



ANTONIO ITURBE

TRANSLATED BY LILIT ŽEKULIN THWAITES

**GODWINBOOKS**

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

NEW YORK

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175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010  
fiercereads.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.  
ISBN 978-1-62779-618-7

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First published in Spain by Editorial Planeta in 2012  
First American edition, 2017

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



Dear reader,

I want to tell you how the book you are holding came into being. Some years ago, the Spanish author Antonio Iturbe was searching for someone who could tell him some details about the books on the children's block in the Auschwitz–Birkenau concentration camp.

He received my internet address, and we started exchanging emails. His were short, apologetic questions and mine long, detailed answers. But then we met in Prague, and for two days I showed him where I grew up and where I played in a sandbox and went to school and the house that we—my parents and I—left forever when we were sent to the Terezín ghetto by the Nazi occupants. The next day we even traveled to Terezín itself. Before we parted, Toni said: “Everyone knows about the largest library in the world. But I am going to write a book about the smallest library in the world and its librarian.”

This is the book that you are holding. Of course he wrote it in Spanish and this is a translation. He used much of what I told him, but he also diligently collected facts from other sources. Still, despite the historical correctness of the narrative, it is not a documentary. It is a story born both from my own experiences and the rich imagination of the author.

Thank you for reading  
and sharing it!

Yours,  
Dita Kraus



Courtesy Dita Kraus



While it lasted, Block 31 (in the Auschwitz extermination camp) was home to five hundred children, together with several prisoners who had been named “counselors.” Despite the strict surveillance they were under and against all odds, the Block housed a clandestine children’s library. It was tiny, consisting of eight books, including *A Short History of the World* by H. G. Wells, a Russian grammar, and another book on analytical geometry. . . . At the end of each day, the books, along with other treasures such as medicine and some food, were entrusted to one of the oldest girls, whose task it was to hide them in a different place every night.

**ALBERTO MANGUEL**, *The Library at Night*

Literature has the same impact as a match lit in the middle of a field in the middle of the night. The match illuminates relatively little, but it enables us to see how much darkness surrounds it.

**JAVIER MARÍAS**, citing William Faulkner



# 1.

## Auschwitz–Birkenau, January 1944

THE NAZI OFFICERS ARE DRESSED IN BLACK. THEY LOOK AT DEATH with the indifference of a gravedigger. In Auschwitz, human life has so little value that no one is shot anymore; a bullet is more valuable than a human being. In Auschwitz, there are communal chambers where they administer Zyklon gas. It's cost-effective, killing hundreds of people with just one tank. Death has become an industry that is profitable only if it's done wholesale.

The officers have no idea that in the family camp in Auschwitz, on top of the dark mud into which everything sinks, Alfred Hirsch has established a school. They don't know it, and it's essential that they should not know it. Some inmates didn't believe it was possible. They thought Hirsch was crazy, or naïve: How could you teach children in this brutal extermination camp where everything is forbidden? But Hirsch would smile. He was always smiling enigmatically, as if he knew something that no one else did. *It doesn't matter how many schools the Nazis close*, he would say to them. *Each time someone stops to tell a story and children listen, a school has been established.*

In this life-destroying factory that is Auschwitz–Birkenau, where the ovens burn corpses day and night, Block 31 is atypical, an anomaly. It's a triumph for Fredy Hirsch. He used to be a youth

sports instructor, but is now an athlete himself, competing against the biggest steamroller of humans in history. He managed to convince the German camp authorities that keeping the children entertained in a hut would make it easier for their parents to do their work in camp BIIB, the one known as “the family camp.” The camp high command agreed, but on the condition that it would be for games and activities only: School was banned. And so Block 31 was formed.

Inside the wooden hut, the classrooms are nothing more than stools, tightly packed into groups. Walls are nonexistent; blackboards are invisible. The teachers trace isosceles triangles, letters of the alphabet, and even the routes of the rivers of Europe with their hands in the air. There are about twenty clusters of children, each with its own teacher. They are so close together that classes are whispered to prevent the story of the ten plagues of Egypt from getting mixed up with the rhythm of a times table.

The barrack door is flung open, and Jakoubek, the lookout, races toward the cubicle of Blockältester Hirsch, the head of Block 31. His clogs leave a trail of moist camp earth across the floor, and the bubble of calm serenity in Block 31 bursts. From her corner, Dita Adler stares, mesmerized by the tiny spots of mud, as Jakoubek calls out:

“Six! Six! Six!”

It’s code for the imminent arrival of SS guards at Block 31.

Hirsch pokes his head out of his door. He doesn’t need to say a word to his assistants or his teachers, whose eyes are locked on him. His nod is barely perceptible. His look is a command.

The lessons come to a halt and are replaced by silly little German songs and guessing games, to give the impression that all



is in order. Normally, the two-soldier patrol barely enters the barrack, casting a routine glance over the children, occasionally clapping along with a song or stroking the head of one of the little ones before continuing their rounds. But Jakoubek adds another note to the customary alert:

“Inspection! Inspection!”

Inspections are another matter altogether. Lines must be formed, and searches are carried out. Sometimes the youngest children are interrogated, the guards hoping to take advantage of their innocence to pry information out of them. They are unsuccessful. Even the youngest children understand more than their snot-covered little faces might suggest.

Someone whispers, “The Priest!” and a murmur of dismay breaks out. That’s their name for one of the SS noncommissioned officers, a sergeant who always walks with his hands tucked into the sleeves of his military greatcoat as if he were a priest, though the only religion he practices is cruelty.

“Come on, come on! Juda! Yes, you! Say ‘I spy . . .’”

“And what do I spy, Mr. Stein?”

“Anything! For heaven’s sake, child, anything!”

Two teachers look up in anguish. They are holding something that’s absolutely forbidden in Auschwitz. These items, so dangerous that their mere possession is a death sentence, cannot be fired, nor do they have a sharp point, a blade, or a heavy end. These items, which the relentless guards of the Reich fear so much, are nothing more than books: old, unbound, with missing pages, and in tatters. The Nazis ban them, hunt them down.

Throughout history, all dictators, tyrants, and oppressors, whatever their ideology—whether Aryan, African, Asian, Arab, Slav, or any other racial background; whether defenders of popular

revolutions, or the privileges of the upper classes, or God's mandate, or martial law—have had one thing in common: the vicious persecution of the written word. Books are extremely dangerous; they make people think.

The groups are in their places, singing softly as they wait for the guards to arrive, but one girl disrupts the harmony. She launches herself into a noisy run between the clusters of stools.

“Get down!”

“What are you doing? Are you crazy?” teachers shout at her.

One of them tries to stop her by grabbing her arm, but she avoids him and continues with her dash. She climbs up onto the waist-high stove and chimney that splits the hut in two, and jumps down noisily on the other side. She knocks over a stool, and it rolls away with such a thunderous clatter that all activity stops for a moment.

“You wretched girl! You're going to betray us all!” shrieks Mrs. Křížková, purple with rage. Behind her back, the children call her Mrs. Nasty. She doesn't know that this very girl invented the nickname. “Sit down at the back with the assistants, you stupid girl.”

But Dita doesn't stop. She continues her frantic run, oblivious to all the disapproving looks. The children watch, fascinated, as she races around on her skinny legs with their woolen socks. She's very thin but not sickly, with shoulder-length brown hair that swings from side to side as she rapidly zigzags her way between the groups. Dita Adler is moving among hundreds of people, but she's running by herself. We always run on our own.

She snakes her way to the center of the hut and clears a path through one group. She brushes aside a stool or two, and a little girl falls over.

“Hey, who do you think you are!” she shouts at Dita from the floor.

The teacher from Brno is amazed to see the young girl come to a halt in front of her, gasping for air. Out of both breath and time, Dita grabs the book from her hands, and the teacher suddenly feels relieved. By the time she responds with her thanks, Dita is already several strides from her. The arrival of the Nazis is only seconds away.

Engineer Maródi, who has seen her maneuvers, is already waiting for her at the edge of his group. He hands her his book as she flies past, as if he were handing off the baton in a relay race. Dita runs desperately toward the back of the hut, where the assistants pretend to sweep the floor.

She’s only halfway there when she notices the voices of the groups have momentarily faltered, wavering like candlelight when a window is opened. Dita doesn’t need to turn around to confirm that the door of the hut has opened and the SS guards are coming in. She instantly drops to the ground, frightening a group of eleven-year-old girls. She puts the books under her smock and crosses her arms over her chest to prevent them from falling. The amused girls steal a glance at her out of the corners of their eyes while the very nervous teacher prompts them to keep on singing by lifting her chin.

After surveying the scene for a few seconds from the entrance to the hut, the SS guards shout one of their favorite words:

*“Achtung!”*

Silence falls. The little songs and the games of I Spy stop. Everyone freezes. And in the middle of the silence, you can hear someone crisply whistling Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. The Priest is a sergeant to be feared, but even he seems somewhat nervous, because he’s accompanied by someone even more sinister.

