

SEAN PURIO

Burned Bones Deserve No Repose Patrick Hicks's *The Commandant of Lubizec*

I've thought for some time now that forgetting begins on the blunted contours of language. An English teacher of mine once told me to pay attention when a poet repeats a word; when a poet turns to prose, white-knuckle the nearest available means of support, for you are either going to nosedive into the nearest snowcapped mountain or find yourself, not on a plane, but on a spaceship nestled next to nebulas of the everyday. Patrick Hicks's novel, *The Commandant of Lubizec*, is a creative non-fiction odyssey that plumbs not the absolute-zero-approaching-vastness of deep space but the absolute-zero-approaching-vastness of humans, of us. In the Marianas Trench of Holocaust study, how does one not get sucked into, lost in, and surrender hope to the unrelenting responsibility of remembering the story of a unique individual against the numbingly unoriginal ending? Where does one even begin?

Well, Hicks starts like this: "The records show that some 710,000 souls died at the small concentration camp known as Lubizec."¹ Small? How does one sum up 710,000 souls? Did the records round up or down? Who was the remainder? Leer into the number long enough and the ending zeroes begin to look like empty eye sockets. Don't they? In *The Tent of Orange Mist*, Paul West has this to say about atrocity and the human remainder: "We run the planet in an approximate way, in round handfuls, never heeding the private agony of the individual, as if people were

¹ Hicks, Patrick. *The Commandant of Lubizec: A Novel of the Holocaust and Operation Reinhard*. Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2014. 1. All subsequent citations are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

wheat, rice, sand.² Or, I'd hasten to add, a handful of ash. Hicks too injects his prose with the first person plural, which inexorably absorbs us into the story to act as another pair of shoulders bearing the knee-buckling weight of remembering the dead.

Hicks's title, *The Commandant of Lubizec*, is misleading. The story chronicles Hans-Peter Guth (an amalgamation of Rudolph Höss and Franz Stangl) and the apparent schism of his personality (mass murderer by day/loving family man by night), but if Hicks's drive to create a narrative about the Holocaust tries to make sense of this divide and a zealot-like devotion to bureaucracy, then his book could be added to a long list of attempts. Thankfully, it does not.

I imagine Hicks agonizing over what to name the book. His mind latches on to the autobiography of Rudolph Höss, *The Commandant of Auschwitz*. His synapses arc to a list of the death camps: Treblinka, Auschwitz (work/death camp), Sobibór, Bełżec: Lubizec—a bricolage of horrors that would make Tarantino turn crimson. *The Commandant of Lubizec*. "Ok," I hear him saying, "But, this isn't what the story is about. Damn it." He scrunches his eyes, shakes his head back and forth as though swishing mouthwash and holds the title, *The Commandant of Lubizec*, in his mind and ... there. Like flour from a sieve, it sifts down out of the title and settles behind his eyebrows: *For The Unknown*. "Yes." Yes, for those unknown remainders neatly tucked into integers. Yes, for those unknown stories. Yes, for the unknown things that happened. Yes, for the unknowable. All of this is pure speculation, but does it matter?

It is as if Hicks decided to write the companion piece to Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. (Note to self: never raise the intellectual ire of a good historian). Historians, hamstrung by the conventions of their discipline, tend to focus on surviving documents, physical evidence, and firsthand accounts to draw their conclusions with the unintended cultural byproduct being, if not the cult of survivorship, then at least the aura of survivorship. But what are historians to do if the overwhelming majority of evidence is piles of ash? Hicks appropriately refocuses us: "Our attention is more rightfully placed on those who were murdered though. Who were they? Where did they come from? What were their stories? What would their grandchildren and great-grandchildren have accomplished in the twenty-first century?" (125). My point is not to devalue the work of historians or question their intellectual or personal investment into such inquiries, but simply to highlight the limitation of their craft. Or put another way, Browning doesn't possess the artistic license

² West, Paul. *The Tent of Orange Mist: A Novel*. New York: Scribner, 1995. 219.

to kindle life in the dry husks of abstracted integers, but Hicks reanimates the unceremoniously burned's baked blue-brown eyes flecked with the specks of pale purple and arctic green that whisper of an individual universe. Where a historian might count and compile a list of fractured femurs, the poet might let you know that bones don't turn to ash, but dry out and shatter. Both the historian and the artist fight to render versions of truth(s), but where one boxes, the other one brawls.

As for my opening, it too is an act of fiction. My teacher never said that rubbish about snowcapped mountains or outer space—but does it matter? He did say, “You can write basically anything, except pieces with titles like ‘Little Green Alien Rapes Nun.’” I have heeded his advice (thus far), though I was tempted to turn in a piece entitled “Little Nun Rapes Green Alien,” but the story fell apart when confronted with the question of logistics.

Sometimes, I get sucked into the calamity of composition and wind up with hazy diction, or at worst, lazy diction, mixed metaphors, and grammatical violations only replicated in slum village architecture. But there is vitality in such unrestricted writing; it's like submerging a hand into the cool-grit of fresh, tilled soil or leaning one's face over a pot of boiling peanuts. Don't get me wrong, grammar has a place (misplaced semi-colons are like chomping on aluminum foil), but it shouldn't be wreathed at the top of the podium. Perhaps third (bronze lacks the luster of gold, but is still important, I guess).

I am not Jewish. While attending Kimball Union Academy in Meriden, New Hampshire, the closest I got to Jewish anything was through Jon Burling's mom, Jean Burling. Jon was adopted by Peter and Jean Burling in 1986 and through the ever-reliable prep school network of meaning making, I heard that if your mother was Jewish then you were too. As my parents had packed up and moved to Australia, Jean became a mother figure to me. She was tough, wicked smart, and understandably tired of taking care of her son's consistently drunk, hungry, and socially inept friend. But she (and Peter) showed me all the love and kindness a floundering adolescent could hope for.

She never nudged me toward the nearest beth din, but if she had, I probably would have gone. I'd already excommunicated myself from Catholicism—I loathed catechism and confession creeped me out (why in the world would I want to tell some robed celibate about my near chronic fondness for *Victoria's Secret* catalogues and long showers?). “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned” ... no kidding. I'm not sure how faithful Jean was to her Jewish roots, but it wouldn't have mattered. I considered her family and that was enough. I loved her. Still do.

That is a roundabout way of saying that I am an outsider. I will never understand what it means to be Jewish. Their customs are not my customs. Their rituals are not my rituals. Their God is not my God. However, even if we do not share the same religion or culture, we share the same position of being human. So, common ground.

