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Days of Forgetting (Müry Salzmann Verlag)

Sample translated by Bradley Schmidt

Anton

"I arrived on February 16, 1944. Yes, that's the day I must have come to the camp. It was winter and very cold. Many froze to death on the train. When the doors were opened up, the dead fell out. Yes, they thundered on the ramp as if firewood was being unloaded.

I was sent to block 16, ten of us lying on a bunk. I couldn't sleep because additional transport trains had arrived in the night. I thought about my village, which was gray in winter like shriveled country, but a white sea in spring. In my village there were thousands of cherry trees with high crowns, beneath which you could walk as if in paradise. There was no one in our village who wasn't stung by bees in spring.

Lying there between the other men and unable to sleep, I thought of my parents, my grandparents, and my two sisters, who were deported with me. I didn't see any of them again. Or my white village.

At some point in that night someone patted my head, maybe it was the tall Ukrainian, who later walked into the barbed wire, or the fat Romanian, who was the first one to starve. He'd said I don't have to go crazy, it all happens really fast here.

And then I waited for it to happen really fast. Every morning I expected that they'd shoot me during the roll call, or that I'd collapse during the day due to hunger. Or I'd freeze to death at night. One plate of soup, two pieces of bread. Sometimes I imagined that I'd vomit out my stomach, bit for bit, then consume it again, bit for bit, and that way I wouldn't be hungry anymore.

We weren't allowed to talk to each other, that was the worst part. If someone talked anyway, he would be clubbed. People wanted to exchange thoughts,

wanted to know how others were doing, what they knew, whether they had the same fear.

One time, someone talked to himself while working, just a few sentences, maybe the start of a prayer or a poem, quietly, I didn't understand it very well. I just understood that the prisoner spoke Polish. He didn't speak to anyone or ask anything, just opened his mouth and formed a few syllables. Then they shot him. And he wasn't the only one. I saw a mound of corpses behind the infirmary. The sewers were clogged with blood. Bodies everywhere, and plenty of rats in between. Together with mud and mire, and the stench of rotting flesh. I just can't get it out of my head.

I also can't get out of my head the cauldrons with human flesh. They were huge stone pots, and I saw how someone drank from this human broth. Heard that someone was roasting a piece of thigh.

I saw how a little girl was standing in the clay. On her skinny legs, wearing a red dress. The girl stood there, her hair braided into two pigtails, without a cap, not even ten years old. She looked at me her hands next to her body, as if they were waiting to come and take her.

The girl bent over all at once and cleaned her dirty shoes with the sleeves of her dress. At some point a guard came over and took the girl by the hand. Like a father, he took her and led her to the black wall, where she turned around once more. She must have asked something. I saw how her mouth moved. The soldier had motioned for the girl to turn around again, and then he shot her."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. You see this striped uniform? We wore that. We always had to wear that. But someone stole my cap on April 21st."

"Someone stole your cap?"

"Yes, someone stole my cap. And then I stole a cap from someone else."

"What was so important about this cap?"

"Whoever went to roll call without their uniform was punished."

"Tell me more!"

“It was my birthday that day. I wanted to celebrate that day because I thought it’d be my last birthday. How I would have liked to celebrate this day with the other from my block and with an extra plate of soup. I would have told them about the cherry trees of my home. Yet I didn’t dare. I didn’t dare tell the other about my birthday and about my home.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t want to celebrate life in the middle of death.”

“I understand.”

“We’d been working all day. When we returned after ten hours, I went to Josef, who was sick. He was so weak that he couldn’t stand up anymore. So I put a piece of my bread in his mouth. He put his chapped lips around the bread and tried to chew it. But it didn’t work. Then I went out to fetch some water. My cap must have disappeared when I scooped up some rain with my hands. I searched the whole block, but I couldn’t find it anywhere. Then when I lay there on the hay and wanted to fall asleep, I couldn’t. I was so completely without comfort. No one patted my head like they did the first night. There were only rats crawling over me like in a great pantry.

The thought of my cap kept me from sleeping the whole night. At some point I got up and crawled over sick Josef. Once again, I neither found my cap nor anyone else’s. Everyone must have hidden their cap: in their hands, between their legs, behind their backs.

Then I saw a man lying curled up on the floor, more bones than skin, more dead than alive. The man seemed older than me, maybe by a few years, maybe time had come faster to his face. I didn’t know him, didn’t know if he was a father or a son. I didn’t even know if he was still alive. And because I didn’t know anything about him, I took the cap lying next to his head, just like that.

Maybe his hands had loosened in sleep and the cap had fallen out. Maybe he’d worn it while sleeping, because the ground was cold and there wasn’t any space in the bunk, or it’d become too cramped for him. It could have slipped from his head while he slept, who knows. Maybe he was already dead, and the others had

pushed the dead man from their bunk, and now I'd found him. Wasn't it right to take the cap before someone else did so, and maybe didn't even need it?

The roll call the following morning took a long time. Seven hours. Because the number was wrong. Someone was missing. We were counted, again and again. There was snow again, although it was already April. And then one of us was pulled out and shot. The man without the cap. I couldn't know that they'd shoot him right away."

"The one you stole the cap from was shot?"

"Yes, him. Sometimes I imagine what would have been if I hadn't found the cap. Of course they would have shot me. It wasn't his fault that his cap was gone. Just like I couldn't help it if my cap was missing.

"And now you're here to forget about the thing with the cap?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that is all."