“May God help us!” Dita hears the teacher nearby whisper.

Dita’s mother used to play the piano before the war, and that’s why Dita knows for sure that it’s Beethoven. She realizes this is not the first time she’s heard that particular way of whistling symphonies. It was after they’d been traveling from the Terezín ghetto for three days, crammed into a freight car without food or water. Night had fallen by the time they reached Auschwitz–Birkenau. It was impossible to forget the screeching sound of the metal door as it opened. Impossible to forget that first breath of icy air that smelled of burnt flesh. Impossible to forget the intense glare of the lights in the night: The platform was lit up like an operating room. Then came the orders, the thud of rifle butts against the side of the metal carriage, the shots, the whistles, the screams. And in the middle of all the confusion, that Beethoven symphony being flawlessly whistled by a captain at whom even the SS guards looked with terror.

That day at the station, the officer passed close to Dita, and she saw his impeccable uniform, his spotless white gloves, and the Iron Cross on the front of his military jacket—the medal that can be won only on the battlefield. He stopped in front of a group of mothers and children and patted one of the children in a friendly manner with his gloved hand. He even smiled. He pointed to a pair of fourteen-year-old twins—Zdeněk and Jirka—and a corporal hurried to remove them from the line. Their mother grabbed the guard by the bottom of his jacket and fell on her knees, begging him not to take them away. The captain calmly intervened.

“No one will treat them like Uncle Josef.”

And in a sense, that was true. No one in Auschwitz touched a hair of the sets of twins that Dr. Josef Mengele collected for his experiments. No one would treat them as Uncle Josef did in his macabre genetic experiments to find out how to make German

women give birth to twins and multiply the number of Aryan births. Dita recalls Mengele walking off holding the children by their hands, still calmly whistling.

That same symphony is now audible in Block 31.

Mengele . . .

Blockältester Hirsch emerges from his tiny cubicle, pretending to be pleasantly surprised by the visit of the SS guards. He clicks his heels together loudly to greet the officer: It's a respectful way of recognizing the soldier's rank, but it's also a way of demonstrating a military attitude, neither submissive nor daunted. Mengele barely gives him a glance; he's still whistling, with his hands behind his back as if none of this had anything to do with him. The sergeant—the one everyone calls the Priest—scrutinizes the hut with his almost transparent eyes, his hands still tucked inside the sleeves of his greatcoat and hovering over his middle, never far from the holster of his gun.

Jakoubek wasn't wrong.

"Inspection," whispers the Priest.

The SS guards repeat his order, amplifying it until it becomes a shout in the prisoners' ears. Dita, sitting in the midst of a ring of girls, shivers and squeezes her arms against her body. She hears the rustle of the books against her ribs. If they find the books on her, it's all over.

"That wouldn't be fair . . ." she murmurs.

She's fourteen years old. Her life is just beginning; everything is ahead of her. She recalls the words her mother has been repeating insistently over the years whenever Dita grumbles about her fate: "It's the war, Edita . . . it's the war."

She is so young that she barely remembers anymore what the

world was like when there was no war. In the same way that she hides the books from the Nazis, she keeps secret the memories in her head. She closes her eyes and tries to recall what the world was like when there was no fear.

She pictures herself in early 1939, aged nine, standing in front of the astronomical clock in Prague's Old Town Hall square. She's sneaking a peek at the old skeleton. It keeps watch over the rooftops of the city with huge empty eye sockets.

They'd told them at school that the clock was a piece of mechanical ingenuity, invented by Maestro Hanuš more than five hundred years ago. But Dita's grandmothers told her a darker story. The king ordered Hanuš to construct a clock with figures, automatons that paraded on the stroke of every hour. When it was completed, the king ordered his bailiffs to blind the clockmaker so that he could never make another wonder like it. But the clockmaker took revenge, putting his hand into the mechanism to disable it. The cogs shredded his hand, the mechanism jammed, and the clock was broken, unfixable for years. Sometimes Dita had nightmares about that amputated hand snaking its way around the serrated wheels of the mechanism.

Dita, hanging on to the books that may take her to the gas chamber, looks back with nostalgia at the happy child she used to be. Whenever she accompanied her mother downtown on shopping expeditions, she loved to stop in front of the astronomical clock, not to watch the mechanical show—the skeleton in fact disturbed her more than she was prepared to admit—but to watch the passersby, many of them foreigners visiting the capital. She had difficulty concealing her laughter at the astonished faces and silly giggles of those watching. She made up names for them. One of her



favorite pastimes was giving everyone nicknames, especially her neighbors and her parents' friends. She called snooty Mrs. Gottlieb "Mrs. Giraffe" because she used to stretch her neck to give herself airs. And she named the Christian upholsterer in the shop downstairs "Mr. Bowling-Pin-Head" because he was skinny and completely bald. She remembers chasing the tram as, its little bell ringing, it turned the corner at the Old Town Square and snaked its way into the distance through the Josefov neighborhood. Then she would run in the direction of the store, where she knew her mother would be, buying material to make Dita's winter coats and skirts. She hasn't forgotten how much she liked that store, with its neon sign in the door, colored spools of thread lighting up one by one from the bottom to the top and then back down again.

If she hadn't been one of those girls insulated by that happiness typical of children, then perhaps as she passed by the newspaper kiosk she would have noticed that there was a long queue of people waiting to buy the paper. The stack of copies of *Lidové Noviny* that day carried a headline on the front page four columns wide and in an unusually large type. It screamed rather than stated GOVERNMENT AGREES TO GERMAN ARMY'S ENTRY INTO PRAGUE.

Dita briefly opens her eyes and sees the SS guards sniffing around the back of the hut. They leave no stone unturned, even checking behind the drawings that hang on the wall from makeshift barbed wire nails. No one says a word; there is only the sound of the guards rummaging around in the hut. It smells of dampness and mildew. Of fear, too. It's the smell of war.

From the little she remembers of her childhood, Dita recalls that peace smelled of chicken soup left cooking on the stove all night every Friday. It tasted of well-roasted lamb, and pastry made

with nuts and eggs. It was long school days, and afternoons spent playing hopscotch and hide-and-seek with Margit and other classmates, now fading in her memory . . .

The changes were gradual, but Dita remembers the day her childhood ended forever. She doesn't recall the date, but it was March 15, 1939. Prague awoke shaking.

The crystal chandelier in the living room was vibrating, but she knew it wasn't an earthquake, because nobody was running around or worried. Her father was drinking his breakfast cup of coffee and reading the paper as if nothing were happening.

When Dita and her mother went out, the city was shuddering. She began to hear the noise as they headed toward Wenceslas Square. The ground was vibrating so strongly that it tickled the soles of her feet. The muffled sounds grew more noticeable as they got closer to the square, and Dita was intrigued. When they reached the square, they couldn't cross the street, which was blocked off by people, or see anything other than a wall of shoulders, coats, necks, and hats.

Her mother came to a dead stop. Her face was strained and suddenly aged. She grabbed her daughter's hand to turn back, but Dita's curiosity was strong. She yanked herself free of the hand that was holding on to her. Because she was small and skinny, she had no trouble wiggling her way through the crowd of people on the sidewalk to the front where the city police were lined up, their arms linked.

The noise was deafening: Gray motorcycles with sidecars led the way one after another. Each carried soldiers in gleaming leather jackets and shining helmets, with goggles dangling from their necks. They were followed by combat trucks, bristling with enormous machine guns, and then tanks thundering slowly down the avenue like a herd of menacing elephants.

She remembers thinking that the people filing past looked like the mechanical figures from the astronomical clock, that after a few seconds, a door would close behind them, and they would disappear, and the trembling would stop. But they weren't automata; they were men. She would learn that the difference between the two is not always significant.

She was only nine years old, but she felt fear. There were no bands playing, no loud laughter or commotion. . . . The procession was being watched in total silence. Why were those uniformed men here? Why was nobody laughing? Suddenly, it reminded her of a funeral.

With an iron grip, her mother caught her again and dragged her out from the crowd. They headed off in the opposite direction, and Prague became itself again. It was like waking up from a bad dream and discovering that everything was back to normal.

But the ground was still shaking under her feet. The city was still trembling. Her mother was trembling, too. She was desperately pulling Dita along, trying to leave the procession behind, taking hurried little steps in her smart patent-leather shoes.

Dita sighs as she clutches the books. She realizes with sadness that it was on that day, not the day of her first period, that she left her childhood behind. That was the day she stopped being afraid of skeletons and old stories about phantom hands, and started being afraid of men.

## 2.

THE SS BEGAN THEIR INSPECTION OF THE HUT WITH SCARCELY A glance at the prisoners, focusing their attention on the walls, the floor, and the surroundings. The Germans are systematic like that: first the container, then its contents. Dr. Mengele turns around to speak with Fredy Hirsch, who has remained standing almost at attention all this time. Dita wonders what they're talking about. Few Jews could hold a conversation with Mengele, or Dr. Death as he is called, with such assurance. Some say that Hirsch is a man without fear. Others believe the Germans warm to him because he is German. Some even suggest his impeccable appearance hides something unsavory.