The Holocaust is not just a Jewish event; it is a human event, one of the darkest human events on record. It is a stark example of what happens when people forget that under all the language, color, words, history, and cultural hogwash that we prize so highly, our blood bleeds red when opened to oxygen and our bowels move regularly. Some may relieve themselves in fancy porcelain receptacles and others in hand dug ditches, but does one make us more human? Does one make us less? I am not advocating for some sort of monoculture (far from it), but for a culture that resists the urge to privilege one over the other. Naïve? Absolutely. Idealistic? Yes, but a boy must have the freedom to dream. I am aware that violence and its application against others forms the foundation of society and culture, but I yearn for that reality to be different. So if my dreams and my reality contradict each other, then “Very well then I contradict myself.” Put that in your post-modern pipe and smoke it. And while you are pondering my undernourished idealism, don’t forget that all life has the same boring ending, porcelain or no porcelain.

In his review of Sarah Helm’s book *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler’s Concentration Camp for Women*, Adam Kirsch writes, “If it is to exercise sympathy or pay a debt to memory, then it quickly becomes clear that the exercise is hopeless, the debt overwhelming: there is no way to feel as much, remember as much, imagine as much as the dead justly demand.”³ Agreed. It is precisely the exercise in hopelessness that the dead demand; burned bones deserve no repose. As with the project of recreating history, the impossibility does not negate or diminish the attempt. Such an act of creation is the same as placing a stone on a grave or returning a shovel to the ground before the next mourner picks it up. (For a poem that dovetails cleanly into the themes threaded through *The Commandant of Lubizec* read Hicks’s “Carrying Grandpa” in *Finding the Gossamer*). “The past,” Hicks writes, “[...] is not about clocks and dead years. It isn’t about dust and documents. It isn’t about looking backwards. No, not at all. The past spills out of memory and demands a future” (227).

3 Whitman, Walt. *Song of Myself*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001. 53.

4 Kirsch, Adam. “The System: Two New Histories Show How the Nazi Concentration Camps Worked.” *The New Yorker*. April 6, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/06/the-system-books-kirsch>.

But in what physical place do we court such memory? And, what is perhaps more pressing, how do we do justice to such a project? Speaking of Guth, Hicks starts this construction project with this simple, yet profound point: “By calling him a monster we remove him from our species, and although this might be precisely what we want to do, to dismiss him as an aberration, we need to remember that a man committed these crimes. Not a monster. A man” (32).

What is an ordinary human, anyway? There is nothing ordinary about us. We are biological magic, neatly contained in a borderline-divine flesh suit, and yet we act as if we are bottom shelf bourbon masquerading as the Thursday night special. When did we lose the majesty, the wonder, the undefinable beauty of being incomprehensibly alive and hurtling through the universe? And when did we decide it was acceptable to waste such an experience like overexposed milk? But back to my main point, I wonder if the same sort of move has been made for the victims as it has for the perpetrators. If the victims are turned into anything other than human, say martyrs or heroes or sacrifices, doesn't that do a disservice to them and their experiences? There is a certain amount of distortion in all memory, but we owe these millions of dead an honest effort to remember them clearly as flawed human beings capable of petty jealousies, betrayals, and jaw dropping acts of goodness. To remember them in this way is to resist the perverse political justification that says their murders were somehow justified. As with all atrocities, political opportunity is shamelessly exploited. As Hicks's character of Zischer watches the flogging of a prisoner, he thinks “The earth would continue to spin, the stars would continue to shine, and the trains would continue to come” and, with just as much certainty, politics would continue to obstruct principles (the Vatican) and those with the power to do something would do nothing (the Allied Powers) (159). How does one justify silence?

Constellations are only forged on the anvil of the imagination; without connecting the dots, stars are simply self-consuming points in space. But, the images the connections make and the stories that are built around them give the heavens a warmth that keeps absolute zero at bay. Stories are all we have and it is the invisible connection made between things (combinations of words and events) that order the universe. Sure, science can tell us about brain synapses and red dwarfs, but I have always felt there is something sinister about science. After all, our unquestioning, dare I say religious, pursuit of science led to atoms splitting over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and melting people into shadows. Is this progress? Is this where modernity takes us: industrial genocide? What do we do now? Plan a trip to Mars?

Comfort each other with mutually assured destruction? Science says, “Let me break this thing down and tell you how it works. Let me quantify this for you. Let me organize it, systematize it.” In effect, let science sterilize the fecund mysteries of the universe. I appreciate the first world luxuries afforded by science like not having to worry about polio or measles or mumps or rubella or how a fever could snuff out one of my children, but I wonder about the consequences. We are not comfortable coming to terms with consequences and endings and yet Carnot’s formulation tells us this is true of the universe. Religions are based on two things: ordering the universe and stories. The two are a closed symbiotic system feeding and nourishing each other. But isn’t the system just a worn pullover designed to dampen the chill of oblivion? Look out at the stars and tell me you feel settled, warm, cozy, secure, and lie to me. Nature constantly reminds us of our own insignificance.

Hicks’s Lubizec is a fictional place, but places with names like Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz are quite real. I imagine myself arriving at Lubizec (which always looks like Sobibór—the forest of owls), and, having procured a chainsaw, I start scouring the pined forest surrounding the camp for a suitable tree. I have already researched the direction the wind tended to blow during the roasts that would sprinkle the local farmers’ crops with globs of human fat. I find my tree and, replete with safety goggles, gloves, and eye and ear protection, prime the chainsaw, flip the control lever to Choke, and hold down the throttle trigger. I yank the starter rope and the engine stutters, sputters, catches and I imagine the chainsaw to be a starved, steel toothed platypus hungry for tree meat.

My imagination skips past the moment when the tree falls. I am not concerned with the part that keels over like a drunk divorcee only fifteen minutes into happy hour, but rather look to the stump. I run my index finger from the center of the stump outward and stop only at a particularly dark and greasy ring. “Here,” I say, “1942-1943” and Hicks, who is now at my shoulder, says, “Here. Here is where fat flew.” Fat flew into this tree, coagulated in its circulation system and produced this dark, greasy ring, this dark, greasy record. The record of hundreds of thousands of bodies, of millions of pairs of hands and eyes and feet and testicles and breasts, and the trillions of heartbeats stilled and distilled into this darkened ring. Here.

Any study of the Holocaust threatens the curious, intrigued or naive with the charge of dilettante or, more frankly, open admission into the guild of illiterati. We quickly learn that curiosity and intrigue are ill-suited companions into an inquiry of the Holocaust. Naivety, like virginity, plays an intimate role in our transformation from the point of not understanding much to the equally sublime position of understanding how much we do not know.

I readily admit my allegiance to the guild, but wonder if the only people exempt from the ranks should be the survivors and the murdered? Sure, the perpetrators could be exempted as well, but even putting them in proximity to the perpetrated seems, somehow, to cheapen the Dante-esque experience of the survivors and the murdered.

