

## 8. *This Side of Good and Evil*

WE had an incorrigible tendency to see a symbol and a sign in every event. For seventy days we had been waiting for the *Wäschetauschen*, the ceremony of the change of underclothes, and a rumour circulated persistently that the change of washing had not taken place because, as the front had moved forward, the Germans were unable to gather together new transport at Auschwitz, and 'therefore\* the liberation was near. And equally, the opposite interpretation circulated: that the delay in the change was a sure sign of an approaching integral liquidation of the camp. Instead the change took place, and as usual, the directors of the Lager took every care to make it occur unexpectedly and at the same time in all the huts.

It has to be realized that cloth is lacking in the Lager and is precious; and that our only way of acquiring a rag to blow our noses, or a pad for our shoes, is precisely that of cutting off the tail of a shirt at the time of the exchange. If the shirt has long sleeves, one cuts the sleeves; if not, one has to make do with a square from the bottom, or by unstitching one of the many patches. But in all cases a certain time is needed to get hold of needle and thread and to carry out the operation with some skill, so as not to leave the damage too obvious at the time of handing it in. The dirty, tattered washing is passed on, thrown together, to the tailor's workshop in the camp, where it is summarily pieced up, sent to the steam disinfection (not washed!) and is then re-distributed; hence the need to make the exchanges as unexpected as possible, so as to save the soiled washing from the above mutilations.

But, as always happens, it was not possible to prevent a cunning glance piercing through the canvas of the cart which was leaving after the disinfection, so that within a few minutes the camp knew of the imminence of a *Wäschetauschen*, and in addition, that this time there were new shirts from a convoy of Hungarians which had arrived three days ago.

The news had immediate repercussions. All who illegally possessed second shirts, stolen or organized, or even honestly bought with bread as a protection against the cold or to invest capital in a moment of prosperity, immediately rushed to the Exchange Market, hoping to arrive in time to barter their reserve shirts for food products before the flood of new shirts, or the certainty of their arrival, irreparably devalued the price of the article.

The Market is always very active. Although every exchange (in fact, every form of possession) is explicitly forbidden, and although frequent swoops of Kapos or *Blockälteste* sent merchants, customers and the curious periodically flying, nevertheless, the north-east corner of the Lager (significantly the corner furthest from the SS huts) is permanently occupied by a tumultuous throng, in the open during the summer, in a wash-room during the winter, as soon as the squads return from work.

Here scores of prisoners driven desperate by hunger prowl around, with lips half-open and eyes gleaming, lured by a deceptive instinct to where the merchandise shown makes the gnawing of their stomachs more acute and their salvation more assiduous. In the best cases they possess a miserable half-ration of bread which, with painful effort, they have saved since the morning, in the senseless hope of a chance to make an advantageous bargain with some ingenuous person, unaware of the prices of the moment. Some of these, with savage patience, acquire with their half-ration two pints of soup which, once in their possession, they subject to a methodical examination with a view to extracting the few pieces of potato lying at the bottom; this done, they exchange it for bread, and the bread for another two pints to denaturalize, and so on until their nerves are exhausted, or until some victim, catching them in the act, inflicts on them a severe lesson, exposing them to public derision. Of the same kind are those who come to the market to sell their only shirt; they well know what will happen on the next occasion that the Kapo finds out that they are bare underneath their jackets. The Kapo will ask them what they have done with their shirt; it is a purely rhetorical question, a formality useful only to begin the game. They will reply that their shirt was stolen in the wash-room; this reply is equally customary, and is not expected to be believed; in fact, even the stones of the Lager know that ninety-nine times out of a hundred whoever has no shirt has sold it because of hunger, and that in any case one is responsible for one's shirt because it belongs to the Lager. Then the Kapo will beat them, they will be issued another shirt, and sooner or later they will begin again.

