking outfit is ordering women to sit on a table. She leans up to see. He is looking between their legs.

She bristles with shame. What on earth would they be interested in? That they should be treated this way is bad enough, but to go poking around in womens’ private places this way? The guards look on with disinterested, almost bored gazes, and the women near the table stand with hunched shoulders in a kind of miserable submission.

“Children,” she says. “Listen to me. They’re doing a kind of private search.” They look up at her. Zygmunt is wincing with pain. “I know,” she says, patting him on the head. She looks at Jadwiga with her beautiful braid and her plump, child’s body, and thinks, no, they can’t do that to her. “I will have to go and sit on that table over there. Just stay together.” Zygmunt looks at her breasts again. “I am an old woman,” she says. “It’s nothing extraordinary.”

“Grandmother,” Jadwiga says. “Will it hurt?”

“Of course not!” she says, surprised at the high pitched, almost strangled artificiality of her voice.

“The bag, please,” one of the workers says. She gives him the bag, and he walks off, bouncing it in his hands as if to test its weight. Now she is

only two or three women away from the table. She is about to separate herself from the children when she sees the man in the dirty clothes fumble between the legs of a younger woman and come up with a leather bag. The guards are suddenly interested, and the woman is crying. The man in the dirty clothes works at the bag and opens it, and the guards peer inside, one of them laughing and holding his nose between his thumb and forefinger. When the woman gets off the table that guard slaps her on the buttocks and laughs, and she runs through the doorway.

It is now her turn. She approaches the table, and the man in the dirty clothes gestures to her to sit and lean back. She does so, feeling the heat of the previous women in the wood of the table. "Oh get off!" the man snaps, and she struggles back down to the floor and rejoins the children.

Then they are walking along a strange, curved lane with pineboughs woven through wire so that the air has a fragrant, sappy odor. One of the guards standing along the way threatens them by stamping his foot as they pass, and ahead she sees another woman who has apparently soiled herself so that wet stains of feces show on the backs of her thighs. She is winded, and aware that women are running toward them from behind, and so she pulls the children to the side. The guards have apparently struck them as they passed. It occurs to her that such meanness could indicate that they never had any intention of killing them. Mistreatment makes little sense. But when she sees the low building with the little door, and the darkness inside, the low ceiling and back in the deeper recesses of the room the pale, ghostlike forms of other women and children, she knows that all that they had said was true. Her heart rises in her chest, high and ticklish and light, and she feels as if she has nothing inside her body, as if she will next be able to float, and the guards on either side of the doorway are two dimensional and flat, like cardboard cutouts, and the hands of the children on her thighs and wrists feel like her own appendages, also hollow and floating. She knows that it is most important that they find a place in there where they can stay together.

Janusz Siedlecki is jostled out of the wide line of men and falls on something soft, the heels of his hands sliding out from under his weight. It is a corpse, and he scrambles away from it, hearing laughter through the hollow, muffled pounding in his head. He looks up at a tall guard who yells at him

in some foreign language. Then a voice behind him says in Polish, “Take one of the arms! Take one of the arms!”

“Why?”

The man raises his hand as if to hit him. Janusz grabs the wrist of the corpse’s left arm and pulls, feeling tendons popping in the shoulder. Then he feels a tearing, so that the skin of the hand begins to pull off, like a glove. He pulls the cuff of the man’s coat sleeve down to cover the sticky, dark red opening. As soon as the corpse is moved, sliding on the yellow, sandy earth, the potent stench of putrefaction blows across his face like a billow of heavy smoke. He sees that he is one of four carrying the corpse, and allows them to determine the direction.

The painful rush of the near deafness makes him dizzy, and he stumbles at a half run, looking back over his shoulder at the spot from which he was pushed out of the line of men. He does not understand it—he should be with them. Then he sees the man who runs with him, holding the corpse’s other arm. He is young, and his face is twisted with fatigue and a kind of grim fright. The corpse’s head does not bob, but bounces stiffly on the neck. They pass a fence, then go around the corner of a building, and in the distance he sees more men, pulling bodies into a long ditch.

His heartbeat bangs painfully in his ears, accompanied by a strange, distant roar. With this he pulls into himself, and looks down at his feet shooting out from under him one by one, until he feels the men slowing down. His hand is numb from gripping the dead man’s wrist.