After passing my eyes over Hicks's concluding word—"civilized"—I took it as a personal charge to find that goddamned gossamer. Step one: look up the word "gossamer". My first inclination was that gossamer was some kind of goose, or duck, or other waterborne bird. I imagined what I would do when I found this gossamer—wring its neck, obliterate it with a shotgun, ensnare it with a homemade noose. Much to my relief, gossamer is in fact not a bird, but the fine silky threads spun by small spiders. Poetic enough. For some reason, Emily Dickinson's poem "479" came to mind.

With the image of spiders and the dew-catching webs they weave firmly planted in my mind, I turned to the "Author's Note." In it, Hicks details the books he is particularly indebted to:

Chil Rajchman's *The Last Jew of Treblinka*, Yitzhak Arad's *Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka*, Gitta Sereny's [...] *Into That Darkness*, Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka*, Richard Rashke's *Escape from Sobibór*, Samuel Willenberg's *Revolt in Treblinka*, as well as Laurence Reese's *Auschwitz*, and "*The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystander*" [...] and] Rudolph Höss's memoir, *The Commandant of Auschwitz*. (243)

I started my quest for the gossamer with *The Commandant of Auschwitz* and have concluded that this particular strain of gossamer is the fabric of nightmare spun directly from the human core.

A certain amount of arrogance is required to comment on an artist's work, as critic or casual voyeur. On the one hand, the critic works at an objective distance: analyzing, theorizing, dissecting, and often missing the point entirely. On the other hand, the casual voyeur gropes like an amateur spelunker whose headlamp battery just died. When I don the objective white coat of the critic, I feel more like a clown than a learned person; or, put another way, I prefer bumping into stalagmites. I have a hunch that Hicks is not a fan of the white coat either, for once we put on the white coat it is as if it cloaks our humility. Humility is possibly the most valuable trait we can bring to a study of the Holocaust.

When we attempt to reanimate the dead, we must place the individual in a believable context: a human context complete with rooms that hold close the scent of stale beer and fresh farts, or the odd release snapping sound an umbilical cord makes as child severs from mother (an airlock door closing in sci-fi flicks or raw steak slapped on a butcher's block), or the chillfully warm tickle of a naughty word porched into an expectant ear, or the thundering orange snap of a fresh carrot. Poetry can make these moves, but the dead need more space on the page, or, if one wanted to paint with a thick brush, more room to breathe. Poetry champions efficiency and economy and sometimes smothers context under the goose down of precision; no syllable is wasted; it is the crystal distillation of the heroic ambition and tragic ineptitude of words, of language, for even distillation requires the burning and purging of all which is deemed useless or lacking positive utility. Addressing the failure of language, Hicks writes, "it is the holes, the gaps, the missing lives, the *not-there*-ness that deserves our attention. How do we represent this though? How?" (25). It is fitting, then, that Hicks, lacking in necromancy, uses prose to reanimate the dead in the living landscape of the imagination and memory.

As I barreled into my search for the gossamer, I saw the connections between the works Hicks was indebted to and moments in his own work. For example, in *The Commandant of Auschwitz*, Höss recalls the following detail:

Once when bodies were being carried from a gas chamber to the fire pit, a man of the Special Detachment suddenly stopped and stood for a moment as though rooted to the spot. Then he continued to drag out a body with his comrades. I asked the Capo what was up. He explained that the corpse was that of the Jew's wife.⁵

Hicks takes this story and fleshes it out with an emotional energy that is lacking in Höss's account (one can only expect so much empathy from a mass murderer).

One new prisoner, someone who hadn't yet gotten used to the casual brutality of Lubizec, moved slowly, too slowly. He held the corpse of a woman. He carried her body as if he were a groom ready to bring her across the threshold of a new life. Her body was slack in his arms, but he kept kissing her shaved head. It was his wife. They had been separated in the Rose Garden a few hours earlier and now, at the edge of the Roasts, he

⁵ Höss, Rudolf. *Commandant of Auschwitz: Autobiography*. Cleveland, OH: World Pub. Company, 1960. 168-169.

finally found her again. He stumbled forward with tears streaming down his face. (99-100)

In another example, which is not as overt, Hicks pulls on Sasha Pechersky's singing of "If War Comes Tomorrow" in Rashke's *Escape from Sobibór* and threads it into Mashe Taube's rendering of the first of the Four Questions delivered at Passover that gives the men of Barrack 14 a spark of hope. Further still, Hicks uses the description of Pechersky's first encounter with the reality of Sobibór—"There was a lull, as if a Nazi had momentarily lifted the needle from a phonograph record. Then one pure sound floated toward heaven. It was a cry of absolute terror, frightening in its utter simplicity and emotion. 'Mama ... Ma'—It ended in the middle of the word"—and weaves it into the chapter "The End of This World Begins Now" when Petranker and Zischer hear from inside the last gas chamber before the revolt "Mommy, help me!" (195).⁶ Through this technique of pulling in and through fiction and non-fiction, Hicks creates a narrative fabric that, when pulled tight, maintains the strength of reality, while exhibiting a fluidity and flexibility that fleshes out the obliterated (physical, psychological, spiritual) contours of those that experienced the Holocaust. The effect? Devastating.

After some chapters, I would simply put my head in my hands and sob. Others, I would throw the book against the wall. Others, I would tunnel into a detail embedded in a list of things. For example, in the chapter "Evidence" under the heading "Plunder," I got lost in "vials of poison (used)," amidst a froth of other objects (diplomas, lipstick, jars of dirt)—perhaps it was because, given the context, it was the only object to make sense (142); or perhaps it was the intimacy poison connotes and the suicide buried beneath it. Suicide: an act of defiance, choice, rebellion? In any event, the act of reading fucked me up. Vulgar? Yes, but accurate nonetheless. I found myself crying at random moments during the day (parking the car, cooking bacon and eggs for my kids on Saturday mornings, going through the car wash, organizing my bookshelf). After some reading sessions, I would simply put the book down and start cleaning. When all the dirty dishes were done and placed on the drying rack, I would move on to the clean glasses. I refused to turn on the cold water and looked forward to the too hot water, bubbles, and the squeak a sponge makes on glass, but the part I enjoyed the most was pulling the plug and watching the bubbles chase the dirty water down the garbage disposal.

⁶ Rashke, Richard L. *Escape from Sobibór*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982. 166.