The professional merchants stand in the market, each one in his normal corner; first among them come the Greeks, as immobile and silent as sphinxes, squatting on the ground behind their bowls of thick soup, the fruits of their labour, of their cooperation and of their national solidarity. The Greeks have been reduced to very few by now, but they have made a contribution of the first importance to the physiognomy of the camp and to the international slang in circulation. Everyone knows that '*caravana*' is the bowl, and that '*la comedera es buena*' means that

the soup is good; the word that expresses the generic idea of theft is '*klepsiklepsi*' of obvious Greek origin. These few survivors from the Jewish colony of Salonica, with their two languages, Spanish and Greek, and their numerous activities, are the repositories of a concrete, mundane, conscious wisdom, in which the traditions of all the Mediterranean civilizations blend together. That this wisdom was transformed in the camp into the systematic and scientific practice of theft and seizure of positions and the monopoly of the bargaining Market, should not let one forget that their aversion to gratuitous brutality, their amazing consciousness of the survival of at least a potential human dignity made of the Greeks the most coherent national nucleus in Lager, and in this respect, the most civilized.

At the Market you can find specialists in kitchen thefts, their jackets swollen with strange bulges. While there is a virtually stable price for soup (half a ration of bread for two pints), the quotations for turnips, carrots, potatoes are extremely variable and depend greatly, among other factors, on the diligence and the corruptibility of the guards at the stores.

Mahorca is sold. Mahorca is a third-rate tobacco, crude and wooden, which is officially on sale at the canteen in one and a half ounce packets, in exchange for the prize-coupons that the Buna ought to distribute to the best workers. Such a distribution occurs irregularly, with great parsimony and open injustice, so that the greatest number of the coupons end up, either legitimately or through abuse of authority, in the hands of the Kapos and of the Prominents; nevertheless the prize-coupons still circulate on the market in the form of money, and their value changes in strict obedience to the laws of classical economics.

There have been periods in which the prize-coupon was worth one ration of bread, then one and a quarter, even one and a third; one day it was quoted at one and a half ration, but then the supply of Mahorca to the canteen failed, so that, lacking a coverage, the money collapsed at once to a quarter of a ration. Another boom period occurred for a singular reason: the arrival of a fresh contingent of robust Polish girls in place of the old inmates of the Frauenblock. In fact, as the prize-coupon is valid for entry to the Frauenblock (for the criminals and the politicals; not for the Jews, who on the other hand, do not feel affected by this restriction), those interested actively and rapidly cornered the market: hence the revaluation, which, in any case, did not last long.

Among the ordinary Häftlinge there are not many who search for Mahorca to smoke it personally; for the most part it leaves the camp and ends in the hands of the civilian workers of the Buna. The traffic is an

instance of a kind of '*kombinacja*' frequently practised: the Häftling, somehow saving a ration of bread, invests it in Mahorca; he cautiously gets in touch with a civilian addict who acquires the Mahorca, paying in cash with a portion of bread greater than that initially invested. The Häftling eats the surplus, and puts back on the market the remaining ration. Speculations of this kind establish a tie between the internal economy of the Lager and the economic life of the outside world: the accidental failure of the distribution of tobacco among the civilian population of Cracow, overcoming the barrier of barbed wire which segregates us from human society, had an immediate repercussion in camp, provoking a notable rise in the quotation of Mahorca, and consequently of the prize-coupon.

The process outlined above is no more than the most simple of examples: another more complex one is the following. The Häftling acquires in exchange for Mahorca or bread, or even obtains as a gift from a civilian, some abominable, ragged, dirty shred of a shirt, which must however have three holes suitable to fit more or less over the head and arms. So long as it only carries signs of wear, and not of artificially created mutilations, such an object, at the time of the *Wäschetauschen*, is valid as a shirt and carries the right of an exchange; at the most, the person who presents it will receive an adequate measure of blows for having taken so little care of camp clothing.

Consequently, within the Lager, there is no great difference in value between a shirt worthy of the name and a tattered thing full of patches; the Häftling described above will have no difficulty in finding a comrade in possession of a shirt of commercial value who is unable to capitalize on it as he is not in touch with civilian workers, either because of his place of work, or through difficulties of language or intrinsic incapacity. This latter will be satisfied with a modest amount of bread for the exchange, and in fact the next *Wäschetauschen* will to a certain extent re-establish equilibrium, distributing good and bad washing in a perfectly casual manner. But the first Häftling will be able to smuggle the good shirt into Buna and sell it to the original civilian (or to any other) for four, six, even ten rations of bread. This high margin of profit is correlative to the gravity of the risk of leaving camp wearing more than one shirt or re-entering with none.