"And the other thing, do you want to forget the other thing as well? Do you want to forget about the white village with the trees and the bees? Do you want to forget the little girl in the red dress, the rats, the hunger, and the dead people everywhere?"

"No, I don't want to forget that."

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(...)

Sabine and Joachim

"Do you want to start?"

"No, you!"

"But it happened to you."

"But it's a problem for you."

"Isn't it a problem for you?"

"Sure, of course."

"So start talking!"

"Why me? You always say that your memory is better than mine."

"I didn't say that."

"And weren't you the one who claimed that I walked naked to the ice cream vendor in 1984?"

"Yes, because it's true."

"It's not true. I wasn't naked. I was wearing a blue bathing suit."

"You haven't worn a blue bathing suit since we've known each other."

"It also could have been red. But never in my life have I walked naked to the ice cream vendor, I know that for a fact."

"Now start talking for once!"

"My wife and I come from a village in the Thuringian Forest, close to Sonnenberg. We've known each other since high school, did an apprenticeship together. After reunification we went to Berlin. There was employment there, life there. We got married 28 years ago. Then along came our daughters. And later came our son."

"And then your new colleague came two years ago."

"I don't know what was happening with me, either. I fell in love with her immediately. She was very different than Sabine, somehow more feminine, gentler."

"Of course, she was also ten years younger, with big breasts and a wet lap."

"Sabine!"

"Sorry, Jo, please continue!"

"What happened isn't pretty, truly. I don't know what was going on with me either. Maybe a crisis or something. Thing like this happen. It went on for a few weeks, then it was over."

"Because I found out."

"Because you went through my things."

"If I hadn't gone through your things, I wouldn't have found out."

"Maybe it would have been better that way. Then we wouldn't be here now."

"Then you'd never have put an end to it. Then you'd be with her now. Come on, tell Mr. Wechsler your favorite word from that period!"

"Which favorite word? I don't know what you mean. Just let me continue telling our story."

"It is part of it, Jo. Back then there was a word you used all the time. You don't remember? It was *different*. Right, everything had to be different back then. I think there's no other word you used so frequently back then. Today there's different food. Today I'm taking a different way to work. Today I'm using a different aftershave. Dear, couldn't you wear a different dress for once? If everything were different, I'd be much happier. You remember now?"

"Yes."

"So you slept with her?"

"But just twice."

"When?"

"At the company party in the summer, against a tree, and the other time was in her apartment."

"Only twice? Are you sure?"

"Maybe it was also three times, but really not more. You know that it doesn't work so well for me anymore."

"Do you regret it?"

"Of course."

"Do you want a divorce?"

"Not at all. We have a house, we have two children. We've already had each other for so many years. Where do you see that anymore? Giving up everything would be idiotic, right? At our age, right?"

"Jo's right, we need the medicine. Everything will be alright if he forgets the other woman."

"But you have to forget everything too, Sabine. So that there's finally peace and quiet."

"Of course I want to get everything related to this out of my head. This whole damn crisis. I'd like to start all over again. With falling in love and everything."

Where everything spins and you look deep into each other's eyes before you fall asleep. When the happiness makes you dizzy. Mr. Wechsler, what do we have to do to finally get started?"

"You have to remember. You both have to remember the same thing."

"I'm thinking of the tree."

"Which tree?"

"The one where you made love to her."

"It was cut down."

"Then take the bed. What was the other woman like in bed? What did she moan into your ear?"

"Is that necessary?"

"Yes, Jo, it is."

"No, Mr. Winkelmann, it's sufficient if you remember the woman. What did she look like? What did you like especially?" And what makes you furious?"

"I already said, she was completely different from Sabine. She had long hair..."

"Down to her shoulders, my dear, her hair was only shoulder length."

"And when she laughed, she got a little dimple. She didn't laugh very frequently, was mostly quiet, which made her laugh special. Sometimes I would think of little pranks to make her laugh."

"For example?"

"I put a rose in her coffee mug."

"Why didn't you ever do that with me?"

"Because you don't drink coffee."

"I would have drunk coffee if you'd put a rose in it."

"Should I continue the story?"

"Absolutely, we need as many details as possible."

"She was a good woman, someone you can't forget so easily. But that's not my point. Sometimes I think it was about anything at all. That's what made it so easy. There were no strings attached. We just loved each other. But it's over now, truly. She had herself transferred to another department, to another city. And that's a good thing. Who knows what else would have happened."

“But everything already happened.”

“I’m with you, aren’t I?”

“But the images, I can’t forget the images. Like a scary movie that follows me. At the time I asked myself how she looks. Is she beautiful? What does her voice sound like? Then I was relieved when I saw her. A small woman, round face, big breasts. Nothing special. That reassured me. And when Jo came back to me, I thought everything would be alright. But it wasn’t. And now I’m constantly picturing this woman with the round face and the big breast, regardless of where I look. I see her with Jo, pushed up against the tree, I see the two of them lying in bed. The pictures are in my head and I can’t get them out.”

“You have to think of something else, otherwise it’ll never get better.”

“It’s not so easy. And what happens if I forget too much? What if I forget you, Jo? I don’t want to forget you, Jo.”

“But that’d be fantastic! We wouldn’t have any more problems if you forget me. Then it’d be enough if you were the only one taking the medicine. What’d I need it for?”

“You’re joking!”

“Of course. We’ll do it as agreed. Everyone takes their capsule. After all, we both want to forget the same thing. After all, we want to start all over again.”

“I’m scared.”