The book is full of passages that leave the reader with a catch in the back of the throat and an ache behind the third and fifth costal cartilages, but here are some passages that affected me:

A rainfall of hammers echoed around the camp and the air filled up with the smell of freshly cut lumber. Used trolleys for luggage were lined up on the platform. Train schedules to Lublin and Kraków were framed. Travel posters to Berlin, Athens, and Barcelona were placed next to the exit, which led to the massive WELCOME sign. A large clock was placed on a wall and its gigantic hands were set ticking. The guards laughed at how realistic it looked. There were signs for the WAITING ROOM and the TICKET OFFICE. Suitcases were stacked beneath a large sign that read, FOR IMMEDIATE DELIVERY TO JEWISH RESETTLEMENT AREA. (59)

And when Zischer witnesses the execution of Josef Bau:

A widening pool of childhood memories and learning and love and thousands of meals and loose baby teeth and learning to tie shoelaces and running after balls and dreaming and walks in the forest and playing with a dog and getting chicken pox and picking bark off a tree and writing a poem and a first kiss and running with friends and watching sunlight come through a window and dancing and drinking wine and laughing—it was all spilling out of Josef Bau. Part of the universe was dying. A tiny corner of it was being drained of light. (182-183)

And when Zischer reflects on the forced disappearance of the entire human network linking him to the universe:

Zischer was so stunned by the overwhelming scope of this crime that he kept looking around, waiting for the universe to stop it, but the rain kept falling down, and the wickedness was allowed to continue. Days passed, then weeks, and still the trains kept on coming. Clothes were dumped into ever higher piles of fabric and still the universe did nothing to stop the murders. He watched it all. It was like being handcuffed to devastation. (151-152)

Meghan, my wife, always in tune with my particulars, noticed how this book was imprinting itself onto my body and mind. One night, she poured me three fingers of whisky in one of the squeaky clean drinking glasses, handed it to me and said “Sean, take a break, slow down.” Of course, she was right. I had become suspicious of the smoke billowing from our neighbors chimney, suspicious of humans, suspicious of myself, suspicious of the bacon as it spit fat onto the counter top, suspicious of sleep and dreams and nightmares, and horrified when the faces of my children started appearing in the Holocaust pictures. Hobbes reigned. So, I took a breather.

At Treblinka, a tank engine was pragmatically repurposed to pump a colorless, odorless gas—carbon monoxide—into the brick murder rooms where the trapped waited, unaware that a handless strangler would soon dive down their throats and invade their cells. The relative simplicity of a metallic engine choking out an infinitely more complex organic one makes me think: what are we but electrochemical transmissions fired across synaptic chasms?

Carbon monoxide poisoning occurs when the carbon monoxide binds to hemoglobin to form carboxyhemoglobin. The carbon monoxide makes it difficult for the hemoglobin to release oxygen into the surrounding tissue. When carbon monoxide attaches itself to hemoglobin, the skin takes on a bright red hue as the trapped oxygen knocks against the opaque canvas of the skin. Try to sleep after imagining the recently murdered as looking more alive as they were dragged (gripped at the ankles or armpits) out of the gas chamber then when they were herded into it. (Some meat companies expose their products to certain amounts of carbon monoxide to rouge the meats prior to packaging). Hicks imagines David Stawczinski’s experience of the gas chamber like this:

He made it up to twenty-three before he had to take another breath and when he opened his esophagus to let in the air it felt like he was drowning in a deep river of thistles. A dizziness made him see purple dots. Fireworks went off in his skull and he felt like he was falling off a tall canyon. He closed his eyes but that sinking, tumbling, dropping, oozing feeling remained with him. Men and boys collapsed around him as he continued to hold his breath. He stumbled backwards and began to weep. Another inhale. The room stank of vomit and piss and shit and although he could smell these things he couldn’t smell the gas that was killing him. (70)

Echoing Dickenson's "479," I'd take the terrifying certainty of eternity over the terrifying certainty of the gas chamber. Hell, I'd take the terrifying certainty of oblivion over the terrifying certainty of the gas chamber. And here is my point: sometimes, words, these immaterial, ethereal, vapor-trail-producing incantations, pry open the hells within us all, and we willingly stoke these hells with wet human beings who smolder and smoke and bubble and froth and burn like so many pieces of wet wood.

A study of the Holocaust disassembles any sort of morality for morality hinges on justice—doesn't it? To borrow a train of thought traveled by the survivors of the Holocaust, justice, like God, seems to have taken a vacation during and after the Holocaust. Hicks speaks to this notion when he writes the following:

The world quickly moved away from the Holocaust as it began to worry about the cold war. Visions of mushroom clouds filled up the newspapers, and everyone built fallout shelters in their backyards. There was talk of whole cities disappearing beneath mighty eruptions of atomic fire. Human civilization could be wiped out by pushing a button. Rockets would then fire up from the ground and arch their deadly payloads across the globe. In a flickering pulse of time, shockwaves of light would obliterate the world, and because of this, no one seemed to care much about the ashfields of Poland. (231)

Even the Nuremberg Trials come off as a roughshod attempt at justice: a sham, a farce, a construction as staged as Guth's train station arrival platform. It is as unsatisfying as the dull thud a neck makes in the curve of a rope as gravity's hand reaches up, grabs the guilty's ankles, and tugs them toward the 10,800°F churning ocean of sulphur and liquid iron at Earth's core. Isolation in such an environment seems a more fitting punishment than hanging, but such a punishment is limited by practicality. Welcome the age of atomic weapons. Now holocaust is no longer an aberration, an outlier, but a permanent potential. Keep calm, hide under your desk and brace for disintegration.

Rudolph Höss, recalling his involvement in the Holocaust, wrote, "Unknowingly I was a cog in the wheel of the great extermination machine created by the Third Reich. The machine has been smashed to pieces, the engine is broken, and I, too, must now be destroyed. The world demands it."⁷ Yes, we do, Rudolph. Yes, we do.

⁷ Höss, Rudolf. *Commandant of Auschwitz: Autobiography*. Cleveland, OH: World Pub. Company, 1960. 201.

But the crime doesn't fit the punishment and it makes one want to believe in God for the simple fact that if God exists then so does Hell and surely if anybody fits the bill for eternal damnation it is those who organized and carried out the Holocaust.

