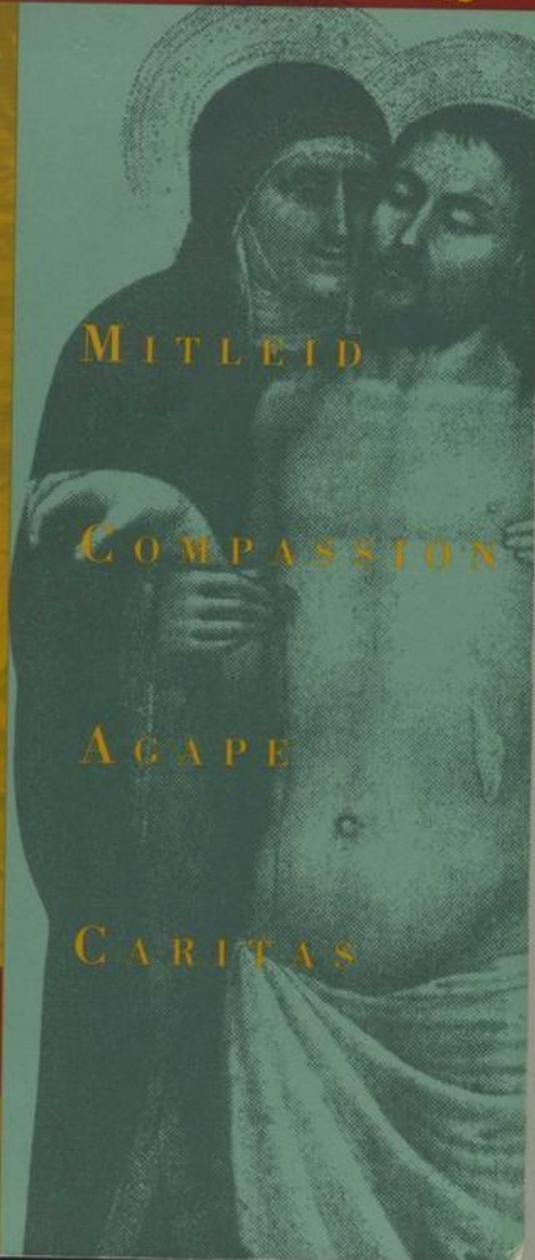


PIETÀ



MITLEID

COMPASSION

AGAPE

CARITAS

George Klein

Pietà

George Klein

Translated by Theodore and Ingrid Friedmann

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Chapter 5, about **Rudolf Vrba**,
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5

The Ultimate Fear of the Traveler Returning from Hell

Was Dante in hell? Did Strindberg experience inferno? Yes, in a way, but they managed to escape and write about it for our delight and edification. They avoided losing their identity and becoming alienated. They also transformed their disillusionment in every-thing and everyone—including themselves—into writings that can seize a reader many generations later. The power of their words helped them to rise above their internal inferno, so that they could stay, at least for a time, in purgatory—not to mention the possibility of reaching paradise. But they were not really, however, travelers through hell. Only those who have experienced the ultimate degradation of humanity have truly experienced hell. They have stood so often in the doorway leading to their almost certain death that they have lost count. But miraculously, some have remained with us. I have met one of those travelers.

Vancouver, Spring 1987

I am sitting face to face with Rudolf Vrba, whom I have previously seen only on the screen in Claude Lanzmann's monumental film "Shoah." In that film, Vrba described his time in Auschwitz between 1942 and 1944. He was at first an ordinary death camp prisoner, but eventually he was promoted to the position of registrar, giving him a certain degree of freedom of movement and a general familiarity with the camp.

Vrba's answers to Lanzmann's questions were composed and matter-of-fact, with an extraordinary detachment frequently ac-

panied by a sardonic smile. I cannot forget the expression on Vrba's face as he explained the difference between Auschwitz and the other concentration camps, many of which maintained a more or less stable population of prisoners to provide labor for the German war industry. The camp at Mauthausen, for instance, was used to quarry stone. Auschwitz was also a kind of factory, but its main product was death.

Lanzmann moved from one interview subject to another with the imperturbable reassurance of a detached analyst. Vrba was followed by another remarkable survivor, Filip Muller, who had been a member of the *Sonderkommando*, the prisoner group responsible for the "dirty work" at the gas chambers and the crematorium—removing the bodies. These workers were themselves also eventually executed. The conversation with Vrba then resumed. It was impossible to imagine anything worse than the horror of the tales these **two** were telling. And yet they went on to describe one episode after another, each more gruesome than the one before.

In his last interview with Lanzmann, Vrba described the gassing of the so-called family camp, whose inhabitants had been trans-ported to Auschwitz from the model ghetto camp at Theresienstadt. Contrary to the usual routine at Auschwitz, the families were permitted to stay together for six months, only to be gassed suddenly. The killings were particularly violent and ruthless, if one might be allowed to use such inadequate words in such a context. Vrba had known about the impending doom through his contacts as camp registrar. When he saw the first indications, he was able to contact a small resistance group that, against all odds, continued to function in the camp. The group was headed by the non-Jewish political prisoners who had a somewhat privileged position among all the prisoners. They tried to organize a revolt in the family camp, but it never came about. The resistance movement had selected the camp's teacher, Freddy Hirsch, to organize the revolt, but Hirsch preferred instead to commit suicide, because he did not want to hasten the inevitable killing of the schoolchildren.

After the liquidation of the family camp, Vrba chose a different and, according to all odds, equally hopeless avenue. He and a fellow countryman from Slovakia, Fred Wetzler, decided to

escape. All previous attempts at escape had failed and had led to torture and execution in front of all of the camp's inmates. But Vrba and Wetzler succeeded, becoming the first ever to flee Auschwitz. Their remarkable escape has been described in detail.¹

At first they hid in a lumberyard in the area between the outer and inner fences of the camp. They lay completely still for several days while the SS searched for them intensively. To keep the SS dogs away, they smeared themselves with poor-quality tobacco drenched with kerosene. The historian Martin Gilbert has de-scribed the extraordinary efforts made by the SS to capture them.² Gestapo headquarters in Berlin put all security units, criminal police, and border patrol stations in the eastern region on alert. Himmler was kept informed. After several days of searching, the SS concluded that the two had succeeded in their escape and discontinued the hunt inside the camp itself. After many long, dangerous nights wandering on foot without any identification documents, a compass or map, or any weapons or money, they finally reached their homeland, Slovakia.

Their escape took on major historical significance because it provided the first eyewitness account from the largest of the death camps. Current historical accounts refer to it simply as "The Auschwitz Report."

In the film, Vrba told Lanzmann that he decided to escape in order to warn the largest surviving Jewish community under Hitler's occupation, the Hungarian Jews. He hoped to incite them to revolt rather than submit to being deported. In his role as registrar, Vrba knew that the Germans were preparing Auschwitz for a speedy annihilation of the Hungarian Jews who had, until then, been relatively unharmed. As early as several months before Germany's invasion of Hungary on March 19, 1944, a new crematorium and new railroad tracks had been built at Auschwitz. The SS troops joked about the "Hungarian salami" that they were looking forward to.

Some weeks after Vrba and Wetzler arrived in Slovakia, their report reached the Allied governments. It was also distributed to leaders of the Jewish communities in Hungary and other countries. But in the film Vrba says, with a feeling of resignation, that it didn't do very much good.

In a review of "Shoah" in the *New York Times* on November 3, 1980, Elie Wiesel calls Vrba "an authentic hero," but he admits that he is afraid to meet him. He dreads the question, "Why did you allow yourself to be deported to Auschwitz? Didn't I warn you?"

It was immediately clear to me that the report I had been given to read under a promise of secrecy in Budapest in May 1944—at the age of nineteen and at a time when deportations from the Hungarian countryside were at their peak—was identical to the Auschwitz report of Vrba and Wetzler. As I listened to Vrba, I was reminded of the dry, matter-of-fact language of the report, but the abstract had suddenly found a face and a voice, now speaking to me from the screen. The entire span of forty-three years was blown away, and I was filled with the same mixture of nausea and a degree of intellectual satisfaction with its relentless logic that I felt then. Even as I read the report for the first time, it was evident to me that it represented the horrors of reality rather than the many unrealistic lies and self-deceiving excuses that we had previously been fed from so many different sources.

I decided to try to find Vrba and tell him of what enormous help his report had been to me. If I had not known what was awaiting me at the other end of the train trip, I would never have dared to risk an escape.