They let the body down at the edge of the ditch. Janusz looks at the face—the skin is blackish around the eyes, nose, and mouth, and part of the man’s tongue peeks through swollen lips. One guard, a Ukrainian he thinks, pokes at the man’s clothes with the barrel of his rifle. He says something to the man who had threatened to hit Janusz, and the man leans down and begins feeling the pockets of the corpse’s clothing. He rises up with a little booklet, perhaps a passport, and a small wad of Polish currency. The guard takes the money, scales the passport into the hole, and shoos them away.

They run back to the train platform, yelled at by the same man. “Faster!” he yells. “If you slow down they’ll kill you.”

Janusz’s mouth is as dry as dust, and his throat burns. He hears a strange, flat crack ahead, and sees a man crumple like a dropped marionette on the dusty earth. An SS officer holsters a pistol, and gestures at them to come



over. As the four run toward the body, Janusz tries to understand what is happening. His grandmother and the children are somewhere beyond the low building to his left.

When he pulls up on the man's wrist he feels its warmth, and the body dangles loosely, the head hanging like a melon in a bag, dripping blood in a dotted line in the dirt. Again they are running toward the long ditch. As he runs he watches the man's head bobbing and snapping while feeling its weight pull in strong vibratory shocks.

"Why—why did they—" He draws breath. "Shoot him?"

"Shut up!"

After they drop the body off at the ditch they run back to the railroad siding, to a line of boxcars, not from the train he was brought in. The leader of their group gestures to him to pull one of the sliding doors open, but he does not know how to work the handle. The man pushes him out of the way and flips the handle up, then slides the door open, and jumps back. The bodies of three men topple out onto the platform, their heads bouncing on the concrete.

Inside no one is standing. The air wafting out the door is heavy with the odor of sweat, of human filth, excrement, vomit. Two more bodies at the edge roll out slowly and flop on the siding at their feet. At floor level are three faces, all with eyes and mouths open. One is a little girl with braids, pinned under the upper body of a man. As he is about to look away, he thinks he sees her blinking.

"Get inside!" the man yells. He climbs up onto the splintered planking of the boxcar. The man below him says something he cannot hear, then looks with wary fright behind him. One of the SS officers is watching them. The man turns again to Janusz and gestures rapidly—bring them out, bring them out. His face is twisted with a combination of fright and irritation. Janusz pulls at the first body, whose legs are pinned under the body of an old woman who died clutching a package that looks like a present against her chest. Her mouth is open as if she is singing. A gold bracelet appears at the opening of her coat pocket, and he picks it up and slips it into his own.

"Idiot!" the man yells. "You do this right or you die, do you understand? We all die, do you understand me, idiot!"

"I'm not supposed to be here," Janusz says.

"Shut up!"

He leans down, and sees the chubby face of the little girl. She blinks again.

“This one is alive,” he says. Then he becomes aware that he should not have put the bracelet in his pocket.

The three men appear furious with impatience.

Janusz tugs at the wrists of the closest man, and his legs come out from under the old woman clutching the package, then drag over the braid of the little girl. Then he pulls the package out of the old woman’s arms, and rolls her toward the opening.

After sundown they are lined up near the railway station and told to wait. The bracelet in his pocket feels somehow bigger, and he is now sure that he will be punished when they see the circular lump of fabric on his trousers. He tries to casually hang his hand there to conceal it. His head pounds, and the muffled rushing in his ears makes him feel as if this is all a dream. Dimly he realizes that he must find out where his grandmother and the children are. A prisoner appears carrying a bucket and a ladle. Janusz is about twentieth in his line, and fears that the bucket may be empty when the man gets to him.

He looks again toward the line of railway cars they had worked at earlier. After removing a few of the bodies, the men were ordered to continue cleaning up the rotting bodies around the railway station, leaving that car as it was—the Ukrainian guard merely ordered the door closed, and they left the bodies as they were, including the little girl pinned under others, blinking at the dirty floor of the car.

They are watched by two Ukrainian guards and one German officer, and the men do not show their desire for water. Janusz understands that those who stand out in any way can be beaten or shot, and in his case, the bracelet would certainly get him killed. He hears the faint grating sound of the ladle against the side of the pail, and finds himself shaking, his knees weak. His turn—the man puts the ladle toward his lips, and he reaches out and holds it with both hands. When the water is to his mouth he drinks it down in two gulps, but too quickly, so that it catches in his throat and makes him cough. Some of the water is expelled painfully from his nose, and he is aware of the men nearby laughing harshly—not the men in the line, but the guards and the officer.