I've experienced a myriad of things while reading *The Commandant of Lubizec* and its constellation of sources, but two things stand out: searching for gossamer is the adult version of going down the rabbit hole and Holocaust deniers are a special breed of ignoramus. For example, in Gitta Sereney's *Into That Darkness* Ricard Glazar recalls when the transports to Treblinka began to slow in March of 1943:

In the storehouses everything had been packed up and shipped—we had never before seen all the space because it had always been so full. And suddenly everything—clothes, watches, spectacles, shoes, walking-sticks, cooking-pots, linen, not to speak of food—everything went, and one day there was nothing left. You can't imagine what we felt when there was nothing there. You see, the *things* were our justification for being alive. If there were no *things* to administer, why would they let us stay alive?⁸

It is hard not to recall William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" and famous line (not in the poem) "No ideas but in things" and pervert it into an absurd version: no existence but in things. What kind of world did Ricard live in? Does it say anything about ours? Can it? Or how about when Hans Freund remembers his little boy: "My little boy had curly hair and soft skin—soft on his cheeks like on his bottom—that same smooth soft skin. When we got off the train, he said he was cold, and I said to his mother "I hope he won't catch cold." A cold. When they separated us he waved to me ..."⁹ How does one deny that story? Can we learn anything from it? I don't know. But, as Hicks suggests with Guth's son, Karl (who becomes an activist speaking out against the genocides in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Darfur), that, perhaps, we have in fact learned nothing from the Holocaust. It brings back the moment Hicks describes that during the timespan—8 and 9 September, 1942—while Jasmine Guth rages about her husband's dishonesty (not mass murder) 6,200 people were brutally killed. Hicks writes, "This is the banality of genocide: that everyday life is allowed to go on and murder becomes just background scenery" (116). It is for this reason that genocide, of any kind, must constantly be pulled into the foreground of thought as to not let the murdered simply disappear.

8 Sereney, Gitta. *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience*. London: Picador, 1974. 212.

9 Ibid., 211-212.

I've thought a long time about the best analogy for Hicks's book and, at the risk of being labeled a hodaddy, chubby checker, or biscuit, have settled on big wave surfing. A major difference being that when Hicks tows you in you don't have a surfboard. Popular big wave spots include No Toes, Jaws, Dungeons, Tombstones, Cribbar, Ghost Trees, Mavericks, Teahupoo, Mullaghmore, and Phantoms. To date, Carlos Burle holds the record for the largest wave surfed off the coast of Nazaré, Portugal (you want to know just how big, but does the exact number matter? Really frickin' big). The greatest danger posed to big wave surfers, in addition to being completely disoriented under 50 feet of eardrum rupturing water or carroted against a reef like some sort of ragdoll at the waving hands of the Conductor, is being subjected to a triple-hold down. A surfer can train for such occurrences, but, sometimes, despite the surfer's best efforts, one just doesn't come back up; it's an understood risk of worshipping at the Church of the Open Sky. *The Commandant of Lubicez* is nothing short of a necessary triple-hold down that offers the reader no reprieve from the meat pulverizing and hope void momentum of the Holocaust. Hicks reminds us to never forget (or always remember) that beneath such monstrous swells lie fine grains of sand that move to moon time and never settle. "They" Hicks writes, "came from towns with names like Zakrzówek, Biłgoraj, Szczepieszyn, Sokal, and Sambor. Turka, Kolomyja, Władawa, Zamość, and Sasów. Kielce and Grabow. Kraków and Lublin" to Treblinka, Auschwitz, Sobibór, and Bełżec to be sorted, strangled, and sifted (62); it is for them, the known and unknown, that we must allow people like Hicks and the art they create to tow us in to tumble over the falls. My advice, learn to hold your breath.

SEAN PURIO is an Air Force officer currently teaching at the United States Air Force Academy.

THE COMMANDANT OF LUBIZEC

"This is a vividly detailed, terrifying, convincing, and completely spellbinding story. . . Patrick Hicks has accomplished a very difficult literary task. He has given a believable and fresh and original face to barbarism. What a fine book this is."

— Tim O'Brien, author of *The Things They Carried*

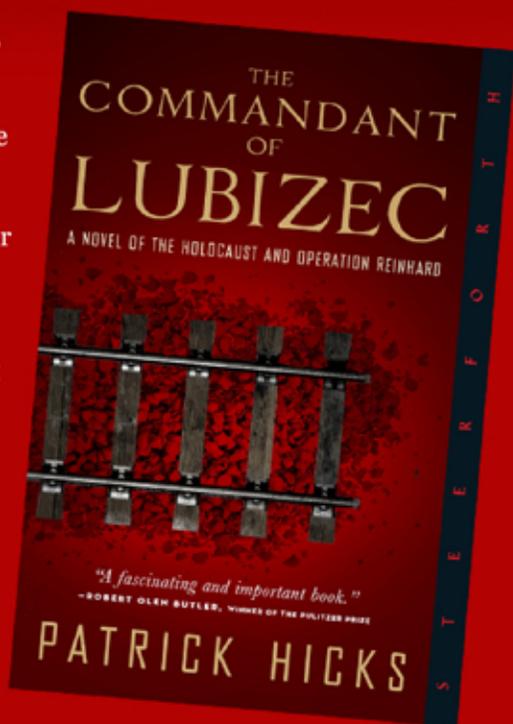
"Thought-provoking and gut-wrenchingly powerful."

— *Kirkus Reviews*

After the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, they quickly began persecuting anyone who was Jewish. Millions were shoved into ghettos and forced to live under the swastika. Death camps were built and something called "Operation Reinhard" was set into motion. Its goal? To murder all the Jews of Poland.

The Commandant of Lubizec is a harrowing account of a death camp that never actually existed but easily could have in the Nazi state. It is a sensitive, accurate retelling of a place that went about the business of genocide. Told as a historical account in a documentary style, it explores the atmosphere of a death camp. It brings voice to the silenced and demands that we bear witness.

Patrick Hicks is the author of *The Collector of Names*, *Adoptable*, and *This London*. His work has appeared in some of the most vital literary journals in America, including *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Missouri Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and many others. He is the Writer-in-Residence at Augustana College and a faculty member at the MFA program at Sierra Nevada College.



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NUMBERS

They came from towns with names like Zakrzówek, Biłgoraj, Szczebrzeszyn, Sokal and Sambor. Turka, Kolomyya, Włodawa, Zamość, and Sasów. Kielce and Grabow. Kraków and Lublin. Two came from Paris. One came from London. Two hundred and twenty-three from Berlin. It has already been mentioned how they were pushed into cattle cars, how they were stuffed in cheek by jowl, how the doors were pulled shut on greased rails and how a lock was flipped into place with a clacking thunk. A ladder was placed next to the car and numbers were chalked onto the side to say how many people were sealed inside. 131. 135. 149. 130. 152. The cars were designed to carry twelve cows but the Nazis shoved in entire families and villages. Whole histories were reduced to nothing more than chalk numbers riding down the rails.

Survivors like Chaim Zischer and Dov Damiel offer painfully vivid accounts about what the camp was like from a prisoner's perspective, but for everyone else that rolled into Lubizec, we can only imagine what it was like to huddle on the platform and listen to Guth's speech. Perhaps we can place ourselves on those wooden planks for a moment or two, maybe we can feel our toes inside our shoes—how sweaty and swollen they are—but in the end it's all just guesswork and make-believe on our part. Try as we might, we can't understand the raw fear these people would have felt swimming around inside their chests.

When they were told they were going to be resettled to a work camp in the east, posters were hung up in the ghetto and a truck with loudspeakers crawled down the cobblestone streets. The message? Resettlement would occur in two days and no more than fifty kilograms were allowed. Pack lightly. Bring only your most valuable

goods. Extra clothes are not needed. Pack lightly. Bring only your most valuable goods. No more than fifty kilograms. Pack lightly. Bring only your most valuable goods.

When Mina Auerbach heard this she decided to pack a ragdoll her grandmother had made from an old blanket. The doll had two buttons for eyes, wide bands of fabric for hair, and she wore a pink dress. Mina was only four but she gathered up her doll and stuffed it into a pillowcase.

Semion Wallach, who was seven, wondered which toys to bring while his mother, Hanel, wrestled between packing a skillet or packing a photo album. There was also her wedding ring to consider. If she wore it, the Nazis would steal it, so maybe she should stitch it into the hem of a dress? Hanel got out a needle and thread. She went to work.

We can only imagine what it was like to look at our things (all that stuff that makes us who we are) and wonder what to leave behind. Fifty kilograms is nothing. Should we take this or this? What about this? And when the SS came with their machine guns and dogs, shooting people in the street and always yelling, yelling, yelling, we can see ourselves jogging towards the train station with the last of our earthly possessions. We might drop something on the ground and realize we can't go back for it because we will be beaten. We watch this valuable trinket skitter away and in that moment we feel as if we are losing everything. Our fingers tighten on our suitcase handle because, if we can only keep the rest of our possessions together, it means not everything is lost. Clothing and candlesticks become symbols of something much larger. Our fifty kilograms feels like a protective talisman because as long as the Nazis don't take everything away from us it means that resettlement—and *life*—waits up ahead.

Although we can imagine this, what must it have been like to stand in a crowded cattle car and feel it judder towards the unknown? We might close our eyes and imagine the muggy heat or the rocking sway as we rumble over points on the tracks, but these are undefined details because, of course, hardly anyone survived. Their stories were snuffed out, erased, and we have so very few eyewitness accounts.

Upon arrival at Lubizec, the doors would have rolled open and people would have looked up at the stinging sunlight, but what must it have been like to hear the guards shouting in German? They have rubber truncheons and their faces are flushed with anger. Flecks of spit fly from their mouths as they scream.

“*Schuhe zusammenbinden! Geld und Dokumente mitnehmen!*”

Abraham Krolkowski came from a small village and he couldn't understand what they were saying so he stroked the bristles of his moustache. Others like Jerzy and Jozek Blatt were at the end of the long platform and they gripped their suitcases. These twin brothers owned a bookstore before the Nazis invaded and they enjoyed heated conversations over pots of mint tea. They adjusted their tortoiseshell glasses and looked around.

“*Schuhe zusammenbinden! Geld und Dokumente mitnehmen!*”

Giesela Wilenberg, who had a mist of freckles on her face, hugged her two daughters. “What are they saying?” she asked in Yiddish. “What's that?”

Someone else, perhaps David Stawczinski, might have thought about translating. He was a music teacher and, even in that moment when fear prickled his throat and his stomach burned for a lump of bread, even then he might have wondered if there was a piano nearby. Perhaps he could tell the Germans he was musician and he couldn't do hard labor? He opened his mouth to translate, but a woman behind him spoke up instead. The confidence in her voice was surprising.

“They're saying, *Tie your shoes together. Bring your gold and documents with.*”

Shoes were taken off and suitcases were stacked onto wagons. The engine huffed and vented as the conductor peered out of his hatch. Mina Auerbach held on to her ragdoll and stroked its thick brown hair.

“Don't be afraid, Miss Doll,” she whispered. “I'm here.”

“*Schuhe zusammenbinden! Geld und Dokumente mitnehmen!*”

Hanel Wallach instinctively put an arm around her son and nodded to herself that she had made the right decision to bring a

skillet instead of a photo album. She curled her toes inside her shoes and realized her mouth was dry. She sucked on her front teeth to make some spit. When she swallowed, she felt the delicate bones in her ears pop. It was such a small thing but it suddenly seemed so grand and important. Her whole life came down to a forgettable moment of daily biology. She swallowed again and listened to her ears pop.

Where is this Lubizec? she wondered. *Where are we?*

Others may have entertained thoughts of escape but what they didn't know—couldn't know—was that farmers were promised two bags of sugar if they caught a prisoner. Escaping from Lubizec would have been like escaping slavery in the Deep South of the United States during the nineteenth-century. Where would you go? Who could you trust? All of this was made harder if you didn't speak Polish and, to make matters worse, you entered the camp with your entire family. Would you abandon your child? Your parents? Would you leave everyone you loved as you made a mad and useless dash for the barbed-wire? Even if you managed to slip through the fence where would you go? It was a world of machine guns and forest.

Where is this place? Hanel Wallach wondered again. She shielded her eyes from the sun and squinted into the pine trees.

What these people were thinking is of course a matter of conjecture but we do know that a man named Rabbi Israel Hirszman refused to be afraid. After everyone was marched beneath the huge WELCOME sign, he whispered words of encouragement. He touched people on the shoulder and patted children on the head. While we cannot know what Rabbi Hirszman said to people like Giesela Wilenberg, Hanel Wallach, and David Stawczinski, we do know what happened next.

It began when Guth was lighting a cigarette. As he fiddled with his lighter, turning this way and that to block the wind, the rabbi adjusted his wide-brimmed hat and bent down for a fistful of sand. He took a step forward and yelled out, "You there. German."

Guth looked up, slowly.

"Yes. I'm talking to you, German."

Prisoners never spoke to Guth, especially not after they had been herded into the Rose Garden. They usually acted like a bolt of lightning had gone off because they were jittery, alert, waiting for the thunderclap to come.

Guth lowered his unlit cigarette and looked amused. "Yes?"

The rabbi held up his fist and let the sand fall into the wind.

"Do you see what I am doing, German? Do you see this? One day you will vanish into flying dust but my people will remain." The rabbi threw the remaining gravel onto the ground and pointed at the guards. "Shame on you. Shame on all of you."

A guard immediately marched over to the bearded man and aimed at that spot where the spinal cord meets the skull. In a crackling flash the rabbi's head opened up in a spray of pink mist and bone. He stood for a moment, then crumpled to the ground like a wet rag. His wide-brimmed hat wheeled away towards the barbed-wire fence where it got hung up, briefly, before skittering into the woods.

Blood pumped from the rabbi's head. It stained the sand with grainy dark blobs. The gunshot startled everyone in a way the screaming had not yet done, and the air became charged with shock.

The guard holstered his pistol and turned to the group. He cleared his throat and spoke loudly but without anger.

"Men and women must separate. It's time for your disinfection showers. There must be no lice in this camp. No lice."

Guth went back to lighting his cigarette as screams filled the air.

When Giesela Wilenberg saw this she might have hugged her daughters and looked around at the wooden guard towers. *This is the last of Earth*, she might have thought. Maybe she kissed her daughters and enjoyed the smell of their unwashed hair.

When the separations began, Hanel Wallach refused to give up her son. The deputy commandant, *Oberscharführer* Heinrich Niemann, came towards her with a truncheon the size of a chair leg and he began beating her on the head with it.

"He must go over there," he grunted. "Over there. Over there. Over there."

But Hanel refused to give up her boy. She hunched into a protective loving shell and held her son's head as blow after blow landed on her back. In this moment of ruinous blinding pain when Hanel teetered on the brink of unconsciousness, her son was dragged away. He kicked wildly against the dirt.

"Mama, help! Where are they taking me?"

As Hanel stumbled after him, she was beaten all the harder. Heinrich Niemann's truncheon became a blur of action and, when he was finally finished crushing her head open, he stood up and wiped sweat from his forehead. He panted.

"Whew. These Jews keep me fit."

Maybe Semion Wallach was picked up by some stranger and shielded from the corpse of his mother and maybe he went limp in this stranger's arms as they were quick-marched off to the undressing area.

"I've got you, boy," the man might have cooed. "I'll be your father now. You can trust me."

While we can't know these things, we do know that after the men stripped off their clothes and ran down the Road to Heaven many of them chanted prayers.

Men like our bookselling brothers, Jerzy and Jozek Blatt, would have run across the dirt and looked up at the bright blue sky. It was such a beautiful day, so full of life and potential, but they didn't know where they were going or why the wooden walls on either side were painted brilliant white. It felt weird to run naked. Their scrotums and penises flapped around and this made them feel even more vulnerable. It was hard to run on the sandy dirt and they worried about tripping and being beaten. Men around them were being hit on the head. Rubber truncheons broke arms, and faces were split open with hissing whips. The terror and confusion was absolute.

They rounded a corner and saw a whitewashed building with the Star of David above the door. Something was written in Hebrew. THIS IS THE GATE OF THE LORD. Flowers were on either side of the entrance and this was oddly reassuring. Almost welcoming.

When they got inside the brick building, the floor was covered with bits of sand that had been tracked in by the others. Most of the men had black fluff from their socks stuck beneath their toenails and they stood around panting. Their eyes darted left and right. They looked up and down.

“It’s a shower,” someone said.

Jozek Blatt looked up to see shower heads hanging from the ceiling. “That’s a good sign,” he said, pointing.

“Yes. A good sign.”

The air became more humid as others pushed in.

“Ugh. It stinks of chlorine.”

“Make room. Make room. I’m getting squashed.”

“Ouch. Careful.”

It could be that David Stawczinski, our imaginary piano teacher, closed his eyes and thought about playing a baby grand in some restaurant. Bits of Rachmaninoff twinkled in his ears and this calmed him. He tried licking his lips but his mouth was dry, and maybe, in these last few minutes of life, he glanced down at his hands. His knuckles and tendons had spent years learning how to tap dance across the stage of a piano, but now they were just curled fists against his chest.

When the metal door slammed shut and the screws were spun home, David’s muscles tingled for him to do *something*. But what? He could barely shift his weight from one foot to the other because there were so many men packed in around him. The room was electrified with fear and a low whispering began.

“What’s happening?”

“Where are we?”

“Stop pushing.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Yes, fine.”

“They wouldn’t kill good workers.”

“It wouldn’t make sense.”

“No sense at all.”

“It’s just a shower.”

“Yes. Just a shower.”

An engine was clattering behind the wall and the guards beyond the door began to laugh.

David felt like he was going to hyperventilate and his head swiveled around at each new sound. He tried to swallow but he couldn't. His throat was dry. His palms were sweaty. A wild energy gripped his muscles but he also felt paralyzed, jacketed.

“Will it take long to die?” a little boy asked.

David looked at the steel door and saw a glass peephole. An eye peered in. It looked to the right, the left, it blinked a few times, then disappeared. Someone on the outside shouted, “Time to die!”

“What was that?”

“What'd he say?”

“I couldn't hear.”

At first there wasn't much to notice except that the engine had shifted into a higher gear and something overhead made the vents change direction. David, like the other men in that room, looked up and began pushing at his neighbors nervously. Whispering turned into shouting as everyone began to realize why the engine was whining at such high speed and why the door had been screwed shut. The vents blew out something hot, but no one realized how much poison was spilling into the room because carbon monoxide is colorless, odorless, and tasteless.

The room began to sizzle with panic. Survival instincts kicked in and the men lurched against the steel door because it was the only exit. Those at the front were crushed and their rib cages cracked. The whole room floundered with shouting and hollering as men turned into beasts. They clawed and gouged for escape.

David began to feel lightheaded and he watched an old man with white hair begin to convulse. His eyes rolled back into his head while—in the corner of the room, in those places not yet soaked with gas—a young boy tried to climb the wall with his fingernails. He boosted himself up onto the backs of others and roared for help. Several men in the center began to vomit. Those against the door banged on it with their open palms.

“Let us out! Let us out!”

David found his hands doing things that surprised him. He punched and pushed and clawed and ripped. He burned with incandescent rage and wanted revenge against the Nazis for putting him in this caged-animal situation. He held his breath and told himself he'd be fine, that somehow he'd survive, and while he was thinking this an image of his mother floated into his mind. She was in a park, the sun was shining, and she held out her arms. Men jostled against him but David Stawczinski held his breath and focused on the park. He counted to ten. One . . . two . . . three . . .

He'd have to breathe again and he wondered how the gas would feel in his lungs. Would it hurt? Would he cough? He kept on counting.

Six . . . seven . . . eight . . . nine . . .

He made it up to twenty-three before he had to take another breath and when he opened his esophagus to let in the air it felt like he was drowning in a deep river of thistles. A dizziness made him see purple dots. Fireworks went off in his skull and he felt like he was falling off a tall canyon. He closed his eyes but that sinking, tumbling, dropping, oozing feeling remained with him. Men and boys collapsed around him as he continued to hold his breath. He stumbled backwards and began to weep. Another inhale. The room stank of vomit and piss and shit and although he could smell these things he couldn't smell the gas that was killing him.

There was so much he still wanted to do, there was so much he still wanted to see. He felt an overwhelming sense of regret, not that he was dying, but that in thirty-two years his dreams had somehow eluded him. He wanted to perform in Warsaw, Kraków, and Lwów, he wanted to see Paris and walk around the ancient streets of Rome, he wanted to drink wine on the Mediterranean and ride a camel in the Sahara and maybe take an ocean liner across the Atlantic, but in one horrible moment he realized none of it was going to happen. None of it.