The Priest, who is in charge of the inspection, makes a gesture Dita can't interpret. If the guards order them to stand to attention, how will she hold the books without them falling out?

The first lesson any veteran inmate teaches a recent arrival is that you must always be clear about your goal: survival. To survive a few more hours and, in this way, gain another day that, added to other days, might become one more week. You must continue like this, never making big plans, never having big goals, only surviving each moment. *To live* is a verb that makes sense only in the present tense.

It's her last chance to leave the books; there's an empty stool just a meter away. When they stand up to form lines and the guards

find the books there, they won't be able to accuse her; all of them and none of them will be guilty. And they won't be able to take all of them to the gas chambers. Though, without a doubt, they'll shut down Block 31. Dita wonders if it would really matter. She's heard how some of the teachers initially questioned the school: Why make the children study when there's little chance they'll leave Auschwitz alive? Does it make any sense to talk to them about polar bears or drill them on multiplication tables, in the shadow of chimneys belching out the black smoke of burning bodies? But Hirsch convinced them. He told them that Block 31 would be an oasis for the children.

*Oasis or mirage?* Some of them still wonder.

The most logical thing would be to get rid of the books, to fight for her life. But Dita hesitates.

The sergeant stands to attention in front of his superior. When he hears the order, he shouts out,

"On your feet! Attention!"

And then the commotion really begins as people start to stand up. It's the moment of confusion Dita needs. As she relaxes her arms, the books inside her smock slip down to her lap. But then she grips them against her body again. With each second she holds on to them, her life is more at risk.

The SS order silence; no one is to move from their spot. Disorder irritates the Germans. When they first set in motion the Final Solution, the bloody executions gave rise to refusals among many of the SS officers. They found it difficult to deal with the mayhem of dead bodies mixed in with those who were still dying; with the arduous task of having to kill again, one by one, those who had already been shot; with the quagmire of blood as they stepped over the fallen bodies; with the hands of the dying coiling around

their boots like creeping vines. But this has ceased to be a problem. In Auschwitz, there is no chaos. The killings are routine.

The people in front of Dita have stood up, and the guards can't see her. She reaches under her smock and grabs hold of the geometry book. As she holds it, she feels the roughness of the pages. She runs a finger over the furrows of the bare spine.

And in that moment, she shuts her eyes and squeezes the books tightly. She acknowledges what she has known right from the start: She's not going to abandon them. She is the librarian of Block 31. She asked Fredy Hirsch to trust her, almost demanded it. And he did. She won't let him down.

Finally, Dita stands up carefully. She holds one arm across her chest, pressing the books to her body. A group of girls observe her, but she is tall and her posture is suspicious.

Before beginning the inspection, the sergeant had given an order and two SS guards disappeared inside Hirsch's cubicle, where the rest of the books are hidden. Though the hiding place is secure—the books fit in a dugout beneath a wooden floorboard so perfectly as to be undetectable—Dita knows that Hirsch is now in great danger. If they find the books, nothing can save him.

Mengele has moved away, but Hirsch continues to stand stock-still as the Germans root around his cubicle. Two SS guards wait outside, relaxed, their heads tilted back. Hirsch remains upright. The more they relax their posture, the more erect he'll be. He'll take any opportunity, no matter how small, to demonstrate the strength of the Jews. They are a stronger people, and that is why the Nazis fear them, why they must exterminate them. The Nazis are winning only because the Jews don't have an army of their own, but Hirsch is convinced the Jews will never make this mistake again.



The two SS men come out of the cubicle; the Priest holds a few papers in his hand. It seems that this is the only suspicious thing they've found. Mengele gives the papers a cursory look and disdainfully hands them to the sergeant, almost allowing them to fall. They are the reports on the operation of Block 31 that Hirsch writes for the camp high command.

The Priest tucks his hands back into the worn sleeves of his greatcoat. He issues his orders in a low voice, and the guards spring into action. They advance toward the inmates, kicking aside any stools in their path. Fear erupts among the children and the newly arrived teachers, who give way to sobs and cries of anguish. The veterans are less concerned. Hirsch does not move. In a corner, Mengele stands removed, observing.

When the pack reaches the first bunch of prisoners, it slows, and the guards begin their search. They inspect the prisoners, frisking some, moving their own heads up and down in their search for who knows what. The prisoners pretend to look straight ahead, but they cast sidelong glances at the inmates next to them.

The guards order one of the female teachers to step out of the line. She's a tall woman who teaches crafts. In her class, children create small miracles out of old string, wood splinters, broken spoons, and discarded cloth. She doesn't understand what the soldiers are saying; they shout at her and shake her, before returning her to the group. There's probably no reason for it. Shouting and shaking are also part of the routine.

The guards move on. Dita's arm is getting tired, but she pulls the books into her chest even more tightly. They stop at the group beside hers, and the Priest lifts his chin, ordering a man out of the line.

It's the first time Dita has paid any attention to Professor

Morgenstern, an inoffensive-looking man who, based on the folds of skin under his chin, must once have been chubby. He has close-cropped white hair and wears a faded, patched jacket that is too big for him. A pair of round glasses sit in front of his myopic beaver-like eyes. Dita has difficulty hearing what the Priest is saying to him, but she sees Professor Morgenstern hold the spectacles out to him. The Priest takes them and examines them; inmates aren't allowed to keep any personal effects, though glasses for a short-sighted person are no luxury. Even so, the Priest examines them carefully before holding them back out for the old man. When the teacher reaches for them, they fall, smashing against a stool before landing on the floor.

"Clumsy idiot!" the sergeant yells at him.

Professor Morgenstern calmly bends to pick up the broken glasses. He begins to straighten, but a pair of wrinkled origami birds fall from his pocket and he bends again to retrieve them. As he reaches down, his glasses fall to the ground again. The Priest observes this clumsiness with barely contained irritation. Angrily, he turns on his heel and continues the inspection. Mengele misses nothing as he watches from the front of the hut.

Dita senses the SS approach, though she does not look. They stop in front of her group, the Priest directly opposite Dita, not more than four or five paces away. She sees the girls trembling. The sweat on her shoulders is icy cold. There's nothing she can do: Her height makes her stick out, and she's the only one not standing to attention, clearly gripping something with one arm. The Priest's eye is ruthless, inescapable. He's one of those Nazis who, like Hitler, is intoxicated by hatred.

Though she looks straight ahead, Dita feels the Priest's gaze piercing her, and fear forms a lump in her throat. She needs air;

she's suffocating. She hears a male voice, and she's already preparing herself to step out from the middle of the group.

*It's all over—*

But not yet. It's not the voice of the Priest, but a much more timid one. It's the voice of Professor Morgenstern.

"Excuse me, Sergeant, sir, do you give me permission to go back to my place in the line? If it's all right with you, of course—otherwise I'll stay here until you give me the order. The last thing I'd want to do is to cause you any kind of trouble. . . ."

The Priest looks angrily at the insignificant little man who has dared to address him without permission. The old professor has put his glasses back on, cracked lens and all, and still standing out of line, he looks dopily toward the SS officer.

The Priest strides toward him, and the guards follow behind. For the first time, he raises his voice.

"Stupid old Jewish imbecile! If you're not back in line in three seconds, I'll shoot you!"

"At your service, whatever you order," the professor replies meekly. "I beg you to forgive me, I had no intention of being a nuisance. It's just that I preferred to ask rather than committing an act of insubordination that might be contrary to the rules, because I don't like behaving in an inconvenient manner, and it's my wish to serve you in the most fitting way—"

"Back in line, idiot!"

"Yes, sir. At your orders, sir. Forgive me once again. It wasn't my intention to interrupt, rather—"

"Shut your mouth, before I put a bullet in your head!" yells the Nazi, beside himself.

The professor, bowing his head in an exaggerated manner, steps backward, returning to his group. The enraged Priest does

not notice that his guards are now behind him, and as he turns abruptly, he barrels into them. It's a spectacular scene: Nazis bounce off each other like billiard balls. Some of the children laugh quietly, and the teachers, alarmed, elbow them to be quiet.

The sergeant looks to Mengele, who despises nothing more than incompetence, before he angrily thrusts his men aside and resumes the inspection. As he walks in front of Dita's row, she clenches her numb arm. And her teeth. In his agitation, the Priest thinks he's already inspected this group and moves on to the next. There are more shouts, more shoves, the odd search . . . and the soldiers move slowly away from Dita.

The librarian can breathe again, though the danger has not passed: The guards remain in the hut. Her arm aches from holding it in the same position for so long. To distract herself from the pain, she thinks of how fate brought her to Block 31.

It was December when Dita and her family arrived in Auschwitz. On their very first morning in the camp, before the morning roll call, her mother bumped into an acquaintance from Terezín, Mrs. Turnovská, who had owned a fruit shop in Zlín. The encounter was a small joy amidst the misery. Mrs. Turnovská told Dita's mother of the barrack-school for children. There, they held roll call under cover, out of the wet and cold, each morning. There, they didn't have to work all day. Even the food rations were a little better.

When her mother said that Edita was fourteen—just a year too old to join the school—Mrs. Turnovská told her that the director of the school had convinced the Germans he needed a few assistants to help maintain order in the hut. In this way, he'd taken on a few children aged fourteen to sixteen. Mrs. Turnovská, who seemed to

know everything, knew the deputy director, Miriam Edelstein, from her hut.

The women found Miriam walking quickly along the *Lagerstrasse*, the camp's main avenue, which stretched from one end to the other. Miriam was in a rush and in a bad mood; things hadn't gone at all well for her since her family's transfer from the Terezín ghetto, where her husband, Yakub, had been chairman of the Jewish Council. When they arrived at the camp, he was put with the political prisoners in Auschwitz I.

Mrs. Turnovská sang Dita's virtues, but before she could finish, Miriam Edelstein cut her off: "The quota for assistants has been filled, and many people before you have asked me for the same favor." With that, Miriam set off in a great hurry.

But just as she was about to disappear down the *Lagerstrasse*, she stopped, then returned to the spot where she had left the women. They had not moved.

"Did you say that this girl speaks perfect Czech and German, and that she reads very well?"

In celebration of Hanukkah, the camp was staging a performance of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and the prompter who would remind actors of their lines had died that morning. And so that afternoon, Dita entered Block 31 for the first time as the new prompter for *Snow White*.

Thirty-two huts, or barracks, formed camp BIIf. They were in two rows of sixteen, lining either side of the *Lagerstrasse*. Block 31 was the same as those other rectangular barracks, divided by a horizontal brick stove and a chimney, which stood on the foot-flattened dirt floor. But Dita realized that there was one fundamental difference: Instead of rows of triple bunks where the prisoners slept, there were stools and benches, and instead of

rotten wood, the walls were covered with drawings of Eskimos and Snow White's dwarves.

Cheerful chaos reigned as volunteers worked to transform the dismal hut into a theater. Some arranged seating, while others transported colorful costumes and cloth decorations. Another group rehearsed lines with the children, and at the far end of the hut, the assistants positioned mattresses to form a small stage. Dita was struck by the bustling activity: Against all odds, life stubbornly carried on.

They had prepared a small compartment for her at the front of the stage, made out of cardboard and painted black. Rubiček, the director of the play, told Dita to pay particular attention to little Sarah, who forgot to say her lines in German when she became nervous, switching unconsciously to Czech. The Nazis required the performance to be in German.

Dita remembers her nerves before the play began, the weight of responsibility. The audience included some of the top officers of Auschwitz II: Kommandant Schwarzhuber and Dr. Mengele. Whenever she glanced through a hole in her cardboard box, she was astonished to see how much they laughed and clapped. Could these be the same people who sent thousands and thousands of children to their death each day?

Of all the plays performed in Block 31, the December 1943 version of *Snow White* was one of the most memorable. When the performance started, the magic mirror stuttered at the wicked step-mother, "Y-y-y-you are the most beautiful, my q-q-q-queen."

The audience erupted in laughter, thinking it a joke, but Dita was sweating inside her cardboard shell. The stammering wasn't in the script.

When Snow White was abandoned in the forest, the guffaws



stopped. The part was played by a young girl with an air of sadness. She looked fragile as she wandered, lost, pleading for help in her tiny voice, and Dita felt a knot in her chest. She, too, was lost, surrounded by wolves. Little Snow White began to sing, and the audience went completely silent. It was only when the prince—the broad-shouldered Fredy Hirsch—came to her rescue, that the audience came to life again, applauding their approval. The play ended with a huge ovation. Even the impassive Dr. Mengele applauded, though he didn't remove his white gloves, of course.

It is this same Dr. Mengele who now stands at one end of Block 31, taking in the scene. The Priest leads his guards toward the back of the hut, kicking aside stools and hauling inmates out of the line, though they find no excuse to take inmates away. Not this time.

When the Nazis finish inspecting the hut, the sergeant turns to the medical captain, but he has vanished. The guards should be pleased; they have found no escape tunnels or weapons—nothing against the rules. But they are furious; there is nothing to punish. They shout and make threats, violently shaking one boy. And then they leave.

They've gone, but they'll be back.

When the door shuts behind them, there's a murmur of relief. Fredy Hirsch puts the whistle he always wears around his neck to his lips, and blows it loudly, signaling them to fall out. Dita's arm is so numb she can barely move it, and the pain brings tears to her eyes. She is so relieved by the departure of the Nazis that she cries and laughs at the same time.

Nervous chatter breaks out. The teachers want to discuss what has happened, to understand what they have seen. The children run around and let off steam. Dita sees Mrs. Křižková approach her,

bearing down on her. As she walks, the flap of skin under her chin wobbles like a turkey's gobbler. She stops just in front of Dita.

"Are you crazy, girl? Don't you know that when the order is given, you have to go to your assigned spot in the assistants' area, not run around like a madwoman? Don't you realize that they can haul you off and kill you? Don't you realize that they can kill all of us?"

"I did what I thought best—"

"What you thought . . ." begins Mrs. Křižková, her face wrinkling. "And who are *you* to change the rules? Do you think you know everything?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Křižková . . ."

Dita clenches her fists to stop her tears from falling. She's not going to give her the satisfaction.

"I'm going to report what you've done—"

"That won't be necessary," says a man's voice, speaking Czech with a strong German accent, slow and deliberate, and yet emphatic. It is Hirsch.

"Mrs. Křižková, there's still a little time before classes end. You should take charge of your group."

Mrs. Křižková always brags that she has the most disciplined and hardworking group of girls in all of Block 31. Without a word, she glances furiously at the head of the hut, turns around, and marches stiffly away toward her pupils. Dita sighs with relief.

"Thank you, Mr. Hirsch."

"Fredy. . . ."

"I'm sorry I broke the rules."

Hirsch smiles at her.

"A good soldier doesn't need to wait for orders; he knows what his duty is."

And before he walks off, he turns toward her and looks at the books she's holding against her chest.

"I'm proud of you, Dita. May God bless you."

She watches him leave and remembers the night of the *Snow White* performance. As the assistants were dismantling the stage, Dita emerged from her prompter's den and headed for the exit, thinking she might never again set foot in this wonderful hut that could turn itself into a theater. But a vaguely familiar voice stopped her.

"Young girl . . ." Fredy Hirsch's face was still covered with white chalk makeup. "Your arrival in this camp is timely," he said.

"Timely?"

"Absolutely!" He gestured for her to follow him to the back of the stage, which was now empty of people. Close up, Hirsch's eyes were an odd mix of gentleness and insolence. "I desperately need a librarian for our children's hut."

It astonished Dita that he would remember her. Hirsch had been in charge of the Youth Office in the Terezín ghetto, but she'd caught a glimpse of him only a few times as she helped one of the librarians wheel her trolley of books.

Dita was perplexed, though. She was no librarian. She was just a fourteen-year-old girl.

"Forgive me, but I think there's been a misunderstanding. The librarian was Miss Sittigová; I only helped her."

The director of Block 31 smiled. "I noticed you several times. You were pushing the library cart."

"Yes, because it was very heavy for her, and the little wheels didn't roll easily on the cobblestones."

"You could have spent the afternoon lying on your pallet, going

for walks with your girlfriends, or just doing your own thing. But instead, you pushed the cart so that people could have their books.”

She was looking at him, perplexed, but Hirsch’s words left no room for argument. He was in charge of an army. And like a general, he pronounced, “You are a librarian.”

He added, “But it’s dangerous. Very dangerous. Handling books here is no game. If the SS catches anyone with a book, they execute them.”

As he said it, he raised his thumb and extended his index finger. He aimed that imaginary pistol at Dita’s forehead. She tried to appear unbothered, but she was becoming nervous at the thought of this responsibility.

“Count on me.”

“It’s a huge risk.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

“They might kill you.”

“I don’t mind.”

Dita tried to sound decisive, but she was unsuccessful. She could not control her trembling legs, and Hirsch stared at her shaking limbs.

“Running the library requires a brave person. . . .”

Dita blushed. The more she tried to stay still, the wilder her trembling became. Her hands began to shake, too, and she feared the director might think her too weak for the job.

“S-s-so you’re not counting on me, then?”

“You seem like a brave girl to me.”

“But I’m trembling!” she replied, devastated.

Then Hirsch smiled in his particular way. “That’s why you’re brave. Brave people are not the ones who aren’t afraid. Those are reckless people who ignore the risk; they put themselves and others

in danger. That's not the sort of person I want on my team. I need the ones who know the risk—whose legs shake, but who carry on.”

As she listened, Dita's legs began to tremble less.

“Brave people are the ones who can overcome their own fear. You are one of those. What's your name?”

“My name is Edita Adler, Mr. Hirsch.”

“Welcome to Block Thirty-One, Edita. May God bless you. Please call me Fredy.”

They had waited quietly until everyone had gone. Then Dita entered Fredy Hirsch's cubicle—a narrow rectangle with a pallet and a pair of old chairs. It was almost bare, with only a few food packages, scraps of material left over from the set of *Snow White*, and Fredy's food bowl in sight.

Hirsch told her something that left her dumbstruck: They had a library on legs, a “living library.” Teachers who knew particular books well had become book-people. They rotated among the different groups, telling the children stories they knew almost by heart.

“Mrs. Magda is really good with *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils Holgersson*, and the children have fun when she makes them imagine that they're flying over the skies of Sweden holding on to geese. Šašek does a really good job with stories of the American Indians and the adventures of the Wild West. Dezo Kovác is almost like a walking Bible.”

But this living library wasn't enough for Fredy Hirsch. He told her about the books that had reached the camp clandestinely. A Polish carpenter called Mietek had brought three, and a Slovak electrician, another two. They were the sorts of prisoners who moved among the camps with greater freedom, as they were employed to do maintenance work. They had managed to sneak some

books from the ramp where the luggage from the arriving transports was sorted by privileged prisoners.

As the librarian, Dita would be in charge of keeping track of which books were lent to which teacher, as well as collecting the books when classes were finished and returning them to their secret compartment.

Hirsch made for a corner where scraps of material were piled up, and moved them aside. He removed a wooden board, and books began to emerge. Dita couldn't restrain her joy and clapped.

"This is your library. It's not much." And he looked at her out of the corner of his eye to see what effect it was having on her.

It wasn't an extensive library. In fact, it consisted of eight books, and some of them were in poor condition. But they were books. In this incredibly dark place, they were a reminder of less somber times, when words rang out more loudly than machine guns.

Dita picked up the books one by one, holding them in her hands as carefully as she would a newborn baby. The first one was an unbound atlas, with a few pages missing. It showed a Europe of the past, with empires that had ceased to exist some time ago. The political maps were a mosaic of vermillion, brilliant greens, orange, navy blue, in sharp contrast to the dullness that surrounded Dita: the dark brown of the mud, the faded ocher of the huts, and an ashy clouded sky. She started to leaf through the pages, and it was as if she were flying over the world. She crossed oceans and mountains, navigating with her finger along the rivers Danube and Volga, and then the Nile. To put all those millions of square kilometers of seas, forests, all of Earth's mountain ranges, all the rivers, all the cities and countries into such a tiny space was a miracle that only a book could achieve.

Fredy Hirsch watched her in silence, taking pleasure in her



absorbed expression. If he had any doubts about the responsibility he'd given to the young Czech girl, they dissipated in that moment. He knew that Edita would look after the library carefully.

The *Basic Treatise on Geometry* was somewhat better preserved. It unfurled a different geography in its pages: a countryside of isosceles triangles, octagons, and cylinders, rows of ordered numbers in squads of arithmetical armies, formations that were like clouds, and parallelograms like mysterious cells.

Her eyes opened wide at the third book. It was *A Short History of the World* by H. G. Wells. A book populated by primitive men, Egyptians, Romans, Maya . . . civilizations that formed empires and then collapsed so that new ones could emerge.

The fourth title was *A Russian Grammar*. She didn't understand a thing, but she liked those enigmatic letters. Now that Germany was also at war with Russia, the Russians were her friends. Dita had heard that there were many Russian prisoners of war in Auschwitz and that the Nazis treated them with extreme cruelty.

There was also a French novel in bad condition and a treatise with the title *New Paths to Psychoanalytic Therapy* by a professor named Freud. There was another novel in Russian with no cover. And the eighth book was Czech, only a handful of sheets held together by a few threads along the spine. Before she could take it in her hands, Fredy grabbed it. She looked at him with the expression of a displeased librarian. She wished she had a pair of tortoiseshell glasses so that she could look at him over their rim, as serious librarians do.

"This one's in a very bad state. It's no good."

"I'll fix it."

"And anyway . . . it's not appropriate for children, especially girls."

Dita narrowed her eyes in irritation.

“With all due respect, Fredy, I’m fourteen years old. Do you honestly believe that after observing on a daily basis thousands of people going to the gas chambers at the edge of the *Lager*, what I read in a novel might shock me?”

Hirsch looked at her with surprise. And it wasn’t easy to surprise him. He explained to her that the book in question was called *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk* and was written by a blasphemous alcoholic called Jaroslav Hašek, that it contained scandalous opinions about politics and religion, and more than dubious moral situations. In the end, though, he handed her that book.

Dita caressed the books. They were broken and scratched, worn, with reddish-brown patches of mildew; some were mutilated. But without them, the wisdom of centuries of civilization might be lost—geography, literature, mathematics, history, language. They were precious.

She would protect them with her life.

# 3.

DITA EATS HER TURNIP SOUP VERY SLOWLY—THEY SAY IT FILLS you more that way—but sipping it barely takes her mind off her hunger. Between one spoonful and the next, the groups of teachers discuss the extraordinary behavior of Morgenstern, their scatter-brained colleague.

“He’s a very strange man. Sometimes he talks a lot, but at other times he hardly says a word to anyone.”

“It would be better if he didn’t speak at all. He just talks nonsense. He’s off his rocker.”

“It was painful to watch him bowing down in front of the Priest in such a servile manner.”

“You couldn’t exactly call him a Resistance hero.”

“I don’t know why Hirsch lets a man with a screw loose give classes to the children.”

Dita overhears them and feels sorry for the old man, who reminds her a bit of her grandfather. She sees him sitting on a stool at the back of the hut, eating by himself, even talking to himself while, with his little finger raised with a refinement that is so out of place in this hut, he ceremoniously lifts the spoon to his mouth as if he were sharing his meal with aristocrats.

They dedicate the afternoon to the usual children’s games and sporting activities, but Dita is desperate for the school day to finish and the final roll call to be over so she can race off to see her parents.

In the family camp, news travels quickly from hut to hut, but like in a game of telephone, there are distortions in the retellings.

As soon as she can, Dita rushes off to reassure her mother, who will already have found out about the Block 31 inspection. As she runs down the *Lagerstrasse*, she comes across her friend Margit.

“Ditiňka, I hear you had an inspection in Thirty-One!”

“That disgusting Priest!”

“Did they find anything? Did they detain anyone?”

“Absolutely nothing; there’s nothing for them to find there.” Dita winked. “Mengele was there, too.”

“Dr. Mengele? He’s a madman. He experimented with injections of blue ink into the pupils of thirty-six children in an attempt to produce blue-eyed people. It was horrible, Ditiňka. Some died of infection, and others were left blind. You were lucky to escape his notice.”

The two girls stop talking. Margit is her best friend, and well aware of her work with the secret library, but Margit knows not to say anything to Dita’s mother, Liesl. She would try to stop her, say it was too dangerous. She’d threaten to tell Dita’s father, or start begging God to save her. It’s better not to tell her, or her father, anything. To change the topic, Dita tells Margit about Morgenstern.

“What a fuss he stirred up. You should have seen the Priest’s face as the professor kept dumping out the contents of his pocket each time he bent over.”

“I know who you mean now. A very old man with a shabby, patched jacket—he always bows when he passes a lady. He’s always bobbing his head! I think that man is a bit crazy.”

“And who isn’t, in this place?”

When Dita reaches her hut, she sees her parents outside, sitting

up against one of the long walls, resting. It's cold outside, but very crowded inside the hut. They look tired, especially her father.

It's a long workday: The guards wake them before dawn. They stand outdoors through a lengthy roll call, exposed to the elements, then labor all day. Dita's father works producing shoulder straps for guns, and his hands are often blackened and blistered from the toxic resins and glues they use. Her mother is a cleaner in a workshop where they make hats. They work many hours with very little food, but at least they are sheltered from the elements. There are many who aren't so lucky: Some must collect dead bodies with carts, some clean the latrines or drain the trenches, others spend the day hauling soup barrels.

Her father gives Dita a wink, while her mother quickly gets to her feet.

"Are you all right, Edita?"

"Ye-e-e-ss."

"You're not just pretending?"

"Of course not! I'm here, aren't I?"

Just then, Mr. Tomášek walks past.

"Hans, Liesl! How are you? I see your daughter still has the prettiest smile in Europe."

Dita blushes, and the two girls leave the grown-ups.

"Isn't Mr. Tomášek kind!"

"Do you know him, too, Margit?"

"Yes, he often visits my parents. Here, many people only look after themselves, but Mr. Tomášek looks after others. He asks them how they're doing; he takes an interest in their problems."

"And he listens to them . . ."

"He's a good man."

“Thank goodness there are still people who haven’t been corrupted in this hell.”

Margit remains silent. Although she is a year older, Dita’s direct way of talking makes her feel uncomfortable, but she knows Dita’s right. Auschwitz not only kills innocents; it kills innocence as well.

“It’s cold, and your parents are outdoors, Dita. Won’t they catch pneumonia?”

“My mother prefers not to be inside with her bunkmate, who has lots of horrible boils . . . though she’s no worse than my bunkmate!”

“But you’re lucky—you both sleep on top bunks. We’re spread among the lowest bunks,” said Margit.

“You must really feel the damp seeping up from the ground.”

“Oh, Ditiňka, Ditiňka. The worst part isn’t what comes up from the ground, but what might come down from above. Vomit, diarrhea . . . bucketloads, Ditiňka. I’ve seen it in other bunks.”

Dita pauses for a moment and turns toward her, looking serious.

“Margit . . .”

“What?”

“You could ask for an umbrella for your birthday.”

Margit shakes her head. “How did you two manage to get those places on the top bunks?” she shoots back.

“You know what an uproar there was in the camp when our transport train arrived in December.”

The two girls stop talking for a moment. The September veterans had not only been fellow Czechs, they’d been friends, acquaintances, even family members who, like them, had been deported from Terezín. But nobody was pleased to see the new arrivals in December. The addition of five thousand new prisoners to the

camp meant they'd have to share the water that dribbled from the taps; the roll calls would become interminable; and the huts would be absolutely jam-packed.

"When my mother and I went inside our assigned hut to find a bunk, it was total chaos."

Margit nods. She remembers the arguments, shouts, and fights among women doing battle over a blanket or a filthy pillow.

"In my hut," Margit explains, "there was a very sick woman who couldn't stop coughing. Each time she tried to sit down on a straw mattress, its occupant would shove her onto the floor. 'Idiots!' the German-appointed woman prisoner who was the barrack supervisor, or *Kapo*, would yell at them. 'Do you think you're healthy? Do you really think it makes any difference whether there's a sick woman sharing your bed?'"

"The *Kapo* was right."

"You're kidding! After she said that, the *Kapo* grabbed a stick and started to beat everyone, even the sick woman."

Dita thinks back to the confusion of shouts, scurrying about, and weeping, and then continues.

"My mother wanted us to leave the hut until things calmed down inside. It was cold outside. A woman said that there wouldn't be enough bunks even if we were to share, that some women would have to sleep on the dirt floor."

"So what did you do?" asked Margit.

"Well, we went on freezing to death outside. You know my mother—she doesn't like to call attention to herself. If a streetcar ran over her one day, she wouldn't cry out, because she wouldn't want to be a topic of conversation. But I was about to explode. So I didn't ask her permission. I took off and ran inside before she could say anything. And I realized something. . . ."

“What?”

“The top bunks were almost all occupied. They had to be the best ones. In a place like this, you have to pay attention to what the old hands are doing.”

“I’ve noticed that some will let you share their bunk if you pay them something. I saw one woman agree in exchange for a potato.”

“And a potato’s worth a fortune,” Dita replies. “She must have had no idea about exchange rates. You can buy lots of things and many favors for half a potato.”

“Did you have something to exchange?”

“Not a thing. I checked out which veterans still had a bunk to themselves. Where the bunks already had two occupants, those women were sitting on them with their legs dangling over the edge to mark out their territory. Women who had arrived on our train were wandering around begging for a space, top, bottom, or wherever. There were searching for the least-hardened inmates who might allow them to share their mattresses. But such friendly veterans had already agreed to share their beds.”

“That happened to us, too,” says Margit. “Luckily, we eventually came across a neighbor from Terezín who helped me, my mother, and my sister.”

“I didn’t know anyone.”

“Did you finally find an understanding veteran?”

“It was too late for that. There were only the angry ones and the selfish ones left. So do you know what I did?”

“No.”

“I searched for the worst one of the lot.”

“Why?”

“Because I was desperate. I saw a middle-aged veteran with short hair that looked as if it had been bitten off, sitting on her



bunk. She had a defiant look on her face, which was split in two by a black scar. You could tell she'd been in jail by the blue tattoo on the back of her hand. A woman approached her, begging for space, and the veteran drove her off with yells, even tried to kick the woman with her dirty feet. Huge, twisted feet they were, too!"

"So what did you do?"

"I cheekily stood right in front of her and said, 'Hey, you!'"

"You didn't! I don't believe it! You're kidding! You see an old hand who looks like a criminal and, without knowing anything about her, you go up to her and calmly say, 'Hey, you?'"

"Who said I was calm? I was scared stiff. But with a woman like that, you can't walk up and say, 'Good evening, madam, do you think the apricots will ripen on time this year?' She'd kick you out of there. I had to speak her language if I wanted her to listen to me."

"And did she?"

"First, she threw me a murderous look. I must have been as white as a sheet, but I tried to hide my fear from her. I told her the *Kapo* would end up randomly assigning women who didn't have a bunk. 'There are still twenty or thirty women outside, and you could end up with any one of them,' I said. 'There's a really fat one who would squash you. And another one whose breath smells more than her feet. And there are others who are old and have bad digestion, and they stink.'"

"Dita, you're terrible! And what did she say?"

"She gave me a dirty look—though I don't think she could give you a kind look even if she wanted to. Anyway, she let me continue. 'I weigh less than forty-five kilos. There's no one thinner on the whole train. I don't snore, I wash every day, and I know when to shut up. You won't find a better bunkmate in all of Birkenau, no matter how hard you look.'"

“And what did she do?”

“She stretched out her head toward me and looked at me like you look at a fly when you don’t know whether to squash it or leave it alone. If my legs hadn’t been shaking so hard, I would have run away.”

“Fine, but what did she do?”

“She said, ‘Of course you’re sharing with me.’”

“You got your way!”

“No, not yet. I said to her, ‘As you can see, I will make a great bunkmate, but I’ll only share your bunk if you help me to get another top bunk for my mother.’ You can’t imagine how angry she became! It was obvious that she wasn’t the least bit impressed that a puny young girl would tell her what to do. But I could see her checking out the other women wandering around the hut with a look of disgust on her face. Do you know what she asked me—totally serious?”

“What?”

“‘Do you wet the bed?’ ‘Absolutely not. Never,’ I replied. ‘Lucky for you,’ she answered in her booming, vodka-damaged voice. Then she turned to the woman on the bunk next to her, who didn’t have a bunkmate.

“‘Hey, Bošcovič,’ she said, ‘did you know they’ve ordered us to share our pallets?’ The other woman pretended she didn’t: ‘We’ll see about that. I’m not convinced by your arguments.’”

“And what did your veteran do?”

“She started arguing. She dug around in her straw mattress and pulled out a piece of twisted wire about ten centimeters long, with a really sharp point. She propped herself up with one hand on her neighbor’s bunk and held the wire to her neighbor’s throat with the other. There was no question which argument was more

convincing. The neighbor quickly nodded her head in agreement. The panic made her so bug-eyed it looked as if her eyes would fall out of their sockets!" And Dita laughed.

"There's nothing funny about that. What a horrible woman! God will punish her."

"Well, I once heard the Christian upholsterer who owned the store on the ground floor of our apartment block say that while God's plan is straight, the path to achieving it is twisted. So maybe twisted wires work, too. I thanked her and said, 'My name is Edita Adler. Perhaps we'll become good friends.'"

"And what was her answer?"

"There wasn't one. She must have thought she'd already wasted too much time on me. She turned toward the wall, leaving barely a hand's width of room for me to lie down with my head at her feet."

"And she didn't say another word?"

"She hasn't spoken to me since, Margit. Can you believe it?"

"Oh, Ditiňka. I would believe anything these days. May God watch over us."

It's dinnertime, so the two girls say good-bye to each other and head back to their barracks. Night has fallen, and only the orange lights illuminate the camp. Dita sees two *Kapos* chatting at the entrance to one of the huts. You can recognize them by their better clothes, their brown "special prisoner" armbands, and the triangular badge that identifies them as non-Jews. A red triangle identifies the political prisoners, many of them Communists or social democrats; a brown one is for Gypsies; a green one for criminals and ordinary delinquents. A black triangle is for social misfits, retarded people, and lesbians, while homosexual men wear a pink triangle. *Kapos* with black or pink triangles are rare in Auschwitz, as these are worn by prisoners of the lowest possible category,

almost as low as Jews. In camp BIIb, the exception is the rule. The two *Kapos* chatting to each other—a man and a woman—wear a pink and a black triangle respectively; chances are no one else wants to talk to them.

Dita walks toward her hut, thinking about the chunk of bread she's about to receive. She sees it as a feast, the only decent meal of the day, since the soup is a bowl of slops that serves only to soothe her thirst for a moment.

A black shadow, darker than all the rest, is walking along the *Lagerstrasse* in the opposite direction. People give way to it, stepping aside so that it will walk past without stopping. You'd think it was Death itself, and it is. The tune from Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" filters through the darkness.

Dr. Mengele.

As he gets close to her, Dita gets ready to lower her head and move to one side, like everyone else. But the officer stops, and his eyes bore through her.

"You're the one I'm looking for."

"Me?"

Mengele studies her at length.

"I never forget a face."

His words carry a deadly stillness. If Death were to speak, it would do so with precisely this icy cadence. Dita goes back over what happened in Block 31 earlier in the afternoon. The Priest didn't focus on her in the end, thanks to the altercation with the crazy teacher, and she thought she'd escaped. But she hadn't reckoned on Dr. Mengele. He had been farther away, but it was obvious he'd seen her. His forensic eye would definitely have picked up that she wasn't in the correct spot, that she had one arm across her

chest, that she was hiding something. She can read all that in the coldness of his eyes, which are, unusually for a Nazi, brown.

“Number?”

“73305.”

“I’m going to keep my eye on you. I’ll be watching you even when you can’t see me. I’ll be listening to you, even when you think I can’t hear you. I know everything. If you break the camp rules even fractionally, I’ll know, and you’ll end up stretched out in my autopsy lab. Live autopsies are very enlightening.”

And he nods as he says this, as if he were talking only to himself.

“You see the last waves of blood pumped out by the heart reaching the stomach. It’s an extraordinary sight.”

Mengele becomes lost in thought, thinking about the perfect surgical laboratory he has set up in Crematorium 2, where he has the most up-to-date equipment at his disposal. He is delighted with the red cement floor, the polished marble dissection table with the sinks set in the middle, and its nickel fittings. It’s his altar dedicated to science. He feels proud. Suddenly, he remembers there are some Gypsy children waiting for him to complete an experiment on their craniums, and he strides off in a hurry.

Dita, stunned, stands stock-still in the middle of the campground. Her sticklike legs are shaking. A moment ago there were hordes of people on the *Lagerstrasse*, but now she’s all on her own. They’ve all disappeared into the camp’s alleyways.

Nobody approaches her to see if she’s all right or if she needs anything. Dr. Mengele has marked her. A few of the inmates who stopped a safe distance away to watch what was happening feel sorry for her; she looks so frightened and confused. Some of the women even know her by sight from the Terezín ghetto. But they

choose to hurry away. Survival comes above all else. That's one of God's commandments.

Dita reacts and heads off toward her alleyway. She wonders if he really is going to keep tabs on her. That icy look is the answer. As she walks, the questions keep multiplying in her head. What should she do now? It would be wise to quit her job as librarian. How is she going to manage the books with Mengele hot on her heels? Something about him terrifies her, which is unusual for her. She's come across many Nazis in the past few years, but there's something about this one that sets him apart. She senses that he has a special talent for evil.

She whispers a quick good-night to her mother so that Liesl won't notice her anxiety, and carefully lies down alongside her bunkmate's foul-smelling feet. Her quiet good-night disappears among the cracks in the ceiling.

She can't sleep, but she can't move, either. She has to keep her body still while her head spins. Mengele has given her a warning. And maybe she's privileged, because there'll be no more warnings, for sure. Next time he'll simply stick a hypodermic needle into her heart. She can't go on looking after the books in Block 31. But how can she abandon the library?

If she does, they'll think she's scared. She'll present her reasons, all of them understandable. Anyone in her position with any sense at all would do the same. But she's already well aware that news in Auschwitz jumps from one bunk to the next faster than any flea. If someone in the first bunk says that a man has drunk a glass of wine, by the time the news reaches the last bunk, he's drunk an entire barrel. And they don't do it out of spite. All the women are respectable. It even happens with Mrs. Turnovská, who treats her

mother so well and is a good woman. Even she can't control her tongue.

Dita can hear her already: *Of course, the little girl got scared. . . .* And they'll say it with that condescending tone that makes her blood boil, pretending to be understanding. And what makes it even worse is that there's always some kind soul who'll say, *Poor little thing! It's easy to understand. She got frightened. She's just a child.*

*A child?* Dita thinks. Far from it. *You have to have a childhood to be a child!*

# 4.

## CHILDHOOD . . .

It was during one of her many sleepless nights that Dita came up with the idea of turning her memories into photos and her head into the only album that nobody would ever be able to take away from her.

After the Nazis arrived in Prague, the family had to leave their apartment. Dita had really liked that place. It was in the city's most modern building, with a laundry in the basement and an intercom system that was the envy of all her classmates. She remembers coming home from school and seeing her father standing in the living room, dressed as elegantly as he always was, in his gray double-breasted suit, but looking much more serious than he normally did. He told her they were going to swap their marvelous apartment for one across the river in Smíchov. Without looking at her, he told her it was sunnier. He didn't even joke about it, as he usually did when he wanted to make something seem insignificant. Her mother was leafing through a magazine and didn't say a word.

"I have no intention of leaving!" Dita bellowed.

Her father, dismayed, lowered his head. Her mother got up from the armchair and slapped her so hard that her fingers left marks on Dita's cheek.

"But, Mama," Dita said, more puzzled than hurt—her mother wasn't in the habit of even raising her voice, never mind her



hand—"you were the one who said that this apartment was a dream come true. . . ."

And Liesl hugged her.

"It's the war, Edita. It's the war."

A year later, her father was again standing in the middle of the living room, in the same double-breasted suit. By that stage he already had less work in the social security office where he was employed as a lawyer. He used to spend many afternoons at home staring at maps and spinning his world globe. He told her they were moving to the Josefov district. The Nazi *Reichsprotector*, who governed the whole country, had ordered that all Jews must live there. The three of them and her grandparents had to move into a tiny dilapidated apartment on Elišky Krásnohorské Street. She didn't ask questions anymore, nor did she object.

It was the war, Edita. It was the war.

And eventually, the day came when the summons from the Jewish Council of Prague arrived, ordering them to move yet again, this time, out of Prague. They were to move to Terezín, a small town that had once been a military fortification and had been converted into a Jewish ghetto—a ghetto that seemed awful when she first arrived, and for which she now yearns. The ghetto from which they slid into the mud and ashes of Auschwitz.

After that winter of 1939, when everything began, the world around Dita began to collapse, slowly at first, and then faster and faster. Ration cards, bans—no entry into cafés, no shopping at the times when other citizens were doing theirs, no radios, no access to movies or theaters, no buying of new shoes. . . . The expulsion of Jewish children from schools followed. They weren't even permitted to play in the parks. It was as if the Nazis wanted to ban childhood.

Dita smiles briefly as an image pops into her head: two children walking hand in hand in Prague's old Jewish cemetery, wandering among the graves where small stones weighed down slips of paper so they wouldn't blow away in the wind. Prague's Jewish children, banned from the city's parks and schools, had turned the old cemetery into an adventure playground. The Nazis planned to convert the synagogue and cemetery into a museum about the soon-to-be extinguished Jewish race.

In her mind's eye, the children chased each other around the ancient gravestones covered with grass and lost in centuries-old silence.

Under a chestnut tree, and hidden by two thick gravestones leaning so much they had almost fallen over, Dita showed her little classmate Erik the name on an even bigger stone—Judah Loew ben Bezalel. Erik had no idea who he was, so she told him the story her father used to tell her whenever he put his yarmulke on his head and the two of them went for a walk in the cemetery.

Judah was a rabbi in the Josefov district in the sixteenth century, when all the Jews had to live in the ghetto, as they do now. He studied the Kabbalah and found out how to bring a clay figure to life.

"That's impossible!" Erik burst in, laughing.

She still smiles now as she remembers how she then resorted to her father's trick: She lowered her voice, put her head next to Erik's, and in a deep voice, whispered,

"The Golem."

Erik's face turned a sickly white. Everyone in Prague had heard of the enormous Golem, a monster.

Dita repeated what her father had told her: The rabbi had succeeded in deciphering the sacred word used by Yahweh to instill

the gift of life. He made a small clay figurine and placed a piece of paper with the secret word inside its mouth. And the little statue grew and grew until it became a living colossus. But Rabbi Loew didn't know how to control it, and the colossus with no brain began to destroy the neighborhood and cause panic. He was an indestructible titan, and it looked like it would be impossible to defeat him. There was only one way to do it—wait until he was asleep and then screw up the courage to stick a hand in his mouth as he snored and remove the piece of paper with the magic word. Doing this would turn the monster back into an inanimate being. And that's exactly what the rabbi did. He then shredded the piece of paper and buried the Golem.

"Where?" asked Erik anxiously.

"No one knows. In a secret place. And the rabbi left word that when the Jewish people found themselves in a difficult situation again, another rabbi enlightened by God would emerge to decipher the magic word, and the Golem would save us."

Erik gazed at Dita, full of admiration because she knew mysterious stories like the one about the Golem. He gently stroked her face and, sheltered by the strong cemetery walls and their secrets, kissed her innocently on the cheek.