It was not difficult to find Vrba, for it turned out that we were scientific colleagues. He is a professor of neuropharmacology in Vancouver, and I am now sitting in a comfortable armchair in the faculty club at a Canadian university, talking with someone who, at first glance, seems quite ordinary. He impresses me as being relaxed and jovial. By now I have also read his book, and I am aware that he has survived more death sentences than anyone else I have ever met. He has also witnessed more human evil, more closely, more profoundly, and for a longer period of time than any other survivor I know. Only the dead could have more to tell.

Vrba's book was very difficult reading, despite its successful outcome. I had to take it in very small doses, two or three pages only now and then—and absolutely never in the evenings. The best time was during a busy workday, when retreat from the planet of Auschwitz to the reality of the moment was ensured. At the same time I felt an irresistible urge to read his book and other

eyewitness reports. I wanted to keep Auschwitz, this universe of death, in my sight and remember how it could operate in this century, not far from here. But why? Was it to honor my murdered family, *my* murdered classmates? Or was it rather to steel myself against the darkest side of our human heritage?

I ask Vrba why the new edition of his book is called *Escape from Auschwitz*, while the first edition, published in 1964, was entitled *I Cannot Forgive*. "What was it that you could not forgive?"

Vrba answers with his sardonic smile, "I don't want to tell you that. The Hungarian-English writer George Mikes has also been wondering a great deal about the same question. But I haven't told him either."³

I could think of several possible explanations. The mass murders of the Nazis were so obvious that no further comments were needed. But Vrba's enigmatic title might mean much more. It could refer to the failure of the Allies to bomb the crematoria in Auschwitz or the railways leading there, despite the fact that it was completely obvious what was going on. He might also be referring to the Jewish leaders in Hungary, whom he has criticized bitterly for failing to warn the Jewish population and urging them to resist. A well-known Zionist leader in Budapest, Dr. Kastner, had read the report but, according to Vrba, decided to keep its contents secret in return for a promise by the Germans of safety for sixteen-hundred people, to be selected by Kastner. The group was to include his family, young Zionists, and wealthy Jews who paid for their safety with gold and other valuables that Eichmann needed to pay for "the German war effort."

I didn't agree at all with Vrba on this point, because I had seen Kastner at work during the period. His headquarters were at the Jewish Council, previously called the Jewish Community Office, in Budapest. I was working there, first as an errand boy and later as secretary to one of the members of the council. I knew that Kastner was trying to select a number of people for rescue, but that I had no chance of being included in that privileged group. Nevertheless, he was a hero in my eyes, and he remained so in the years that followed. He rescued many while the rest of us tried to save only ourselves or, at best, the members of our families. Kastner's activities became the subject of a libel case in Israel during the 1950s. It began when Kastner sued a relatively obscure

journalist named Malchier Greenwald, who had written an article in a Hungarian-language Israeli newspaper accusing Kastner of collaboration with the Nazis. The case went to trial in May 1953. In its first decision in 1955, the court acquitted Greenwald of libel. Then, on March 3, 1957, Kastner was murdered on the street by a deranged young man whose family had been killed by the Nazis. In January of 1958, the Supreme Court of Israel reconsidered the original case and, by a split vote of three to two, convicted Greenwald. Kastner had finally won. The process aroused very intense reactions in Israel, and feelings are polarized to this day. But my own conversations with many people have convinced me that Kastner's position is much better understood and appreciated now than it was earlier. The division of opinion is also reflected in the Supreme Court decision of 1958 and the controversy that it generated. One of the judges who voted against the majority opinion concluded that Kastner had entered into a pact with the devil himself. The President of the Court, Justice Agranat, was of a quite different opinion. His lengthy introduction to the written decision begins with a crystal-clear historical analysis of the circumstances that prevailed in Budapest in 1944, quoting the Biblical interpreter, Rabbi Hillel: 'Judge not thy neighbor until thou art in his place.'

I pointed out to Vrba that the publication of his report could not have led to a massive general uprising as he had wished. My own experience serves as an example. I had read the report a few weeks after it was prepared. It was one of the first copies prepared from the original that Kastner and the other members of the Jewish Council had received. My supervisor gave me permission to tell my relatives and close friends about the report so that they could go underground in time. Of the dozen or so people I warned, not one believed me.

But that was exactly the problem, answered Vrba. Why were the contents of the report distributed only through private circles and in such secrecy? Why had the Jewish Council not blared their warnings loudly and openly for all? Why was the report not published for general circulation? Why did your leaders not urge you to rebel? You were a mere boy—why would anyone believe what you were saying? The Jews would certainly have believed their responsible leaders.

I answered skeptically that I didn't believe that the majority of the Jews in Budapest were ready to see the terrible truth. There might have been a few, but certainly not the majority. Vrba himself makes exactly that point in his book when he describes the reactions of those already in Auschwitz, who could see it with their own eyes. Primo Levi and others have described how otherwise sensible and logical people could explain away the black smoke that spewed from the chimneys of the crematoria, the horrible odor of burnt human flesh. Miklos Nyiszli, the Hungarian Jewish pathologist and Mengele's forced assistant, describes how prisoners, who knew full well that no one ever returned from the gas chambers, repressed such knowledge as they themselves lined up for execution in front of the chamber doors.⁴ Besides, why are you so bitter about what didn't or couldn't happen in Hungary in 1944? Why are you not more satisfied and proud of your own achievements? The report by you and Wetzler was largely responsible for the fact that the Pope and the king of Sweden appealed to the Hungarian Regent Miklos Horthy, and that President Roosevelt gave his famous speech declaring the punishment that would await the war criminals. Because of these interventions and Mrs. Horthy's reaction to the report, Horthy intervened and stopped the deportations on July 7, only one week before the remainder of the Hungarian Jews, the two-hundred thousand Jews of Budapest, were scheduled to join the eight-hundred thousand from the provinces who had already gone to their end in the gas chambers during Eichmann's "blitz operation" of May and June. Shouldn't you be satisfied that you managed to save two-hundred thousand?

No, Vrba was not satisfied. He saw his glass half empty, not half full. I did not agree with him, but what right did I have to tell him so? Nevertheless, I tried.

"It was relatively easy for me to believe your report. I was young and vigorous and had nothing to lose. Nevertheless, I hesitated until the very last moment. It was not until I saw the freight cars in front of me that I had the courage to run, despite the risk of being shot. But what more could you have expected from a law-abiding citizen, the head of a family, unprepared suddenly to change his opinion of a government that had until that time been reasonably respectable to recognize it for the gang of criminals

it had become, to expose his children to the risk of being gunned down? If you really harbored greater expectations, you were completely unrealistic. As long as families were able to stay together, especially if they were in their own homes, such thoughts were unbearable for most of them. Denial, the idea that 'it couldn't be that bad,' was therefore quite natural."

Vrba shook his head. "You are ignoring the most important fact! The whole Nazi program of annihilation was based on lies, deceptive rumors, and hellishly clever traps. The leaders of the Jewish community responded by disseminating reassuring and misleading information instead of speaking out in plain language, warning and organizing a last-ditch rebellion. That might have amounted to no more than suicide, as great or greater than the revolt in the Warsaw ghetto. Many would have died, but far fewer than in Auschwitz. And they would have perished with their dignity intact."

"No, I don't agree at all," I replied. "The Jewish leaders whom I knew were no heroes, but they tried to do whatever they could in that desperate situation. They appealed and warned, they tried to find a way out or, at least, a temporary respite. Their only alternative was to commit suicide, like Czerniakowski, the president of the Jewish Council in Warsaw or like your own friend, the teacher that you mentioned in the Lanzmann film. Even the president of the Jewish Council in Budapest, Samuel Stem, committed suicide at the end."

"No," said Vrba, still shaking his head. We changed the subject. "How can you live and function in this pleasant, friendly, and rather provincial place where no one has the slightest concept of what you went through?" I asked him. "How can anyone who has experienced all that you have described in your book still sit quietly, making small talk with waiters or colleagues? I know other survivors of Auschwitz who have quite successfully repressed their memories and who manage very well, at least until the nightmares reappear suddenly. But you must go back constantly to those days. You are called in as a witness at trials of old Nazis or their followers, people who claim that the holocaust never happened. You try to describe something that cannot be described in any human language, you try to explain the incomprehensible, you want people to listen to something they do not want to hear. How can

you keep your sanity? By the way, have you been back to Auschwitz since the war?" "Yes, I have," he said impassively. "Ten years after I escaped, I attended a conference in Poland. A bus tour was arranged to Auschwitz, and I went along." "How did you react? Did you tell your colleagues what you had experienced there?" "No. I didn't even mention that I had ever been to Auschwitz before." "But why not?"

"What would have been the use? No one who has not experienced it can understand. None of the many books ever written about it, not even my book, could convey the sense of what it was really like. Lanzmann's film was the first fairly successful attempt to approach the subject, to listen to the voices of the survivors, to hear their silence, to dare to look into their faces."

"But do any of your colleagues, your assistants, your Canadian friends, know what you have experienced?"

At first Vrba did not answer. Then, with an odd smile, he said that one of his colleagues became very upset when he quite unexpectedly saw Vrba in Lanzmann's film. He wondered if all the horrible things that Vrba described in the film were really true. "I do not know," Vrba answered. "I was only an actor reciting my lines." "How strange," the colleague remarked. "I didn't know that you were an actor. Why did they say that film was made without any actors?"

I was speechless. Only now did I understand that this was the same man who lay quiet and motionless for three days in the hollow pile of lumber while Auschwitz was on maximum alert, only a few yards from the armed SS *men* and their dogs combing the area so thoroughly. If he could do that, then he certainly could also don the mask of a professor and manage everyday conversation with his colleagues in Vancouver, in Canada, that paradise land that is never fully appreciated by its own citizens, a people without the slightest notion of the planet Auschwitz. Neither the children of paradise nor the children of hell can dissociate themselves altogether from their own worlds. It is only

a few rare individuals who make courageous attempts to penetrate the unbearable occasionally, but they cannot venture out too far from the well protected spaceships of their own psychology either.

Do I dare approach the planet Auschwitz? My own space capsule is circling in an orbit closer than that of my Canadian or Swedish colleagues to that horrible world, but it is still much farther away than Vrba's orbit. What I experienced in Nazi-occupied Budapest compared with Vrba's experience at Auschwitz is like a shampoo at the barber shop compared with decapitation by a guillotine.

After ten hours of almost uninterrupted conversation, we parted like old friends despite the differences in our views. I hoped to see him again soon, but I was also longing to forget about him, not to have to think about what he can and cannot forgive. But I knew that I would never be able to forget his sardonic smile.

Los Angeles, Summer 1987

From Vancouver I continued on to a symposium in California, where I was scheduled to give a talk. During the lunch break, I sat next to one of my former graduate students, now a professor at the university. We talked like old friends—the years had completely disappeared. But suddenly he changed the subject. He told me that he had met an apparently pleasant and intelligent Austrian colleague in his forties, who declared after a few drinks that the gassing of millions of Jews never actually took place. The Austrian talked about the "big Jewish lie" that he had uncovered through his own "research." He was convinced that the Jews had fabricated this myth to coerce the world into giving them a nation of their own. He claimed that the myth was created in collusion with the CIA and the Soviet Union after the Second World War. He declared that even the "Waldheim affair" was a typical fabrication concocted by the tireless work of the worldwide Jewish conspiracy. It was merely the latest link in the chain of efforts to maintain the illusion of the holocaust. During his very emotional monologue, the Austrian pointed out time and again that he was not anti-Semitic. On the contrary, many of his friends were Jewish. My colleague, who was born several years after the war, was so amazed that he didn't know what to say, especially since he was

just about to leave to catch a plane. Because of the rapid pace of the discussion and the generally friendly atmosphere, he could not come up with an appropriate answer to what he perceived to be absurd and classically anti-Semitic remarks, even though they had been presented with such great certainty. He felt somewhat like a traitor and asked if I could recommend anything for him to read in order to be better prepared the next time.

How, indeed, could one answer that question? What literature should one give to someone having to confront people so thoroughly convinced by their own irrational arguments, whether they concern the holocaust, supernatural powers, living cells that they think have been produced in test tubes, or deadly viruses produced by the Pentagon? Is it possible to use rational arguments to counter such profound delusions?

I thought of SS officer Suchomel in Lanzmann's film, photo-graphed by a hidden camera, describing the last hour of the women standing naked in below-zero temperature in the underground tunnel leading to the gas chambers of Treblinka. He talked of their anxiety when they realized that their death was coming, as they heard the screams of the men who had preceded them into the gas chambers and understood that they were merely waiting their turn. I remember his composed, dispassionate, and monotonous voice, describing in gruesome detail how the women lost control of their bodily functions. I was seized by a rage that I could barely suppress, but because it was time for my lecture, I could not allow myself to yield to that feeling.

An hour of concentrating on cells, chromosomes, and cancer genes reestablished my peace of mind. It was time for questions and then a coffee break. Suddenly I saw two women, one young and the other elderly, who seemed to be very eager to talk to me. The older woman spoke with a strong Hungarian accent and mentioned my father's name. I changed immediately to my mother tongue. She told me that she and I used to play together on my grandmother's farm when I was eleven years old and she was six. She described the farm, the outhouse, the vegetable garden, the stable, and our favorite playground, the big haystacks. It was correct to every detail, just like a photograph. I asked her daughter with the long black hair whether she understood our conversation. She replied in Hungarian overlaid with a strong

American accent. She turned out to be studying engineering. How did they manage to find me? The daughter had noticed my name on the bulletin board. She had previously heard that I was alive and living in Stockholm.

I asked the mother if she had remained in my father's village even during her teenage years. No, she lived in a nearby town. What happened in 1944? "Auschwitz," she answered. An assistant returned *my* slides from the lecture and another colleague asked if I would mind taking some cells back to Stockholm with me.

"How did you manage to survive?" I asked.

"A man from the *Sonderkommando* who met us at the unloading platform in Auschwitz warned me to lie about my age. I told them I was eighteen instead of fourteen. That saved *my life*." A departmental secretary interrupted our conversation. I had to sign some papers to arrange to be reimbursed for my travel expenses.

"Did you know you were in Auschwitz? Did you know about the gas chambers?"

"Yes and no. My father had previously met some Polish refugees who told him some of the facts. When he was forced to pack up his most valuable possessions, he insisted on taking his prayer shawl and the other religious items without which no orthodox Jew would ever take a step, even though he knew that he would have no use for them where he was going. We believed him, but we also didn't believe him."

Again a colleague interrupted and asked if I would please send his greetings to a good friend in Stockholm. "What happened to your father?"

"He went to the gas chamber. Mengele himself made the selection. He arrived at the train platform on his motorbike and seemed very polite. He looked at my mother, who was forty-two and very beautiful, and said, 'You can still work.' She went off to the right and stood in the same line where I was standing. But suddenly she saw her little four-year-old nephew, who had apparently been separated from his mother and was wandering about. My mother took hold of the boy's hand. Mengele was already sitting on his motorbike, ready to speed off, when he too noticed the boy. He got off his bike, came back to the line, grabbed a cane

from an old man, put the crook of the cane around *my* mother's neck, pulled her and the boy out of the line and moved them to the other line on the left, the one leading straight to the gas chamber. I never saw her again."

She spoke calmly, as if talking about an ordinary event of everyday life in Los Angeles the previous week.

I was interrupted by yet another colleague, who introduced me to a student. They were telling me about an experiment they thought would interest me. Then my scientific host appeared. He had been worried about the intrusion of the two strange women and suspected that they were trying to "monopolize "me. I felt that I owed him *some* sort of explanation, and I introduced the older woman, explaining that she was on the same deportation train to Auschwitz as my grandmother and my uncles, none of whom ever returned. My colleague stared at me, groping for words, obviously not knowing what to say. I have often noticed this same reaction. Indeed, what could one really say? He left.

"Do you remember my grandmother?"

"Oh, do I! I loved Aunti Fani. My own grandmother was also called Fani. She also ended her life in the gas chamber. She was as devoted to her family as your grandmother was."

What would the Austrian have said? Surely he would have found an answer somewhere among his preconceived notions.

The secretary approached again. Politely, she reminded *me* that there were others who wanted to talk to me. "Yes, I'm coming. I'll be right there."

Paris, Fall 1987

We were three apparently quite ordinary people, strolling among the crowd on the Boulevard St. Michel on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. We soaked up the autumn sun as we ambled along through the fallen leaves in the Jardin de Luxembourg, watching the many colorful young people around us. But we didn't really pay much attention to them. For a while, we continued along the banks of the Seine, and then we turned around and headed toward the Latin Quarter, where we spent some more time sitting in cafes, ordering, paying, and talking, seemingly relaxed like everyone else. But in reality our minds were elsewhere, as far from

Paris as possible. We had traveled from different places and come together to descend voluntarily to hell. One of us, Benno Muller-Hill, was a German molecular biologist who had taken a sabbatical leave from his experiments to carry on his historical research on the role of the German scientists in the mass murders of psychiatric patients, Jews, and gypsies.⁵ I myself, who had at one time stood next to the inferno and experienced the horror of having a large part of my family annihilated, had managed to escape. The third was Vrba, the traveler through hell.

Earlier that afternoon I had brought together my two newfound friends. Vrba was in Paris to brush up on his French and check the translation of his book. Benno had come to Paris to visit his colleagues at the Pasteur Institute and also to meet Vrba. I was traveling through Paris after a scientific meeting in Lyon.

Who was living closer to reality, the young people strolling around the Latin Quarter, or the three of us?

I had a strong sense of unreality as we waited for the traffic light to change in front of the Cafe Dupont and as we crowded together with the tourists at Notre Dame. The enormous facade of the cathedral was there in front of us, but this time it looked almost like a kitsch theater set. Vrba suggested that we visit the holocaust memorial behind Notre Dame.

That walk of only a few minutes took us from the noisy tourist crowd to the silence of the museum's rooms, where you feel alone and isolated among the symbolic chains and barbed wire. A faint glow of sunlight came in through the narrow openings in the wall. We were surrounded by the voices of the victims, forcing them-selves upon us from all the inscriptions on the walls pressing in around us, as if they wanted to drink our sacrificial blood. They reminded me of the shadows that surrounded Odysseus when he visited Hades to ask Teiresias, the wise seer, how he might find his way home.

The outer courtyard of the memorial was surrounded by a wall that ended with a sharp point at the east side of the lie de la Cite. The narrow, slanted openings of the wall pointed downward. The much-celebrated city had vanished as though it had never existed. The water swirled and flowed toward an unidentifiable and inexorable eternity. The walls towered above, turning away from

us and yet simultaneously closing in. We were in the chamber of death.

We were all completely speechless. Even Vrba's macabre sense of humor and his sharp sarcasm had fallen silent for the moment.

Some *time* later we found ourselves sitting in a small bistro. I asked Vrba what he thought of Benno's conclusion that the German anthropologists, human geneticists, and psychiatrists had laid the ideological groundwork for the Nazi mass murders that they were the architects of the holocaust, not merely passive followers. Benno had concluded from his exhaustive documentation that, contrary to what many wanted so desperately to believe, the "euthanasia programs" of the mental hospitals and the horrible human experiments with the "valuable scientific material" from Auschwitz, as Mengele described it, could not be ascribed to a small minority of madmen, opportunists, or charlatans. On the contrary, they had been carried out by quite ordinary and in some instances, eminent physicians and scientists.

Vrba was not particularly convinced by this interpretation. He thought that the ideology of race biology might have played a minor role, but that would not explain why so many apparently ordinary people took part in the murders without showing any signs of remorse, or how the annihilation program could have been carried out with such efficiency. He thought that some other factors must have been far more important. His views were shaped strongly by his own period of imprisonment, during which he worked in a section of Auschwitz called "Canada." This was the commercial center of the camp, a kind of giant department store where hundreds of prisoners worked sorting, registering, and packing clothes, foodstuffs, valuables, and other goods and property taken from the prisoners on their way to the gas chambers.⁶ There certainly was a lot of it, because the Jews often wanted to bring their most valued possessions in the hope that they might be of some use later. In the words of the official propaganda, the deportation of the Jews was part of a "resettlement," as if they were merely changing homes.

"Canada" was a large square yard surrounded by barbed wire, with a watchtower in each corner, enclosing several enormous

storage buildings. In a special section were all the valuables cash, gold, jewelry, and precious stones. There were huge piles of suitcases, blankets, children's clothing, fur coats, baby carriages, and women's hair, all waiting for distribution and processing. One report sent to Himmler on February 6, 1943, stated that by that date, the camp had sent back to Germany 825 truckloads containing 97,000 men's suits, 76,000 dresses, 132,000 shirts, 155,000 coats, three tons of woman's hair, enormous amounts of children's clothing, \$50,000 in cash, and gold valued at \$ 116,420.

Vrba's experiences in "Canada" made him *more* inclined to ascribe economic motives to the mass murders. Otherwise, why did the murders start in 1941 and not in 1939, when war broke out? Vrba thought that might be explained by the war situation in the fall of 1941. At that time leading generals of the *Wehrmacht* began to realize that Hitler's blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union was about to go amiss, and that they would have to count on along, drawn out war on the eastern front. That would leave Germany's western defense system weakened in the event of campaigns there.⁷ Large contingents of the German army were kept tied up in the occupied countries. That was a great burden to the war effort. Increasingly they had to rely on local collaborators, or "quislings." The local Nazis were the obvious candidates, but their services were costly. They could not be paid in German currency, so weakened by the war. The Jews of Europe had hard currency, gold, and jewelry, but it wouldn't have been nearly enough simply to take it from the Jews. The quislings had to be reassured that the Jews would never come back. According to Vrba, the driving forces for the Nazis were greed and the desire for a comfortable life. Vrba saw many signs of this among the SS personnel in Auschwitz. Nobody had to work in the camp against his will. A simple request for transfer was always granted, even if it usually meant service at the front. But the "bourgeois have a tendency to go berserk whenever they can satisfy their own avarice," Vrba said, and he proceeded to illustrate his point with a series of harrowing anecdotes. I will recount only one such episode. A non-Jewish doctor, Ella Lingens-Reinert, who became an assistant minister of health in Austria after the war, was sent to Auschwitz for having harbored a Jew in her home in Vienna. As a non-Jewish prisoner, she had a privileged position

and was respected even by the SS women. One day she was standing with an SS woman whose husband also worked at Auschwitz, watching a long line of children, women, and old or incapacitated men waiting in front of the gas chamber. She asked the SS woman, "Do you like working here?" "No, Frau Doktor," answered the woman, "I don't really like it." "But then why do you do it? You could be transferred if you wanted." "Yes, but you see, it is like this. My husband and I both come from very simple families, we are hard-working people, and for many years we have been hoping to live in a better area. We want to have pleasant and respectable neighbors and friends. It is only now that we have been able to buy a house in a nice suburb. It is almost ready, but the kitchen is still far from finished. If we work here for only six more months, we can have it finished and then invite our neighbors. Then we will stop working here."

No, she did not like her job, but the kitchen was far more important.

Vrba had a similar interpretation of the work of the SS doctors. The racist ideology that culminated in the relegation of Jews to a class of subhuman beings was an important prerequisite for the program of annihilation. But that alone cannot explain why so many doctors remained in their positions in Auschwitz for so long and participated in the murders with such equanimity. The diary of SS physician Paul Kremer, one of the documents presented at the Nuremberg trials, is especially enlightening in this context.⁸ Kremer was in the SS reserves and started his service at Auschwitz when he was already fifty-nine years old. He remained there for only several months, but long enough to be placed in charge of the killings and to take an active part in the death of 10,717 people between September 2 and November 8, 1942. He was a gastroenterologist and an unsuccessful scientist, with dubious theories that had not received recognition in the German academic world. He had become frustrated and bitter. But he loved good food, a glass of cognac, and good conversation with educated friends. All these things he found at Auschwitz. In his meticulously thorough diary, he often describes small enjoyable events and the pleasant company at the SS club next to the concentration camp. It is only in passing that he mentions the "special actions *{Sonderaktion}*," the official euphemistic code name for the executions, in which

he took part. In one entry he writes that Dante's inferno is nothing compared to this place. In another note, he calls Auschwitz the anus of the world. The "special action" against the "Musulmanen," the camp's most severely emaciated prisoners, was in his words the "most horrible of the horrible." But, he added, the SS men participated willingly in these actions because they received an extra-large ration of schnapps, cigarettes, and sausage.

Kremer writes much more about his own minor ailments than about his "work." He returns constantly to his "outstanding dinners" and notes the menus for most of them. He is particular about the brand of mineral water and praises the desserts, especially *das herrliche Vanilleneis* (the magnificent vanilla ice cream). With the next stroke of his pen he describes naked Jewish women who beg for their lives, in vain "*entsetzliche*" (terrible!) But most of the time the entries simply state *Sonderaktion*, with a note of the time and date but no other details. At one point he notes briefly that he provided medical assistance at a thrashing and a "small arms execution." Immediately thereafter he turns to notes on his daily ration of soap. He also writes about his measurements that he sent to a tailor in Berlin when he ordered a new uniform. He praises the prisoners' orchestra the conductor is from the State Opera in Warsaw! After the concert, he ate "*Schweinebraten. Es gab echten Bohnenkaffee, ausgezeichnetes Bier und belegte Brotchen!*"

(Roast pork. There was real coffee, wonderful beer, and sandwiches!)

There isn't much about Kremer's "research," but he writes repeatedly that he obtains absolutely fresh material from newly executed prisoners. At the Nuremberg trials, he described how his "patients" were placed on the post mortem table, alive. He asked them about the symptoms and diseases that interested him. The autopsy assistant then injected fatal doses of phenol directly into the heart as Kremer stood ready with his instruments, so that he could get his material for fixation in only a few seconds. Toward the end of the diary, Kremer expresses horror at the Anglo-American bombings of Germany. "They bomb even the churches!" he exclaims. "How far can humans go in their barbarism? If they attack cultural monuments, they make war on the whole of civilized humanity, not only on us. My heart writhes with

pain when I see such things. How can God allow these buildings, made to honor his glory, to be so completely destroyed?"

Of all the SS doctors at Auschwitz, Vrba pointed out that Benno focused his attention mostly on Mengele. That might be because Mengele was a student of the two professors who had originated the theory of race biology, Professors Fischer and Vershuer at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology in Berlin. In Mengele, Muller-Hill sees the prototype for the perverted, ideo-logically motivated scientist who wants to "purify the Aryan race." But Vrba was more skeptical of the ideological motivation, even in the case of Mengele. As we know, he had delivered fixed brains and other tissues from the victims to many prominent professors in the German academic system. The recipients were fully aware of the source of the material and had given exact instructions for the preparation, preservation, and transportation of the tissues. According to Vrba, Mengele wanted to ingratiate himself with the prominent professors to foster his own academic career. He had no loftier goals, not even perverted ones. He was merely a small-time climber, but one who did not hesitate to murder.

The discussions between Benno and Vrba continued for several hours. At first they took diametrically opposed positions, but after a while they began slowly to agree with one another. Finally they concluded that they were both correct. The concepts of racial ideology had provided justification for mass murder, and the criminal government had sanctioned, implemented, and institutionalized it. Within the perverted universe of the death camp, one could discover all the motivations that existed in the society at large, but in the camps the images were distorted, as in a convex mirror. If Mengele was the perverted researcher driven to establish his academic career, then Kremer represented the type of doctor who chose medicine as a route toward creature comforts and a high standard of living.

In his foreword to *Commandant in Auschwitz*, the memoirs written by the Auschwitz base commander Rudolf Höss, the Norwegian author Arnulf Overland writes, "From the technical and quantitative point of view, his (Höss's) crimes exceed every-thing in the world history of mass murders. Nevertheless, this autobiography demonstrates that, in most respects, Höss was

indistinguishable from ordinary human beings. That is precisely what makes his book one of the most horrible in the history of literature." Exactly the same might be said for most of the other Nazi doctors.⁹

All German doctors had taken the Hippocratic oath and sworn to heal, ease suffering, and provide comfort. Could it be that these sacred promises, the core of our proud tradition of Western culture, have so quickly been stripped of all their meaning and become no more than shallow formalities? Or has the gradual shallowing merely been pushed to its extreme logical consequence in this case?

Later that evening we were invited for dinner with Francois Jacob, one of the principal pioneers of modern molecular biology. In addition to his Nobel Prize-winning scientific work, Jacob is also well known as a writer. His first great work, *La Logique du Vivant*, deals with the development of concepts of biology since the sixteenth century. His collection of essays, *The Possible and the Actual*, examines the logic of scientific reasoning and the ways in which scientists work. Jacob's recently published autobiography, *The Statue Within*, has been praised as one of the best if not the best autobiography ever written by a scientist. The book describes the birth of some of this century's most important biological discoveries, arising from the interaction among the unique trio of scientists at the Pasteur Institute, Andre Lwoff, Jacques Monod, and Francois Jacob three very different men with two decades of age difference between them. But Jacob's book deals with much more than the history of science. His childhood, his escape from German-occupied France, and his wartime exploits as one of General De Gaulle's most highly decorated soldiers in the African campaign were previously practically unknown, even to his friends and colleagues.

I have known Jacob for more than thirty years. He is not a facile conversationalist just the opposite. He prefers to listen to others and talk very little. This is partly due to the thousands of shrapnel pieces that he has carried in his body since the war. They cause him pain, particularly when the weather is about to change. He always finds it difficult to sit still for prolonged periods of time. When he is a bit disinterested, he seems completely absent. If he does become involved in a conversation, he makes short com-

ments and asks only simple questions. Some people who do not like Jacob find him thoroughly boring. But in his autobiography, Jacob the writer and storyteller has painted a completely different picture of himself. The book is characterized by an unusual sense of intensity and vitality. The narrator is both participant and observer, present and absent at the same time, sensitive but aloof, abstract and indifferent, yet concrete and vital.

The meeting with Jacob was arranged at my initiative. I was a bit worried as we climbed the stairs to his apartment in the Latin Quarter. What would happen if my friends didn't like each other?

It didn't go so badly after all. After a glass of sherry at Jacob's home, we went to a small restaurant around the corner where Jacob is a regular customer. At first we talked about some mutual friends, and then took on, or at least pretended to take on, the air of seriousness associated with ordering dinner in a French restaurant.

Jacob asked Vrba why he had come to Paris. Vrba said that his book describing his escape from Auschwitz was being translated into French and he was proofreading the manuscript. He was also taking a crash course in French at the Sorbonne. In the middle of all this work, however, he also was asked to take on yet another obligation. The ultra-right leader Le Pen had recently declared that the annihilation of the Jews should be viewed as only one of many episodes of the war, and he even questioned whether the gas chambers ever existed.

The French radio service had asked Vrba to respond to these statements, and he showed us the text of his proposed comments. They were crystal clear, as long as one didn't choose to turn a deaf ear to them. But that is exactly what a small but steadily increasing segment of humanity was preparing to do. Vrba described the many figures in the United States, Canada, France, and other countries who have chosen to forge history. In Sweden, Radio Islam broadcasts classically anti-Semitic programs, asserting that the holocaust never took place and accusing the Jews, in conspiracy with Zionists and Bolsheviks, of having invented it. One of the American "revisionists" was R.A. Butz, who had been a rather mediocre and obscure researcher in a low-level position at Northwestern University in Chicago. After being "converted" by the French instigator of the revisionist theories, Faurisson, he

suddenly became something of a celebrity. Since then, the denial of history has become his life's work. His basic premise is that the myth of Auschwitz was created by no less than Vrba himself. According to Butz, Vrba was an incompetent youngster, a lazy troublemaker in whom the good German authorities wanted to instill the work ethic. With this as their underlying positive, educational motivation, they sent him to a work camp called Auschwitz. But Vrba was not able, even there, to keep a job, and he chose to escape. After being paid by the Zionists, the CIA, and the Bolsheviks, he collaborated with these organizations to concoct the myth about Auschwitz.

I asked Vrba if it was possible to sue these people. Yes, it was possible, but the expenses of a lawsuit could become enormous. Furthermore, because of the laws protecting freedom of speech, it was often very difficult to win such cases and to prove the defendants guilty. The enemies of democracy have often abused the rights guaranteed by it to pursue their own nefarious goals. But there is in Canada a law that prohibits interference with the rightful and legitimate grieving of another person. Through use of this law, a woman who had lost her parents in the gas chambers of Auschwitz brought suit against the Canadian representative of the revisionist movement. After a legal process that lasted many years, the accused was found guilty in a lower court. However, because of legal technicalities, the verdict was overturned by a higher appeals court. The case must now be heard again, and the costs will be astronomical. Who in the world would listen to these latter-day followers of Joseph Goebbels, whose main thesis was that a lie becomes the truth if it is repeated often enough? There is, according to Vrba, an unholy alliance between the classical, rabid anti-Semites who wish to wash clean the record of Nazism, and more "moderate" anti-Semites who think that Jews have been complaining far too much. To these two groups might be added the political anti-Zionists that come in a variety of anti-Semitic shades and wish only to promote their own goals. Many are opportunists like the scientific charlatans of cancer research and other fields, people who do not hesitate to deny even the most well-documented facts if it suits their personal ambitions. But the heresy of charlatans can assume validity only when planted in the

fertile soil of widespread wishful thinking. Generations that have not experienced persecutions and discrimination, totalitarianism, or foreign occupation want very much to believe that man is basically good and incapable of atrocities of such a magnitude. Even if one were to accept the historical facts, it is often convenient to blame the Nazi war crimes on a small handful of madmen, thereby ignoring the fact that Hitler attained the office of Chancellor of the Reich through an entirely lawful process. Often one does not want to admit that most of the mass murderers were quite ordinary people. Others are willing to admit the facts of the past, but wish to put the past completely behind them and ignore it altogether. The movement, promulgated by Nolte, to relegate the holocaust to the role of just another historical incident is one good example of this approach. The Nazi programs and the suppression of memory are wrapped in academic attire, and the organized mass murders are viewed in their historical perspective merely as one of the many tragic occurrences of war. Parallels are drawn to the role of mass acquiescence during the purges of the Stalin era in the Soviet Union. Hitler is seen to have drawn an example from those events. One closes one's eyes to the fact that the holocaust was a program of mass murder of millions of private citizens, conceived and implemented by the government. It was a unique program without historical parallel with respect to decision making, planning, and ruthless implementation, utilizing all the available technological resources, often at the expense of the war effort. Even Stalin's purges and horrible mass murders pale in comparison with the holocaust. The example of the mass eradication of the Armenians by the Turks might come closer, but even this was basically a local and ancient ethnic conflict. In contrast, the Nazis carried on a prolonged extermination of people whose only common denominator was that they belonged to, had belonged to, or were descendants of people belonging to a certain religion.

Vrba spoke with the same intense but nevertheless distanced and occasionally slightly ironic voice as in Lanzmann's film. I looked around. We were sitting in a first-class Parisian restaurant, surrounded by elegant people, having a very nice dinner in the best French tradition. The street was still filled with people

strolling casually by, enjoying the fine, warm fall evening. We were again immersed in the dark and unbearable subject. But which is the true reality? Who is fooling himself? No one. Reality is an optical illusion, like the work by Escher in which black birds fly toward the right, and white birds toward the left. It is not possible to see both at the same time. They mutually exclude one another. Most people prefer to look at the white birds. They may be aware of the black birds, at least at an intellectual level, but emotionally they try to exclude them. A similar psychological mechanism must have been in operation in the concentration camps. In his essay "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations," Bruno Bettelheim describes how the prisoners tried to "exteriorize" their situation.¹⁰ Their attitude might be described in the following terms: What is happening cannot possibly happen to me. Therefore it is not real. I must be able to separate myself as subject from myself as object. I must protect myself, my attitudes, and my values so that I can remain the same person in the unlikely event that I manage to survive this.

The wish to concentrate on the white birds even under objectively completely black circumstances may reflect a survival mechanism. Relatives of those who had already been deported and who realized that they were to be the next targets, as well as similarly deceived people elsewhere in the same country or in other lands, resorted to similar mechanisms of selective understanding. It is hardly surprising that neither they nor the even more distant large masses that were not affected by the atrocities chose to disbelieve all rumors about mass murder. They preferred to write them off as heinous propaganda, pure fabrication.

But why did the three of us, with Jacob listening, choose to spend that beautiful Saturday in Paris compulsively focusing our attention on the black birds? We were all citizens of free countries, living well in peaceful times. Were we haunted by feelings of guilt toward the dead? Were we afraid that the whole experience would recur if we let go? We knew that the wide and relentless river of history is rarely influenced by knowledge of the past. In no more than one or two generations, archives of extreme horror turn into scraps of faded paper, with no more influence than dried leaves. I suddenly felt that we were like a traveler with a fear of flying, forcing himself to stay awake and keep his seatbelt buckled during

the entire flight, obsessed with the idea that the plane would surely crash if he were to fall asleep. But perhaps we had other motives. Perhaps we wanted to feel a solidarity with each other by selecting a more or less taboo subject for our conversation, one avoided by most others. Or did we try to perform a kind of autopsy, using our brains to understand what human minds are capable of at their worst? Have we appointed our brains to serve as the pathologist and the cadaver at the same time?

I was suddenly overcome by an irresistible urge to change the subject. I asked Jacob if he remembered the time *some* years earlier when he had asked me to present a lecture at the College de France. Following an ancient tradition, we entered the small faculty lounge prior to the lecture, where we happened to run into writer, philosopher, and political scientist Raymond Aron. He mentioned to Jacob that Robert Schuman, the former finance minister in De Gaulle's administration, had just published his autobiography describing, among other things, his wartime experiences. He praised Jacob's achievements as a soldier in De Gaulle's army in Africa. Apparently Jacob had refused to abandon a badly wounded comrade and carried him a vast distance, at great risk to his own life.

I had heard previously that Jacob was one of De Gaulle's most decorated soldiers, but I had never heard of that episode. Jacob seemed embarrassed, and he didn't want to discuss it further. He asked instead what Schuman's book was like. Not particularly good, Aron replied. Schuman is incapable of discussing anguish (*l'angoisse*). Who could discuss *l'angoisse*? "Andre Malraux," Jacob and Aron said almost simultaneously.

This episode occurred more than two decades before our visit to Paris. And now Jacob has written about anguish himself. Suddenly, all three of us begin talking about his book, using different words but all exhibiting much appreciation. Jacob listened, looked away, remained silent. His description of anguish seizes the reader, even though it does not necessarily refer to events of the battlefield. His description of an episode in which he passed only yards from the muzzle of a German soldier's rifle conveys no fear. Inexplicably, the soldier did not fire. Anxiety came at the moment of long-desired victory, after Jacob had been seriously wounded during the Allied drive toward Paris. He was

severely disabled and hospitalized for an extended period of time, abandoned by his friends and with a few close relatives as his only human contacts. His less courageous friends, who had chosen to remain in occupied France, had already completed much of their medical education. Jacob had barely begun his. The girl whom he loved had become engaged to someone else, and his hopes of becoming a surgeon lay in ruins. I have often heard biologists say that there are many excellent surgeons, and that it was really quite fortunate that the cruelty of fate prevented Jacob from becoming a physician. But anyone who makes such a thoughtless remark cannot have tried very hard to imagine how difficult it was for Jacob: the bitterness at finding himself left out of everything and separated from everyone; his disabilities, the excruciating pain with every step; the cold room, the lonely environment that seemed to be his obvious fate. The feeling of being the least clever of his entire school class, even of his whole generation. The thought of enormous potential gone to waste, of times gone by without any accomplishments. The potential of life being utilized to the full by everyone but him. The brief meeting with his old love, real but still unreal, faded like old photographs turned yellow in the album. The camaraderie of the war years, now an unreal memory. The impossibility, the unwillingness, the inability to say "we" in any context. An abhorrence of all political parties and their self-serving propaganda. The search for the murderer and his victims in strange faces. The blurring of the borderline between those who fought against the Nazis and those who profited from them. Five years of terrible tragedy had vanished suddenly, they had submerged like stones under the sea while the world continued as if nothing had happened.

The relentless flow of our accounts of what we had read left Jacob apparently unmoved. He didn't say a word. From *my* previous conversations and correspondence with him, I knew that he would readily respond to questions related to science and practical issues, but he was unwilling to comment on the reactions of others to his nonscientific writings.

In the middle of this conversation between three who had read a book written by the silent fourth, Vrba suddenly said, "But there

is one detail in the book that has given me a sleepless night."

We were all flabbergasted. How could anything in Jacob's book upset Vrba? We knew that Vrba's own book is the safest drug against sleep. Vrba, the man who had experienced the ultimate hell himself, a hell that is difficult to even try to describe in any human language? In comparison, Jacob's book is filled with simple tales and charming little stories. Could we have missed something?

The episode that had upset Vrba dealt with the first lecture Jacob had to give in English to the international audience of scientists at the Pasteur Institute. He felt very insecure and decided to read his talk from the manuscript with his strong French accent. His friend and colleague Jean Weigle, a well-known scientist who could, in Jacob's view, discern subtle signs not visible to others, advised him strongly against reading from his manuscript. "Your talk will be much better if you speak freely, despite your imperfect English," he said.

But Jacob absolutely refused to listen. Just before he was to step up to the podium, however, Jacob noticed with panic that his manuscript had vanished. There was nothing he could do! Filled with fear, he walked up to the podium and presented his talk in halting but quite comprehensible English. It had obviously gone well. Weigle told him after the lecture that he had stolen the manuscript. "It was the best way to convince you that you should never read a talk from a paper. You did beautifully," was his congratulatory comment.

"How can a scientist do something like that to a young colleague?" Vrba exclaimed, red with anger. "I would never have believed that of someone like Weigle!"

I had a vague sense of *deja vu*. I remembered George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In his nightmarish view of the Stalinist future, the Thought Police myrtles its political prisoners in the Ministry of Love, a large pyramidal and windowless building containing all kinds of unimaginably hellish instruments. But the worst tortures were carried out in Room 101, a plain room lacking any special equipment. In this room each prisoner was confronted with what he feared the most. Orwell's hero had to endure the threat of ferocious rats gnawing at his face. But what is it that Vrba, the man Elie Wiesel called "an authentic hero," could find in

Room 101 instead of rats? Why was he so shaken by Weigle's little practical joke, a prank that Jacob himself admitted turned out to be so helpful in the long run? It was a criminal thing to do, regardless of the result. It was theft, Vrba repeated, still visibly upset. A good scientist should not be allowed to commit such a reprehensible act, because the search for scientific truth makes certain ethical demands on those who practice science. Vrba's position was consistent with the argument he had made earlier in the afternoon, when he asserted that German scientists who utilized material from the concentration camps and, in the worst cases, even participated in the executions, were charlatans. They could not be called scientists. But Weigle was a highly respected scientist.

"No, it's not that simple, unfortunately," Benno replied. Vrba's criteria could be met only if the basic definition of science were changed to include ethical precepts, especially the principle of righteousness. The traditional concept of science, however, makes no allowance for any such reformulation. How do we judge an ordinary person who in most situations behaves in accordance with accepted moral norms, but who does not hesitate to steal when there is no risk of being caught? Think of all the plundering and looting that has taken place even in the most civilized of countries during so many wars, earthquakes, floods, and other disasters. Is a scientist who steals results from other scientists and uses them in his own research necessarily a bad scientist? Possibly yes and possibly no, depending on the quality of the work to which he applies the stolen material. In most cases it is only the victim who cares that he has been robbed. It is generally very difficult for others to take positions in instances of alleged "idea stealing" in the scientific world, to follow all the claims and counter-claims that are usually so trivial that they arouse no more than a yawn when the victim prattles on about it. Ideas are regarded as common property, and it is usually very difficult to know where and when an idea first arose. Some are born from the *Zeitgeist*, occasionally in several places simultaneously. The originator might be as anonymous as the first author of a ballad or a common popular joke.

"And how," Benno continued, "are we to judge those who would not hesitate to commit atrocities in the name of a current reigning

ideology, during wars, revolutions, totalitarian dictatorships, when the killing of undesirables and persecuted minorities is a state-sanctioned duty?" Scientists need not necessarily participate, as Mengele did, in the atrocities, but they can be easily tempted to forget about moral considerations when their scientific interests take priority. One of the most prominent figures in German neuropathology, Professor Hallervorden, said to an SS doctor, "Since you are killing all these people anyhow, you might just as well send me their brains." By the end of the war, he had received 697 brains from murdered psychiatric patients. He knew exactly what he wanted and why. He was not trying to identify specific changes in the brains of psychiatric patients, because he already knew that no such changes could be detected with the methods available at the time. He remained within the realm of what was possible, and thereby made contributions that were significant and remain a firm part of current neuropathology. Hallervorden retained his professorship after the war. Many scientific papers and doctoral theses have been based on material he collected. Reports of the executions are still to be found in the archives of the institutions, written neatly by the "euthanasia doctor" or by the SS doctor, indicating with pride the precise time when the brain was fixed: "Two hours after death," "completely fresh," and so on.

When Hallervorden died in 1965, many laudatory obituaries were written. His colleague Prof. Spatz eulogized him as a great scientist and a deeply moral man.¹¹ He was described as a devoted follower of the ethical philosophy of Kant. This is exemplified by his absolute focus on scientific problems, his sense of duty, and his support of young research colleagues. According to these descriptions, he was a modest man, completely different from the autocratic *Geheimrat* type. During relatively peaceful times, when professors have a stable and reasonable income, it is difficult to imagine that scientists can act criminally, steal, rob, and even murder, Benno continued. We cannot conceive that there might be a connection between their world and that of Mengele. But we cannot escape that easily. Mengele's most immediate supervisor, Professor Ottmar Baron von Verschuer, expressed his great appreciation for Mengele's

"splendid utilization of the enormous potential of Auschwitz for scientific research." He was himself one of the leading "race biologists" and Mengele's closest scientific mentor. He also died an honored man, many years after the end of the war.¹²

The most detailed and thorough description of Mengele's horrible activities in Auschwitz can be found in a book written shortly after the war by his closest professional assistant, the Hungarian Jewish pathologist Miklos Nyiszli. He himself was a prisoner under constant threat of death, like all Jews at Auschwitz, and he was a member of the so-called *Sonderkommando*, who were murdered and replaced at regular intervals. Nyiszli survived, thanks to his skill and knowledge, which Mengele took advantage of. He had a well-equipped pathology laboratory at his disposal, situated no more than sixty yards from the gas chambers. It takes very strong nerves to read his book.¹³ In his foreword, Bruno Bettelheim says, "It is an unbelievable story, but we all know it is true. We wish to forget it. It just does not fit into our current system of thoughts. And rather than to reshape them, we wish to dismiss the story of the German extermination camps. If we could, we would prefer to think it never happened. Since this is impossible, we prefer to forget about it so that we need not come to terms with its nightmarish perspectives." Bettelheim characterizes the attitude of the doctors and of the general community as a kind of inertia, a tendency to consider even the most heinous atrocities "business as usual."

He continues: "All this would be past history except that the very same 'business as usual' makes us forget two things: that twentieth century men like us sent millions into the gas chambers and that millions of *men* like us walked to death without resistance. ... In the deepest sense, the walk to the gas chamber was only the last consequence of the philosophy of 'business as usual.'"

Bettelheim also points to the great danger that stems from our respect for technical competence. In this regard, he is in full agreement with Benno when he says, "Auschwitz is gone, but as long as this attitude remains with us we cannot be protected from criminal indifference to life at its core."

Nyiszli calls Mengele a "criminal doctor" and the greatest felon in the history of the world. But at the same time he is filled with

admiration for what he considers Mengele's scientific interest, his persistent, focused work, his talent for observation, his precision.

Mengele passed out innumerable death sentences and even murdered with his own hands. His monstrosities are perfectly apparent. But what about the German doctors who competed for the empty spaces in the psychiatric hospitals after the completion of the euthanasia programs there, or of the other intellectuals so eager to assume the positions vacated by the Jewish professors? Their private ambitions could be easily hidden behind a facade of altruism. The hospital rooms should be emptied to reduce the costs of medical care. The program to extinguish *lebensunwertes Leben* (lives not worthy to be lived), as in the case of the execution of chronically ill patients or mentally retarded infants, could be disguised as a humanitarian activity. The absurd concepts of the race biologists could easily be justified in a political climate in which it was generally accepted that the hereditary factors of the nation should be purged of 'Jewish genes,' condemned by the Fuhrer as the "cancer" of the nation.

From this point, the road led straight to mass murder, euphemistically called "the final solution." The lies grew along with the murders, like twins. The criminal leadership divided the job behind this smokescreen: Himmler's main task was to kill, Goring's job was to steal valuables and property, and Goebbels was responsible for all the official lying. Hitler amalgamated all three of these aims within himself. Why should science be an exception in a state ruled by this triumvirate of murderers, thieves, and liars?

"Here is where we differ," Benno said, turning to Vrba. "Science is incompatible with lying and secrecy about scientific data, but there is no ethical prohibition against robbery and murder in a society in which such actions are sanctioned. Murder is not legitimized in our time and culture, and we have difficulties in understanding the experience of the Nazi era. It tells us that not even the worst crime a human being can commit against another is deterrent in itself, if sanctioned by the political leadership."

Vrba was not convinced by Benno's argument. He persisted in his belief that scientists who participate in murder cannot be considered true scientists. At best, they might be considered "well-groomed curs" (*frisierte Schnauzen*), polished and well-camouflaged opportunists.

Toward the end of the evening, it became obvious that Benno and Vrba had become friends despite their differences of opinion. They agreed to disagree. But Benno and I wondered why Vrba had to cling to the image of the righteous scientist? Why would scientists differ from others? Was Vrba grasping at straws to save his faith in humanity? In that case, what right do we have to take that from him?

Where is my remaining horror, my own personal Room 101 ? In his last book. *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi wrote,

Above and beyond our personal experiences, we have collectively witnessed a fundamental, unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone. It took place in the teeth of all forecasts; it happened in Europe; incredibly, it happened that an entire civilized people, just issued from the fervid cultural flowering of Weimar, followed a buffoon whose figure today inspires laughter, and yet Adolf Hitler was obeyed and his praises were sung right up to the catastrophe. It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. ... It is not very probable that all factors that unleashed the Nazi madness will again occur simultaneously but precursory signs loom before us. Violence, "useful" or "useless," is there before our eyes: it snakes either through sporadic and private episodes, or government lawlessness, both in what we call the first and the second worlds, that is to say, the parliamentary democracies and countries in the Communist bloc. In the third world it is endemic or epidemic. It only awaits its new buffoon (there is no dearth of candidates) to organize it, legalize it, declare it necessary and mandatory, and so contaminate the world. Few countries can be considered immune to a future tide of violence generated by intolerance, lust for power, economic difficulties, religious or political fanaticism, and racialist attritions. It is therefore necessary to sharpen our senses, distrust the prophets, the enchanters, those who speak and write "beautiful words" unsupported by intelligent reasons.

Is that my Room 101, the fear of oblivion, the fear that it can all happen again if we are not constantly reminded of the past? Possibly so. But I know that there is yet another room, the innermost and most terrible of all.

In the fall of 1988, Benno Muller-Hill organized a conference in Cologne. In contrast to most scientific conferences in which a particular theme or set of themes is chosen, Muller-Hill's symposium had the broad title "Medical Science without Compassion." The meeting was opened by Vrba and Hermann Langbein, also a survivor of Auschwitz and an unpretentious yet incisive witness of the horrors of that hellish planet. After them came a

number of experts on the ideological history of Nazism and the principles of its murderous doctors and scientists. We also heard descriptions of the equally horrendous experiments that the Japanese carried out in one of their gigantic, specially constructed camps in Manchuria—an appalling fact that is still hushed-up in modern Japan.

But unethical experimentation was not limited to the totalitarian states. It was for me quite a shocking revelation to hear about the deceptive experiments sponsored by the CIA on volunteers during the McCarthy era in the United States. Those were times when parts of the American government were obsessed with fear of Stalinist "brainwashing" and spent large sums of money on "behavior-modulation experiments" with LSD and other mind-altering drugs. Hidden cameras and observation stations were part of the armamentarium. In the end, these experiments did not result in the "elimination" of the test subjects, but it was particularly troublesome that the studies were carried out with support from a federal body, in the world's largest democracy, in peacetime.

As I sat in the meeting, trying to formulate some concluding remarks as I had been asked to do, I detected a recurrent underlying theme in most of the talks. Not even the worst crimes that were discussed at the meeting had been committed by psychopaths, sadists, or the kind of monsters that the mass media and crime films like so much to portray for impressionable young people. Some of the leaders, like Hitler—in a class by himself— and possibly also the bloodhound-like Senator McCarthy, were undoubtedly psychopaths. But this convenient label cannot be applied to most of the functionaries. On the contrary, they were conformists and good citizens whose activities had been sanctioned by the system and whose consciences were "clean." After all, they were performing "patriotic works." and were being re-warded with good incomes and promotions.

The real problem is the *conformity* itself, not the atrocities and the inhumanities per se. According to American historians who have studied the experiments in Manchuria, the Japanese treated their prisoners very well during the First World War. However, less than three decades later, they treated prisoners with exceptional cruelty. Many of us remember the film *The Bridge on the River*

Kwai, if nothing else. Our Chinese, Korean, and other East Asian friends have much to add to that story. What had happened to that polite and friendly nation between the two world wars to explain such an enormous change?

Historians attribute this national transformation to changes in Japanese leaders and their ideology. During the First World War, after two centuries of isolation, Japanese politicians were intent on contacts and openness toward the West. They even considered the prisoners of war to be human beings through whom they wished to foster contacts with the West. During the Second World War the country was led by the military, which wanted to revive the traditional spirit of war. A Japanese soldier was never to surrender to the enemy—to do so was regarded as the most cowardly act of all. His duty was to commit suicide. The same judgment was applied to English and American prisoners of war. Those who surrendered deserved no respect as human beings. Is it possible that the attitudes of a whole group or an entire nation can be changed so easily by one or a small number of leaders? Apparently so, especially if loyalty to the leaders or the system is more important than one's own conscience.

I looked around the lecture hall in Cologne. We all agreed in our condemnation of unethical and criminal experiments with human beings. But the doctors and the "scientists" who performed the experiments were merely products of their time and of the society that had sanctioned their activities. Even the general population had quietly accepted, tolerated, or in any case ignored what they were doing.

We also are children of our own time. In this time and in this society, it is correct and praiseworthy to condemn cruelty and murder, to regard those who practice them as criminals. We feel righteous in our indignation, and we are fully convinced that we would be incapable of doing such things. But are we not also conformists within the spirit of our own times? Can we be sure that we would have behaved differently if we had lived in that time and place? Don't we have to prove first that we can go against the stream, follow our own consciences, even if it may involve economic hardships or injure our careers, even if we are condemned by those closest to us, and even if it leads, in the extreme case,

to ultimate punishment? How can our moral indignation be considered reliable in the absence of such proof?

The gap between us and the era of Hitler is fortunately so great that the whole question seems absurd. But the CIA-supported experiments that were carried out in a free society awakens a far greater and more imminent fear.

At the time of the conference in Cologne I had just finished a very difficult but necessary project. As so often in the past, I had to prepare a large research grant application, the worst kind of work I know. I have to write down what I already know and have already published. I learn nothing new from it. It has to be written clearly and concisely to be competitive. It must contain detailed plans for the future, even though both I and the funding agency realize that such plans are purely fictitious. In reality, the scientific problem has to be pursued step by step, without the constraints of a rigidly determined plan. This is the only part of *my* work that I dislike. For a period of two or three months I feel as if I am in prison. All my energy and the pleasure of work is gone, but I have to finish it! It is like climbing a high mountain.

Imagine if someone were to offer me a grant, enough for my entire department to function, in exchange for some experiments that might not take more than a fraction of my time and could be done with the left hand, or even one finger. This is just how the CIA agents went about it when they persuaded the American sociologists to carry out their unethical LSD experiments.

Would I have the courage and strength to say no to experiments that I consider unethical? I hope and believe that I would, but only a self-deceiving hypocrite would claim that he knows this for certain, before he could prove it to be true.

Can I be 100 percent certain that I would say no?

This recurrent thought is my Room 101.

Notes

1. R. Vrba and A. Bestic, *I Cannot Forgive*. 1964.
2. M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*. New York, 1981.
3. George Mikes, *Sunday Times*, February 2, 1964.
4. Miklós Nyiszli, *Auschwitz, An Eyewitness Report*. New York, 1985.
5. B. Müller, *Murderous Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. See also the chapter "Ultima Thule," in Georg Klein, *The Atheist and the Holy City*, translated by Theodore and Ingrid Friedmann. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.
6. M. Gilbert, *The Holocaust*. New York, 1985.
7. Vrba referred to statement by General Rudolf Hoffmann, commander of the northern army, as quoted by H.A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer in *Decisive Battles of World War II: The German View*. London, 1966.
8. H. Langein, *Wir haben es gesehen*. Vienna, 1964.
9. Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*. New York, 1986.
10. Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays*. New York, 1952.
11. "Erinnerungen an Julius Hallervorden," 1882–1965, in *Der Nervenarzt*, 1966.
12. MüllerHill, *Murderous Science*.
13. Nyiszli, *Auschwitz. An Eyewitnes Report*.