There are many variations on this theme. There are some who do not hesitate to have the gold fillings of their teeth extracted to sell them in Buna for bread or tobacco. But the most common of cases is that such traffic takes place through an intermediary. A 'high number', that is, a

new arrival, only recently but sufficiently besotted by hunger and by the extreme tension of life in the camp, is noticed by a 'low number' for the number of his gold teeth; the 'low' offers the 'high' three or four rations of bread to be paid in return for extraction. If the high number accepts, the low one pays, carries the gold to Buna, and if in contact with a civilian of trust, from whom he fears neither denunciation nor fraudulent dealing, he can make a gain of ten or even as much as twenty or more rations, which are paid to him gradually, one or two a day. It is worth noting in this respect that contrary to what takes place in Buna, the maximum total of any transaction negotiated *within* the camp is four rations of bread, because it would be practically impossible either to make contracts on credit, or to preserve a larger quantity of bread from the greed of others or one's own hunger.

Traffic with civilians is a characteristic element of the *Arbeitslager*, and as we have seen, determines its economic life. On the other hand, it is a crime, explicitly foreseen by the camp regulations, and considered equivalent to 'political' crimes; so that it is punished with particular severity. The Häftling convicted of '*Handel mit Zivilisten*' unless he can rely on powerful influences, ends up at Gleiwitz III, at Janina or at Heidebreck in the coal-mines; which means death from exhaustion in the course of a few weeks. Moreover, his accomplice, the civilian worker, may also be denounced to the competent German authority and condemned to pass a period in *Vernichtungslager*, under the same conditions as us; a period varying, as far as I can see, from a fortnight to eight months. The workmen who experience this retaliation have their possessions taken away like us on their entry, but their personal effects are kept in a special store-room. They are not tattooed and they keep their hair, which makes them easily recognizable, but for the whole duration of the punishment they are subjected to the same work and the same discipline as us — except, of course, the selections.

They work in separate Kommandos and they have no contact of any sort with the common Häftlinge. In fact, the Lager is for them a punishment, and if they do not die of exhaustion or illness they can expect to return among men; if they could communicate with us, it would create a breach in the wall which keeps us dead to the world, and a ray of light into the mystery which prevails among free men about our condition. For us, on the contrary, the Lager is not a punishment; for us, no end is foreseen and the Lager is nothing but a manner of living assigned to us, without limits of time, in the bosom of the Germanic social organism.

One section of the camp itself is in fact set aside for civilian workers of all nationalities who are compelled to stay there for a longer or shorter period in expiation of their illicit relations with Häftlinge. This section is separated from the rest of the camp by barbed wire, and is called E-Lager, and its guests E-Häftlinge. 'E' is the initial for '*Erziehung*' which means education.

All the bargaining-transactions outlined above are based on the smuggling of materials belonging to the Lager. This is why the SS are so eager to suppress them: the very gold of our teeth is their property, as sooner or later, torn from the mouths of the living or the dead, it ends up in their hands. So it is natural that they should take care that the gold does not leave the camp.

But against theft in itself, the direction of the camp has no prejudice. The attitude of open connivance by the SS as regards smuggling in the opposite direction shows this clearly.

Here things are generally more simple. It is a question of stealing or receiving any of the various tools, utensils, materials, products, etc. with which we come in daily contact in Buna in the course of our work, of introducing them into the camp in the evening, of finding a customer and of effecting the exchange for bread or soup. This traffic is intense: for certain articles, although they are necessary for the normal life of the Lager, this method of theft in Buna is the only and regular way of provisioning. Typical are the instances of brooms, paint, electric wire, grease for shoes. The traffic in this last item will serve as an example.

As we have stated elsewhere, the camp regulations prescribe the greasing and polishing of shoes every morning, and every *Blockältester* is responsible to the SS for obedience to this order by all the men in his hut. One would think that each hut would enjoy a periodic assignment of grease for shoes, but this is not so; the mechanism is completely different. It needs to be stated first that each hut receives an assignment of soup somewhat higher than that prescribed for regulation rations; the extra is divided according to the discretion of the *Blockältester*, who first of all distributes the gifts to his friends and proteges, then the recompense to the hut-sweepers, to the night-guards, to the lice-controllers and to all other prominents and functionaries in the hut. What is still left over (and every smart *Blockältester* makes sure that there is always some over) is used precisely for these acquisitions.