They are then marched around one building toward another which has a single door directly under the inverted V of the roof. He stumbles into the dark room. The men ahead of him move off into corners, to places where the raw wood walls meet the hardened dirt, and flop down. They curl up in sleeping positions. He has no idea what time it is, but imagines that it must be nine o'clock. In this sudden calm he pulls into himself and feels the muffled pounding in his head, the flashing of pain in both ears. There is no hope—he will be living inside his head, as he has most of his life. They poured oil in his ears, they irrigated his ears, but it never worked. Then his father would become angry at him for being deaf and order him to his room, where he would remain alone with an old encyclopedia, with which he bored himself into exhaustion. He was always assumed to be partially deaf, but on those strange occasions when it vanished by some miracle—after playing so hard that he became drenched with sweat, or perhaps after swimming—he would experience two hours, sometimes half a day, of a bizarre auditory lucidity that would frighten him. The world was a constant gabbling of sounds, snappings, tinklings, far off moans, vibrations of sound so mysterious that he could never identify their source, and he wondered if deafness was somehow preferable. Then he would recede once again into that world of a perpetual roaring paced by the whooshing sound of the beating of his own heart. When his parents were arrested he did what he thought his father would do: he cut stovewood with a bow-saw, which on weekends they had always sold by the wagonload in Warsaw, thirty kilometers to the south of their little town. He waited for his father to come back, to pick up where they had left off, but he never did.

“My name is Adam Szpilman.”

It is the leader of their group of four.

“Janusz Siedlecki.”

“Stop shouting—are you deaf?”

He can barely see the man's face in the darkness.

“Some of the time,” he whispers. “Where are my grandmother and sisters and brother?”

“How can you be deaf some of the time?”

Adam Szpilman grabs him by the upper arm and draws him toward the wall where there are small windows through which the reflection of guard tower lights shine in yellow shafts.

“Listen to me,” Szpilman says. “You are fairly strong for your age, which is?”

“Sixteen.”

“You’ve got to hear me when I talk, do you understand? You worked all day today without dropping, which means I made it through today also. But you’ve got to hear me.”

“What is happening here?”

“This is a mess. The system has broken down, and that is why the corpses are everywhere. Normally—” Szpilman comes out with a derisive laugh. “Normally everything is quite smooth. Normally we get a little to eat at the end of the day.”

Janusz remembers the bracelet and pulls it from his pocket. “I found this.”

Adam Szpilman takes it and holds it up to the dim light. “You’d have been shot if they caught you.”

“I didn’t know.”

“What do you want to do with it? Around here, people use it to buy water, food—”

“You can have it.”

Szpilman looks at him. “I have no use for it but I know of someone who does.”

“All right.”

“He—they have a use for anything—currency, jewelry, whatever. Some of us are trying to organize—well, some way of dealing with this.”

“I need to find my grandmother and brother and sisters.”

“You should forget about them,” Szpilman says. “They’re dead. I’m sorry.” He pauses, then says, “That’s how it is here.”

Janusz imagines each of their faces, Grandmother, then Jadwiga, then the little ones, and sees them in a kind of rapid animation. But they are dead. He does not know what to think of that. Szpilman leaves him and lies down on the dirt floor of the barracks building, and Janusz does the same.

That they are all dead seems not to assert itself to him. He is aware that his hands still smell of rotting flesh. His stomach twists in painful cramps of hunger, and as he feels himself begin to drift, almost against his will, he pictures the face of the little girl in braids, who blinked at him as he pulled the few bodies off the top of the pile in the railway car. She is still there, pinned under a man, and her face remains superimposed on his imagination,

her eyes blinking patiently as she waits to be pulled out of the car. He is aware of men talking somewhere on the other side of the room, but he remains encased inside his deafness, and it seems to him that it might be the deafness itself that prevents him from understanding that they are all dead, that the picture of the blinking girl remains somehow more important.

He awakens to the sound of yelling, and when he opens his eyes he sees a man hanging suspended from a belt, his tongue filling his mouth like food and his trousers wet from urine and feces. No one pays any attention to the man—they brush by him toward the barracks door, making him swing slightly, causing the roof of the barracks to creak in such a way that he can feel the sound in the ground under him and hear what seems like a man groaning.

The men are crowding at the door, then going outside to line up in front of the building. He looks for Adam Szpilman but cannot see him. Outside, he sees that some of the men are using the small latrine building just across from the doorway. The rest are preparing to form lines.

Adam Szpilman taps him on the shoulder, then says something he cannot hear. He shakes his head, and Adam repeats, “Stay with me.”

They are given water, each a tin cupful. Janusz is more careful this time, and waits while he feels it working its way down his throat to his stomach—it is almost painful, and at first feels like he imagines acid might feel.

“When do we eat?” he asks.

“Not yet.”

“What happened to the man in the barracks?”

“He was an informer and got chummy with the Germans.”

When the men are finished drinking their water they are marched back toward the railway station, to the same car they pulled bodies from the evening before. Janusz remembers the blinking girl, and as he walks, he recalls that his grandmother and sisters and brother are dead. As had happened the day before, he realizes that his perception of this fact is somehow short circuited in his pounding head, that his attitude should be some kind of grief, but he does not feel grief. He feels hunger, and thirst, and his skin is irritated with dirt and sour body oil.

He sees that Adam now has a look of a kind of terrified excitement on his face, and the two other men are aware of something by the railway cars.

There stands a tall officer in black, who is jovially watching the activity, nodding and smiling and giving orders to Ukrainian guards and prisoners. Janusz understands that this man is important, and as his figure bobs in his vision his perception of the man clarifies—he is tall and handsome, the insignia on his cap and collar glinting in the sunlight. Adam passes near the man, who watches with a kind of thoughtful perplexity. His eyes are beautiful, and he has the face of a cinema actor.

He speaks to Adam, who turns and points to the door of the railway car. Janusz opens it, now knowing how the handle works, and peers inside. The girl is still there pinned under a man and appears to be dead. In the darker corners of the car he sees the same corpses that he saw the previous evening. He climbs up into the car, smelling a deadened version of yesterday's air, and starts by trying to work the body of the man off the little girl with the braids. One of the other workers pulls himself up into the car and helps.

When they drag the heavy corpse off the girl, Janusz hears a strange wailing sound that seems to come from somewhere outside the car, but sees that Adam and the other worker helping are looking down at the little girl. Her face is contorted with pain. Janusz picks her up, and she reaches out to grab at his arms. He passes the girl to Adam, who lays her down on the siding. She continues to yell, and the handsome officer snaps at him with a look of distracted irritation on his face. Adam and the fourth worker pick her up and carry her toward the ditches, Adam holding both of her wrists in one of his hands, the other man holding both ankles. Her head bobs harshly, and Janusz can see her straining her neck to hold it still.

He sees her once again near nightfall, but seeing her brings out no more than a dull recognition that yes, this was the blinking girl with the braids. She lies in the long ditch pinned under the bloated, blackened corpse of a woman, so that only her braid is visible.

He turns with the other three workers and walks around a building to a place they call the Sorting Square. In the center of the square there is a colorful mountain of clothing with an officer sitting on top. The mountain of clothes looms over piles of decomposing corpses. "Ten thousand," Adam Szpilman says. "And for days." He explains to Janusz that only a week ago things ran smoothly, but more and more the railway cars delivered to them whole villages of dead people, because of the suffocation. Janusz tries to process this information, but is distracted because his hands

are hopelessly fouled with the odor of decomposition, so that he no longer puts them near his face. His hands are now like tools. They begin work, and he distracts himself by looking for things to steal—here a ring, there a watch, in this pocket money, Polish, English, American. It all goes into his pockets and is visible, he knows, and he waits for them to catch him, to shoot him, and it is as if he does not care. When he finds something to steal, he puts it in his pocket giggling with a sensation of weak-kneed, demented mischief. It doesn't matter—the increasing pressure in his head and the pounding roar in his ears have reduced him into an automaton, and he exists inside that roar, calmly and objectively processing information: there are ten thousand bodies in that pile. Ten thousand? Yes. He comes from a town of three or four thousand people, so he labors over the mathematical logic of this information: this would be, then, perhaps two and a half times the population of his town. He does not even know one tenth of the people in his town, having lived in its Jewish quarter.

And the corpses: how long have they been lying there in what they call the Sorting Square? Perhaps three or four days, because in the folds of skin, the mouths, sometimes around the groin areas there is the subtle, glistening movement of worms.

Sometimes when he picks up on a man's arm—always the same arm because Adam does not want any variation in the technique of their body-carrying—the arm simply pulls off, sometimes at the elbow, sometimes at the shoulder. Janusz has noted with a kind of scientific objectivity that children pull apart more readily than adults, perhaps because of the softness of their flesh. They have decided that when these arms come off, they shall be piled just so, ready for that one trip to the ditch when Adam orders each man to carry four adult limbs, or six child limbs. And always it is the same number, because Adam does not want any variation in the technique of their body-carrying. One of the guards, attracted by any irregularity, may walk up to one of them and shoot him carefully, high in the back of the neck, just under what Janusz remembers is called the occipital point of the skull, shown skinless in an illustration in the encyclopedia as a protrusion flanked by red muscles that run down the neck. And why there? He recalls that under the occipital point of the skull there is the root of the brain, referred to as the Medulla, and the bullet, passing through the Medulla, shuts off all information transferred from the brain to the body, in effect turning the human being off like a lamp.

But for the moment, he realizes, his brain is still safely connected to his spinal cord, and so he is able to carry bodies and process information. From time to time they find food inside bags, boxes, in pockets, and they find money and jewelry, some of which he puts in his pocket. Adam has told him that this is unusual, because normally, when things run smoothly, those coming in, perhaps ten thousand a day, are gassed naked, and he pointed, over there, in Camp Number Two, the Death Camp. But these bodies are rotting so fast that there is not time to bother taking off their clothes. Those who run the camp do not like to eat their dinner with that smell hanging in the air. Eat while you can, he told Janusz, and as for stealing, you are risking what little chance you have at life. Be careful. Eating proved easier said than done—Janusz ran across a flattened box in a man's pocket, and inside the box were the melted remains of chocolate covered cherries, and he stuffed a wad of this material into his mouth. He chewed, and it burst with a sticky, almost unbearable sweetness, and his jaws were stung with the sensation of painful astringency, but the saliva he expected did not materialize, and he has spent this day with the sensation of the cherry pieces stuck in his throat, which is so dry that he cannot swallow them.

This evening they are given cups of cold potato soup before being marched off to the barracks. Janusz is aware that the three other men in his group are excited about something, that in their surreptitious smiles and knowing glances they have found something. It is alcohol. When the door is closed on them and the majority of the fatigued workers flop down on the hard dirt, the rest seem still too wide awake. Adam reaches into the front of his trousers, pulls out a bottle of clear liquid, and holds it up to the pale moonlight coming in through one of the little windows. Vodka. Other men have also waited until now to reveal flasks, bottles of wine, bags of candy, cigarettes.

“The four of us can get drunk,” Adam says.

One of the others, who is called Marek, frowns and shakes his head. “And how well do you think you'll work tomorrow? Do you think you'll survive tomorrow?”

“I don't care,” Adam says.

“I do.”



Janusz sits down on the hard dirt, fatigued at the effort of trying to hear what they are saying. Above him he hears another older man who is an acquaintance of Adam Szpilman's ask if that is the deaf one, to which Adam, taking a sip of the vodka, says yes. But Janusz feels himself receding from them, pulling into the rushing in his head, vaguely thinking, my grandmother is dead, my sisters and brother are dead. There are ten thousand people in that pile. There is no qualitative difference to these observations. It might just as well be a list of odd facts of the sort that you might find in a science book: there is a theory that birds are distant relatives of dinosaurs, the most interesting property of mercury is what gives it its common name—quicksilver, ducks mate for life, a pane of glass is a sheet of slowly flowing liquid.

He is being pulled to his feet and does not protest. Adam is speaking to the older man, who holds up and then lights a candle stump, grabs Janusz's right ear between his thumb and forefinger, and pulls it up. When Janusz moves as if to prevent the man from looking in his ear Adam shakes his head and looks threateningly at him—could it be that Adam could have him shot? He does not know, and so decides to submit to the examination.

The older man walks off a short distance and begins to rummage in a small bag. "He's a doctor," Adam shouts. "His name is Herzenberg. He found that bag in a transport and they let him keep it." Then the older man rises, holding a black tube which sweeps to a point on one end and has three silver rings on the other. Adam and the older man laugh about something, and Janusz feels his head reel in a nightmarish swoon. The older man unscrews the point of the tube, and Adam pours vodka into it. Janusz feels his knees jerk and has the powerful impulse to run, but he remains rooted to the spot because the rushing in his head has neutralized even his physical will.

The older man's hand, which smells of carrion, grips the top of Janusz's head and tips it, and as Adam looks on with an encouraging expression, Janusz feels the thin end of the device moving into his ear, sliding along the top of the canal. Suddenly there is a loud rush of sound, like a roaring waterfall, biting cold inside his ear, and the pain increases sharply, pressing inward, until there is what feels like an explosion, and the older man looks down at the dirt between them. He stoops, holding the candle. On the dirt the long wax plug looks like a fat worm, a rich brown blending to dark amber at the ends. His head is gripped once more, and once more

the thin end of the device is slid into his other ear, and as this is happening, Janusz feels the stinging in the other ear along with something else: a lucidity of sound that mesmerizes him to the point of being nearly unaware of the waterfall rush in the other ear, the increasing pressure that seems ready to burst his ear, and then the peculiar explosion.

“So how does that feel?” Adam asks.

Janusz can only stare at him. He feels the cold moistness tunneling into his head from both sides, a powerful frigid astringency that chills his whole body. His hearing is so intense that he blocks out the recognition of what he sees and absorbs the strange ticking sounds, the humming, the vibration of the building they stand in, the buzzing sounds emanating from each human being near him, and in the distance, the sounds made by trees, by dew falling, and yes, over there, the mumbling of praying men, beyond that someone screaming. A number of people screaming—perhaps in one of the railway cars. He can hear each screaming voice as clearly as if they were just there on the other side of the wall.

“Now when I whisper to you, you won’t call attention to yourself by always saying, ‘What?’”

“Do I say that?”

Adam laughs. The older man puts the black device back into his valise.

“My ears sting.”

“That’s the vodka. It’ll go away. I can’t imagine that alcohol would hurt you.”

“Who is screaming?”

Adam squints at him, then listens. “Oh, yes—that is most likely a few boxcar loads of people they stuffed into the gas chambers and forgot. They’ll suffocate by morning.”

Adam squats down and begins digging in the dirt with his fingers. Then he sits down and gouges a little trench out with the heel of his shoe, and places the half empty bottle of vodka in the hole. Janusz listens to every sound, the scraping of the shoe, the soft clinking sound of the bottle being laid in the trench, then the sound of the sandy earth squeaking on the bottle as Adam covers it up. Then Adam curls up around the buried bottle and prepares to sleep.

“Listen to me,” he says. “Now that you can hear, remember this: don’t call any attention to yourself. If you do they’ll hit your face, I mean so that they will leave a mark. If they do that, then they’ll take you to the Hospital

tomorrow and shoot you. The Hospital, by the way, is a hole in the ground with a fire going all the time. In any case, if they ask you about your face and you lie, then they'll kill you with shovels, hack your arms off."

"How do you know they are dead?"

"I know."

"Why shovels?"

Adam laughs. "That was all most people carried at the beginning. They discovered that they work well as a kind of axe. You know, hitting with the edge. I imagine that it felt somehow familiar to them. So they use them like axes."

"I have two sisters, a brother and grandmother."

"Please," Adam says. "We'll talk tomorrow."

The doctor moves toward him. "How do you feel?"

"Good."

"You are the one who gave Adam the bracelet."

"Yes," Janusz says, then remembers. He digs into his pocket and pulls out the handful of bills and coins, a ring and a watch. "Here, he said you have a use for it."

"Not so loud," Adam whispers. "Let's keep it to ourselves."

Dr. Herzenberg takes the money, ring and watch. "Listen to me—some of us use this to buy food and sometimes weapons. The problem is that those of us who—the people trying to plan something—" He pauses. "No one really seems to live long enough. In your case—I saw you with that bulge in your pocket. That you are alive amazes me."

"You must not be caught," Adam says. "That is, if you tell them who you give the money to, well—"

"If they catch you and suspect anything," Dr. Herzenberg says, "they'll torture you until you tell them. They'll hold your hand in a pot of boiling water until it's overcooked; they'll blind you." He pauses, staring at Janusz. "Why did you give Adam the bracelet?"

"I don't know. He was friendly to me."

"Why do you give me money?"

"You cleaned my ears."

"You'll probably live around two weeks to a month, like the rest of us. How does that make you feel?"

He tries to think of an answer. "I don't know. I guess it doesn't matter."

"A philosopher," Adam says.

Dr. Herzenberg looks at him, then at the money in his hand. “You must be careful,” he says. “I will pass on what you give me to others, but you won’t know who they are. I can give you little in return.”

“That’s all right.”

Dr. Herzenberg places his hand on Janusz’s shoulder and then turns to find a place to sleep. Adam seems to have dropped off also.

Within a minute Janusz is lying on the dirt staring into the blackness, and as he prepares to sleep, he is aware of something ticking in the air around him that makes his heart beat too fast, that makes his breath begin to catch in his throat. It is not the certainty of his death or his fear of it. For some reason he cannot relax inside so complicated a collection of sounds, moans, snufflings, snoring, clearings of the throat, and off in the distance under the sound of tree leaves scraping one another, the softer wailing of those suffocating in the gas chambers. Then he understands that it is not sound itself—there is something else which makes his breathing irregular, makes it now halt and produce truncated sobs, and whatever it is invades his flesh as surely as a virus moving at the speed of light. He gets to his feet and makes his way toward the door, but his foot runs into a man’s leg, and the man grunts and moves on the dirt.

Janusz is now trembling, his body threatening to crumple to the ground. Then he understands what it is: the children are dead, the little babies are dead, and Grandmother—she is dead, and he did not say goodbye to her. In fact he behaved badly to her, and now she and the children are dead. He is alone, tiny and soiled and locked inside this room, only a day or so away from his own death. His awareness has achieved so horrible a lucidity that he thinks he may vomit his insides out at his feet. The children are dead, and he behaved so badly, and now he can never put it right.

## Afterword

This story is excerpted from *Village of a Million Spirits*, the third novel in a trilogy begun with *Proud Monster* (1987) and *Orbit of Darkness* (1991), all dealing with the subject of World War II in Middle Europe. The approach to the balance of history and fiction has been to use broad historical event as a stage on which fictional characters act, and fictional events occur inside the context of verifiable history.

In *Village of a Million Spirits* the major events are verifiable: it is true that an officer named Max Bielas was killed by an Argentine inmate named Meir Berliner, but this event is seen obliquely through the eyes of a fictional Ukrainian guard. It is true that after a long winter lull during which no transports and therefore no food or valuables arrived at Treblinka, Deputy Commandant Kurt Franz (The Doll) announced that the trains would roll again, bringing on a sustained cheer from the starving workers. These events are all seen through the eyes of fictional characters.

The real heroes of Treblinka, the engineer Galewski, Zhelo Bloch, Rudolph Masarek, are presented obliquely and at a distance, leaving the points of view to those fictional inmates who were lucky enough to survive the transports but were not as consequential to Treblinka's fate as those heroes mentioned above.

The estimates of the number of people killed at Treblinka range from 600,000 to 1.2 million, itself evidence of the secrecy of the camp and the scarcity of written record or of survivors (and perpetrators) willing to discuss it. Survivors' accounts of events at Treblinka tend to contradict each other in certain respects, but are generally consistent in presenting a broad picture of the year of the camp's existence. But the estimation of the number of dead may be the most horrible of all the "inconsistencies." In this case, to use an obscene euphemism, the "margin of error" comes to 600,000.

The various motivations for the perpetration of this crime are obviously complicated, but the core of the crime was genocide. It is often thought of as an aberration from a half a century ago, but on a smaller scale it has continued to happen since, and is, if you're tuned into the news, still happening now.

One last point: the crime that was committed fifty years ago has not yet been "completed." Historical revisionists demand proof that it happened,

and rest their case because they feel “objective” proof cannot be provided to their satisfaction. This is the last part of a process that began with denial of human rights, went through theft of wealth, then murder. Now the last act is the attempt to deny that these people ever existed, thereby robbing them of their identity, and their relatives or friends or distant descendants or us the opportunity to acknowledge their existence or honor their memory.