Dita smiles mischievously as she remembers that moment.

The first kiss, no matter how fleeting it might be, is never forgotten. She recalls with pleasure the joy she felt that afternoon, and is surprised at the capacity for happiness to blossom in the emptiness of war. Adults wear themselves out pointlessly searching for a joy they never find. But in children, it bursts out of every pore.

Dita won't let them treat her like a child. She won't quit. She'll carry on; she must. That's what Hirsch said to her: You chew on

fear, and you swallow it. And you carry on. No, she won't abandon the library.

Not a single step backward . . .

Dita opens her eyes in the darkness of the hut, and the intensity of her inner flame turns into the flicker of a candle. She hears coughs, snores, the moans of some woman who might be dying. Maybe she doesn't want to admit to herself that it's not so much what Mrs. Turnovská or any of the other inmates might say that worries her. No, what really concerns her is what Fredy Hirsch would think of her.

A few days ago, she heard him talking with a group of older children from the athletics team that runs around the outside of the hut every afternoon even if it's snowing or raining, cold or freezing. Hirsch runs with them, always at the front, leading the way.

"The strongest athlete isn't the one who finishes first. That athlete is the fastest. The strongest athlete is the one who gets up again every time he falls, the one who doesn't stop when he feels a pain in his side, the one who doesn't abandon the race, no matter how far away the finish line is. That runner is a winner whenever he reaches the finish line, even if he comes in last. Sometimes, no matter how much you want it, being the fastest isn't an option, because your legs aren't as long or your lungs as large. But you can always choose to be the strongest. It's up to you—your willpower and your effort. I'm not going to ask you to be the fastest, but I am going to require you to be the strongest."

Dita is certain that if she told him she had to give up the library, he'd offer her kind, extremely polite, even comforting words . . . but she's not sure she could bear his look of disappointment. Dita sees him as an indestructible man, like the unstoppable Golem in the Jewish legend who, one day, would save them all.

Fredy Hirsch. . . . His name gives her courage.

Dita sifts again through the images stored in her head and finds one from a couple of years ago, of the gentle fields of Strašnice, on the outskirts of Prague. Jews could breathe fresh air there, away from all the restrictions of the city. The Hagibor sports grounds were located there.

In her memory, it was summer, and a hot day, so many of the boys were bare-chested. She could see three people surrounded by a bustling huddle of children and teenagers. The first person was a thin twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy with glasses who was wearing nothing more than a pair of white shorts. The one in the middle—a magician who had introduced himself theatrically as Borghini—was bowing. He was elegantly dressed in a shirt, sport coat, and striped tie. There was a young man on the other side of him who was wearing only sandals and a pair of shorts, which emphasized his slim but athletic body. That day, she learned that his name was Fredy Hirsch and that he was in charge of youth activities at the Hagibor sports grounds. The boy with the glasses was holding one end of a piece of string, the magician was holding it in the middle, and Hirsch was holding the other end. Dita remembers the coach's posture: one hand placed somewhat vainly on his waist while the other hand held on to the string. Hirsch was looking at the magician with a slightly mischievous smile.

The show began, and the enterprising Borghini tried to take on the crushing might of the war with his small arsenal of magic tricks: multicolored handkerchiefs up his sleeve versus cannons, the ace of clubs versus fighter-bombers. And, incredible as it might seem, for just a few moments full of smiling, spellbound faces, magic won out.

A very determined young girl holding a bundle of papers approached Dita and held one out to her.

“You can join us. We organize summer camps in Bezprávi, by the Orlice River, where we play sport and strengthen our Jewish spirit. There’s more information about our activities on the flyer.”

Her father didn’t like those sorts of things. She had overheard him telling her uncle that he didn’t approve of mixing politics and sport. They said this Hirsch fellow organized guerrilla warfare games with the children, had them digging trenches from which they pretended to shoot weapons, and talked to them about combat techniques as if they were a small army under his command.

If Hirsch is the commander, Dita is now more than ready to get into any trench. Anyway, she’s already in it up to her neck. They are Jews, a stubborn people. The Nazis won’t be able to crack her, or Hirsch. She won’t quit the library . . . but she’ll have to be alert, all eyes and ears, keep an eye on the shadows in which Mengele operates so she doesn’t get trapped. She’s a fourteen-year-old girl, and they are the most powerful military weapon of destruction in history, but she’s not going to take part silently in the procession again. Not this time. She’s going to stand up to them.

No matter the cost.

Dita isn’t the only one suffering insomnia.

Fredy Hirsch, as the head of Block 31, has been granted the privilege of sleeping in his own cubicle, and in a barrack where he is the only resident. After working on one of his reports, he leaves his cubicle and stands by himself in the silence. The whispering has faded, the books have been closed, the songs are over. . . . When the kids race off, the school goes back to being a crude wooden shed.

*They’re the best thing we’ve got*, he tells himself.

One more day and one more inspection have passed. Each day is a battle won. His chest shrinks and his straight collarbones

disappear into his shoulders. He collapses onto a stool and closes his eyes. He's exhausted, but no one must know. He's a leader. He can't let them down.

If they only knew. . . .

He's lying to them all. If they found out who he really is, they would hate him.

He feels drained. So he drops to the floor, beginning a round of push-ups. He's constantly telling the members of his teams that effort overcomes tiredness.

Up, down; up, down.

The whistle he always wears around his neck bangs rhythmically against the foot-flattened earth. His secret feels like an iron ball shackled to his ankle, but he knows he has no choice. He has to keep going. Up and down . . .

"Weakness is a sin," he whispers, almost out of breath.

Growing up in Aachen, all the children walked to school. Fredy was the only one who ran, his schoolbooks tied to his shoulders with a rope. The store owners would jokingly ask him where he was going in such a hurry, and he greeted them politely, but never slowed down. He had no reason to hurry; he just enjoyed running. Whenever an adult asked him why he ran, he would answer that walking made him feel tired, but running never did.

He would race into the little square in front of the main entrance to the school and then, because there were no old people sitting on the bench at that hour, he would leap over it as if he were taking part in a steeplechase. Whenever the opportunity arose, he would tell his classmates that it was his ambition to be a professional athlete.

At the age of ten, his childhood was smashed into a million pieces when his father died. Sitting on the stool in the barrack,

Fredy tries to picture his father, but he can't. His strongest memory of him back then is of the hole left by his absence. That emptiness, which he felt so acutely, has never been filled. He continues to feel that uneasy sense of being alone, even when he's surrounded by people.

After his father's death, Fredy started to lose the strength to run. He stopped enjoying races and lost his bearings. His mother had to spend all day working, and so, to stop him from spending long stretches at home on his own or fighting with his older brother, she signed him up for a German-Jewish version of the Boy Scouts called the Jüdischer Pfadfinderbund Deutschland or JPD. They ran activities for young children and had a separate sports branch called Maccabi Hatzair.

The first time Fredy entered the large and somewhat shabby premises, with its list of rules tacked to the wall, it smelled of bleach. He remembers choking back his tears. Little by little, young Fredy Hirsch found the warmth that was lacking in his empty house. He found companionship, tabletop games on rainy days, excursions that always included a guitar and someone telling an inspiring story about Israel's martyrs. Games of football and basketball, sack races, athletics—they all became a life raft he could cling to. When Saturday rolled around and all the others stayed at home with their families, he would go to the sports grounds by himself to throw balls at the rusty hoops on the basketball court or do endless rounds of sit-ups until his T-shirt was soaked with sweat.

He wiped out all his concerns and banished his insecurities by training to the point of exhaustion. He would set himself small challenges: race to the corner and back five times in under three minutes, do ten push-ups and clap his hands together on the last



one, sink four baskets in four attempts from a particular spot on the basketball court. . . . His mind was a blank while he was concentrating on his challenges; he was almost happy.

His mother remarried, and throughout his adolescence, Fredy felt more at home in the JPD headquarters than at home. When school was over, he'd go straight there, staying late into the evening. He always had some reason to give his mother for not coming home: meetings of the youth board—of which he was a member; the need to organize excursions or sports tournaments; maintenance work around the premises. . . . As he got older, he became less and less capable of connecting with kids his own age. Few of them shared either his heightened Zionist mysticism, which encouraged him to see the return to Palestine as a mission, or his passion for endless sports training. His peers invited him to the odd party, where the first couples began to form, but Fredy kept making excuses. Eventually they stopped asking him.

He discovered that what he enjoyed most was coaching teams and organizing tournaments for the youngest children. And he was very good at it, inspiring the kids with his passion. His teams always fought to the bitter end.

"Let's go! Keep going! Try harder, harder!" he'd shout at the children from the sideline. "If you don't fight for victory, then don't cry when you lose!"

Fredy Hirsch never cries.

Up, down. Up, down. Up, down

When he is finished with his push-ups, Fredy stands, satisfied. That is, as satisfied as the secret keeper can be.