The rest is obvious. Those Häftlinge at Buna who have the chance to fill their bowl with grease or machine-oil (or anything else: any blackish and greasy substance is considered suitable for the purpose), on

their return to the camp in the evening, make a systematic tour of the huts until they find a *Blockältester* who has run out of the article and wants a fresh supply. In addition, every hut usually has its habitual supplier, who has been allotted a fixed daily recompense on condition that he provides the grease every time that the reserve is about to run out.

Every evening, beside the doors of the *Tagesräume*, the groups of suppliers stand patiently around; on their feet for hours and hours in the rain or snow, they discuss excitedly matters relating to the fluctuation of prices and value of the prize-coupon. Every now and again one of them leaves the group, makes a quick visit to the Market and returns with the latest news.

Besides the articles already described, there are innumerable others to be found in Buna, which might be useful to the Block or welcomed by the *Blockältester*, or might excite the interest or curiosity of the prominents: light-bulbs, ordinary or shaving-soap, files, pliers, sacks, nails; methylic alcohol is sold to make drinks; while petrol is useful for the rudimentary lighters, prodigies of the secret industry of the Lager craftsmen.

In this complex network of thefts and counter-thefts, nourished by the silent hostility between the SS command and the civilian authorities of the Buna, Ka-Be plays a part of prime importance. Ka-Be is the place of least resistance, where the regulations can most easily be avoided and the surveillance of the Kapos eluded. Everyone knows that it is the nurses themselves who send back on the market, at low prices, the clothes and shoes of the dead and of the selected who leave naked for Birkenau; it is the nurses and doctors who export the restricted sulphonamides to Buna, selling them to civilians for articles of food.

The nurses also make huge profits from the trade in spoons. The Lager does not provide the new arrivals with spoons, although the semi-liquid soup cannot be consumed without them. The spoons are manufactured in Buna, secretly and in their spare moments, by *Häftlinge* who work as specialists in the iron and tin-smith Kommandos: they are rough and clumsy tools, shaped from iron-plate worked by hammer, often with a sharp handle-edge to serve at the same time as a knife to cut the bread. The manufacturers themselves sell them directly to the new arrivals: an ordinary spoon is worth half a ration, a knife-spoon three quarters of a ration of bread. Now it is a law that although one can enter Ka-Be with one's spoon, one cannot leave with it. At the moment of release, before the clothes are given, the healthy patient's spoon is confiscated by the nurses and placed on sale in the Market. Adding the

spoons of the patients about to leave to those of the dead and selected, the nurses receive the gains of the sale of about fifty spoons every day. On the other hand, the dismissed patients are forced to begin work again with the initial disadvantage of half a ration of bread, set aside to acquire a new spoon.

Finally, Ka-Be is the main customer and receiver of thefts occurring in Buna: of the soup assigned to Ka-Be, a good forty pints are set aside every day as the theft-fund to acquire the most varied of goods from the specialists. There are those who steal thin rubber tubing which is used in Ka-Be for enemas and for stomach-tubes; others offer coloured pencils and inks, necessary for Ka-Be's complicated book-keeping system; and thermometers and glass instruments and chemicals, which come from the Buna stores in the HafHinge's pockets and are used in the infirmary as sanitary equipment.

And I would not like to be accused of immodesty if I add that it was our idea, mine and Alberto's, to steal the rolls of graph-paper from the thermographs of the Desiccation Department, and offer them to the Medical Chief of Ka-Be with the suggestion that they be used as paper for pulse-temperature charts.

In conclusion: theft in Buna, punished by the civil direction, is authorized and encouraged by the SS; theft in camp, severely repressed by the SS, is considered by the civilians as a normal exchange operation; theft among Häftlinge is generally punished, but the punishment strikes the thief and the victim with equal gravity. We now invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words 'good' and 'evil', 'just' and 'unjust'; let everybody judge, on the basis of the picture we have outlined and of the examples given above, how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire.