

A Burden to Pass Forward

The sounds of yelling jolt me from my slumber as I draw in a deep breath of fresh countryside air. As my vision refocuses, I can see the soldiers of my platoon milling about as if in a trance, clearly overworked and exhausted. I grab my pack, dog tags, canteen, and sling my rifle across my shoulder, a routine that has become like second nature over the past few years of war. This is our 4th day advancing through the German countryside in pursuit of the fleeing Third Reich following the costly victory at D-Day. I tear open a ration canister and begin chewing away at a petrified granola bar as the jeeps and tanks are loaded, their engines roaring to life and beginning their constant, persistent hum. The signal is shouted, and the convoy lurches forward as the golden sun peaks above the pink horizon, giving way to dawn. In the dim red light illuminating the tank's interior, I gaze at a small photograph of my wife, her small, petite face warming my conscience. *How much longer will this war drag on?* It's unclear, is the answer that everyone keeps telling us. Every time we reach a checkpoint, new orders are issued; at every village we free, another one is assigned to us; there is always more to liberate, more troops to resupply, more ground to cover. The way the chain of command works, I have no power or say in our endeavors as a mere private. All I can do is stand by and watch, obediently obeying orders and carrying my small, trusty rifle at the ready.

After hours of driving, the sun hangs low in the sky, and the roads begin curving as if they were drawn by a small child in a coloring book. As we turn a sharp corner, a blurry figure appears in the distance, growing larger and larger, eventually making itself out to be a fence. This is not just any fence; it is three layers of razor-sharp barbed wire, and one of the layers has electricity surging through it, the subtle hum protruding into the silent air. At once, Sergeant Blowers orders the tanks to penetrate it, and the electrified fence sizzles as it hits the muddy ground, the tank treads indenting the blackened mush. We immediately take defensive positions, but there are no enemies, no targets, just a low-hanging silence protruding in the air.

We sit there for a moment, waiting, the soft breeze wisping my hair and causing me to shiver lightly.

Then, slowly, figures began emerging from grey concrete buildings. They walked like zombies, their expressions surprised but blank all at once, their bodies emaciated and frail. I do not understand. Are these German soldiers? They don't look German, but who else could they be? We are deep into enemy territory, and so far, the only people we have encountered were fleeing German soldiers and civilians, categories that these people did not fit into.

Suddenly, one of them speaks, in a raspy scratchy voice, "A-a-are y-you A-A-American?" His accent is clearly foreign, masked by the effects of dehydration and disease on his body. For a second, there is a moment of tension in the air as we stare at each other, a look of pure shock ingrained into each soldier's face. Finally, someone nods to the man, and a look of joy floods his face, diffusing to the rest of them. Finally, I realize: they are prisoners. Green tattoos indent each of their arms: women, children, elderly. They begin crowding around us, forming hordes and cupping their hands, asking for food. We give what we have, and they happily share it amongst themselves, almost like deprived animals. *Animals*. How, I think, can anyone be treated like this?

Shortly after these moments, Sergeant Blowers gathers the platoon together, a solemn look painted across his face. The fact that he is worried makes me uneasy, as he is the man that I knew possessed no fear; we were told that he had seen virtually everything there was to see in the world, whether it be beautiful or downright grueling.

"This is a concentration camp," he relents, "What you are about to see, you will not be able to unsee. Look for as long as your stomachs can last, then take a walk in the woods."

Concentration camp. I didn't know that that was, but I had a feeling I was soon to find out. As I wandered about the rudimentary red cross tents being set up and meandered through the food tents, lines stretching endlessly, I came across a tall, black gate, its bars thick and frigid to the touch. At the top, the words *Jedem das seine* were spelled out. I walk in the gate, and I am

immediately taken aback by a putrid scent that fills my nose, throat, and lungs, suffocating me. It is the smell of death itself, and there are few words I can use to describe its pungency. My eyes widen as I see what I am surrounded by. At first, I thought they were chunks of wood, wood that was going to be used to feed fires during the winter. But no. They are bodies, hundreds of them, neatly stacked in rows and columns in large wagons. I instantly feel sick to my stomach and walk on. The concrete buildings I had seen earlier surround me. Peering inside, I am met with the same putrid smell of death and decay, and I see dilapidated wooden bunks stacked high to the ceiling; there are no mattresses, no bedding, no lights, and no floor. It resembles the living conditions of a farm. I continue wandering about until I see three extremely long concrete buildings, each with a vault-like rectangular metal door as the only way in. I pause before opening it, wondering what horrors lie within. The door opens with a creak, and the smell is worse inside. I shine my flashlight inside, its rays bouncing off the walls and creating strange shapes with the shadows. The building is empty, apart from small shower heads dotting the walls, too high to reach. The next building is similar. Lastly, I lurch the third door open, expecting a similar scene, only to find something harrowing. A blood-curdling scream rises in my throat, but I quickly swallow it down as I attempt to process what I am seeing. In this building, there are more bodies scattered across the floor, their faces expressionless, their bodies still appearing to be in pain. It hurts to think about their deaths, their losses, so many losses in such a small, confined space trapped within layers of concrete. I now realize what I have stumbled upon: gas chambers. Weapons of systematic killings. It dawns on me that thousands, maybe millions of lives had ended in this small, damp, confined concrete room.

Suddenly, I can't take it anymore, and I take off sprinting in another direction, towards the comfort of the forest. The wind hits my face, and for the first time in hours, I take a gasp of fresh air, leaning on a tree and heaving as I drink greedily from my canteen. I peer back at the prisoners as they mill about in a confused, trance-like manner, soup bowls in their hands,

unsure of what to do. An overwhelming force of empathy fills my resolve, not only for these people, but for their futures, for their minds, and for their losses.

What evil could have caused this? I was a soldier. I had seen the brutalities of war, the countless deaths, the senseless violence gripping the world in an unrelenting vice. But this? I had never seen anything to this extent; it was mind-boggling that humans could even be capable of such thoughts as to construct such a fabrication of reality, a *death camp*.

Years later, it is 2005. With the end of the Rwandan genocide, the events of the Holocaust have become increasingly relevant, although the memories have never truly escaped my mind. I still have dreams, to this day, of meandering through the camp, not walking but not floating at the same time, with my eyes darting about in utter fear.

Those memories have never left me. Now, I realize I am tasked with a heavy burden, a burden that countless others have also been tasked with upholding: to preserve the memory of the holocaust for future generations. As I prepare to deliver a presentation to my local high school, I truly grasp the significance of what I am doing. Leaving my home, I scribble a final anecdote at the end of my speech with a newfound resolve:

“You may not understand what I am telling you right now, but you will one day. Together, you all are tasked with not only continuing our legacy but bringing humanity into a time that is void of hatred, void of indifference, and filled to the brim with empathy. Empathy is what allows us to never forget.”

Works Cited

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