

My Father, 'The Story Teller'

Lager 10, An Outer Camp of Dachau.

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By Solly Ganor

Burgin's alarm clock rang and brought us back from father's world and time that had long ceased to exist. Yet it somehow seemed more real than the impossible reality we were living in now. Burgin was visibly intrigued by the story father was telling, especially about the fact that father was going to meet Trotsky in the following chapter.

"I am surprised that you never had that story published. It has more adventure and suspense than most suspense novels I have ever read. If we ever get out of this place alive, you should have it published. These are historical facts no one had heard about and the world should know about it. Anyway, I have it all arranged. From tomorrow you are beginning to tell your story in block 1. The next day you will come back here and continue with it and the night after you will continue with block two. " Burgin didn't wait for father's agreement. He simply ordered father to do it. But father was only too eager to follow Burgin's plan. He loved telling his story. Since he had started his sessions with Burgin, he had completely recuperated from the terrible state he was in. Of course the easier work and the extra food I shared with him had something to do with it, but I was certain that it was more to it than just that.

I too was greatly affected by father's incredible story. I vaguely remembered when I was just a child in Heydekrug that he would tell me stories before I would go to sleep. But he would tell me the stories in Russian, and the stories themselves were too complicated for me to follow, but I remember the name Trotsky mentioned a few times and it remained in my mind, because he would pronounce the name with infinite respect. 'He was a Jew and a great leader, but he followed the wrong ideals.'" He said. But now the story opened up before my mind like some magical wand.

'If only we could by some warp in space transport ourselves to that time.' I thought with a terrible longing in my heart. And yet, I shouldn't be the one to complain. I had more food and an easier job than most prisoners, so why was I so miserable? ' The next day father started his story all over again in block one. The people, most of who were hungry and dead tired from a day of slave labor, at first responded coolly. Many fell asleep and were snoring loudly, but many were affected the way I was. Somehow he managed to trigger a source of their imagination and the rest just followed. He told the story to these people in a different way. Somehow the tone of voice was more humane and compassionate than the one he used for Burgin.

Even the first night, after he had talked for about two hours, there was spontaneous applause in the darkness. But what made an emotional impact on me was a

man whose life father had saved by reawakening in him a spark of humanity. Just when we were about to leave block 1 and groped our way up the few step leading out of the barrack, a man's voice stopped us. It was very weak and hoarse. He stood like a dark shadow very close to us and he literally smelled of death. That smell was well known to us by now. It was the smell of a man who gave up hope and decided to die. He wouldn't wash or otherwise take care of himself and quite often would urinate or excrete in his pants while lying on his bunk. He usually was infested by all kinds of vermin, predominantly lice. The stink emanating from such a living cadaver was overpowering and there was nothing one could do about it because no one could force a man to live if he didn't want to live.

Such a man was standing next to us. The smell coming from that man was so overpowering that I had to hold my nose. "I don't know whether what you are telling me is true or not and I don't care. All I know is that you reawakened in me something dormant, something I had given up. And you know what it was? Shame.. You made me feel ashamed.. You showed me what we were and what we still can be. I too was a very active member of the revolution in Russia and I too was full of ideals and hope.

Therefore, what is happening to us and the evil men in whose power we fell into made me lose my faith in all mankind. I just wanted out of here. At first I heard nothing that you were saying, but slowly, first your voice and then your story began penetrating into my consciousness. Ever since Stutthof where I saw my wife and grandchild being taken to Auschwitz, I began dropping out of this world. Then the terrible work in carrying the cement sacks completely broke my spirit. I gave up on life and didn't care anymore. But now I will give it another try. I don't know whether I will make it, but at least I am willing to fight for my life. Can you help me get to the washroom?"

Both father and I were crying after the man's speech. We didn't try to tell him to wait till next morning. We were afraid that the spark of life that reawakened in this man merely by shame would be extinguished by the morning. In a fit of generosity father handed him over the bowl of soup he received, and the man ate it greedily.

It was a full moon when we took him to the washroom. In the pale eerie light his face was deathly white. I had literally seen corpses that looked better than this man. I don't know how long we were there with him. We helped him wash himself and he even washed his pants to get the stink out of them. It was a disgusting job, but after we were finished I felt a tremendous satisfaction. For the first time in my life I fully understood the immense pleasure of "giving" that my mother would so often speak of. "What is your name?" Father asked when we brought him back to the barrack. The man thought for a moment as if he had forgotten it. Then he said quietly: "You can call me Chaim."

The next day Burgin called father and gave him an extra bowl of soup to replace the one he had given to Chaim. He had already heard what had happened during the night as nothing that took place in the camp escaped Burgin. He was visibly moved. "That was a fine thing you did for Shmuel. I think you may have saved his life. I have known him in

Shiauliai (Lithuania) and he was a fine upstanding man. I tried to help him, but he had given up. I gave him an easy job in the camp for a while. That should help.”

“ Did you say his name was Shmuel? He told me that his name was Chaim.”
Father asked Burgin a little puzzled. Then the significance of the name suddenly dawned on them. “ Chaim “in Hebrew meant “life!”

*(Burgin was the camp’s Jewish supervisor)