He closed his eyes and thought about his mother standing in a park. It was a beautiful cloudless day and he began to count. One . . . two . . . three . . .

His mother was waiting for him. He ran to her.

We can never know what it was like inside that gas chamber. We can only make guesses. We can only hypothesize and speculate. Precisely because we can never know what these victims were thinking or feeling, we bump up against the central paradox of Lubizec itself: Whenever we read eyewitness accounts from former prisoners we know in the back of our minds that at least *this* person survived, at least *this* person made it out, at least *this* story won't be hopeless, and this means our focus necessarily shifts from death to life. The absolute unrelenting horror of the Holocaust is dulled because we know that eyewitness accounts by their very nature are stories of life. But Lubizec was not a place of life. It was a place of clockwork murder and annihilation. To understand it we need to read hundreds of thousands of stories just like David Stawczinski's, and then we need to imagine each of them dying.

Our hearts, though, can only take so much horror.

Because of this, the victims become faceless ghosts that are pushed into gas chambers. We watch the door swing shut and we turn away. It's easier to cope with Lubizec if we do this, but in order to understand the place in any meaningful way we need to know about women like Giesela Wilenberg and we need to imagine her worrying about what the guards will do to her naked daughters. Perhaps she draws them close and tells them everything will be okay. Maybe she wipes their tears away. It could be that she tries to be strong even though inside the secret corridors of her mind she is quaking. She holds their hands and when the steel door booms shut she leans into their ears. As the gas kicks on, she tells her daughters to look into her eyes.

"Look at me. Look at me. Are you listening? I have *loved* being your mother. Do you hear me? I love you. I love you. I love you."

While we cannot know what these people were thinking or feeling we must not allow ourselves to see them as faceless numbers. That's what the Nazis did—they were numbers that needed erasing. All the sunrises they had seen, all the lips they had kissed, all the shoes they had bought, all the tears and underhanded deeds and acts of generosity and presents and toothaches and music and

laughter and hugs and stomach aches and blisters and dancing, it all got snuffed out in Lubizec. Imagine 710,000 candles flickering away and then, in one gigantic storm, they are all blown out. There is a sudden intake of breath and then—

One of the more heartbreaking stories about Lubizec occurred on August 27, 1942 and we only know about it thanks to “Allied Forces Report No. 3042”. The story would have slipped into oblivion if Captain Joe Ehrenbach hadn’t interrogated Heinrich Niemann as well as he did in 1946. The fact that Niemann brought the story up at all suggests how unusual it was, even for Lubizec.

It was raining heavily that day, a real monsoon, and when the afternoon transport arrived everyone was surprised to find 150 boys stuffed into a single car. Apparently an orphanage had been liquidated near Warsaw, and as the rain came down harder and harder, Guth climbed onto his specially made wooden box. He held a black umbrella and spoke into a microphone as the boys cupped their hands to catch what was falling from the heavens. They opened their mouths and stuck out their tongues. Thunder rumbled in the sky and lightning shocked the horizon. The rain came down onto the platform so hard it looked like dancing sparks. One guard said it was like a river had been turned upside down.

“I think I saw Noah building an ark,” another guard joked. “It was a huge amount of rain.”

The boys weren’t listening to Guth so the guards began hitting them with truncheons. A terrible wailing filled up the platform as rain guttered off the cattle cars and, standing in the middle of the boys like a protective willow tree, was a tall man in a hat. When the guards asked who he was the man simply answered, “The director of the orphanage.”

Although we don’t know this man’s name (let us call him Aron Joffe so that at least he has a name), he could have abandoned these boys and taken his chances at Lubizec, he could have said he was by himself and that he was a hard worker, but that’s not what he did. Instead, this tall man stood in the middle of 150 terrified boys and did something profoundly good.

“You’re all with me,” he shouted. “Boys, boys. We’ll be shown to our rooms shortly. Hush now. Stop crying. You’re all loved.”

When order was restored, the guards stepped back under the long wooden awning. Guth stood beneath his umbrella and continued his speech as if nothing had happened. He smoked a cigarette and flicked it against the glossy wet train.

“Welcome to Lubizec,” he said, climbing down from his box.

The boys were herded into the Rose Garden, where they clustered around the tall man in a hat. Aron Joffe, as we are calling him, looked around as if sizing up the camp. He nodded as if coming to some kind of horrible realization. Water dripped off the brim of his hat.

“Boys, boys,” he said. “Listen. Do I have your full and complete attention? Good. As you’ve all heard, we need to take a shower. Yes, I know it’s raining and . . . yes, we probably don’t need a shower but . . . listen to me . . . listen . . . after *that* we’ll be given bread and butter and cookies.”

Some of them cheered.

“We need to follow the commandant’s orders first and then he’ll give us a big, beautiful meal.” He stressed the last word with a smile. “I’m sure the guards won’t hit anyone if we follow their orders. Isn’t that right, Herr Commandant? No more hitting?”

Guth usually went back to his office but on that rainy afternoon of sheeting water he stood beneath the hemisphere of his umbrella and nodded. The boys were then marched down a narrow path. They stomped in puddles. They took off their clothes and talked about eating boiled eggs, different kinds of cheeses, apples, and potatoes. The director of the orphanage encouraged them to think of other foods as he took off his waistcoat and unhooked his belt. He folded his trousers and took off his hat as the rain kept on coming down.

“What else will we eat?”

The boys began to shout. Toffee! Pierogi! Matzo ball soup! Pears! Cherries! Lamb! Salmon!

When the director was completely naked he covered up his penis with one hand and kept the list going, as if he were conducting a symphony. “What else? What else?”

The boys, all 150 of them, marched up the Road to Heaven shouting out food they would soon be eating. The guards stood in the pouring rain and didn't raise their clubs. They simply watched the boys file past them into the whitewashed building as if they were on some kind of strange field trip. The director paused when he heard the clattering engine. He covered his mouth and let out a little gasp.

"Oh my God. You boys are *so* wonderful," he said with tears in his eyes. "Thank you for being so good and beautiful. You're all loved. Do you know that, boys? All of you. That's right, I'm coming too. I'm here, boys. I'm here."

When everyone was inside, the man ran both hands through his wet hair and turned to Guth.

"How can you bring yourself to do this?" He broke down. "They're such good boys. They've done nothing wrong."

Thunder crackled and roiled the sky, but Guth said nothing.

Crying came from inside the brick building and the director wiped his eyes. He took a deep breath, smiled, and stepped in.

"It's okay. I'm here, I'm here."

Guth stood beneath his black umbrella and tried to light another cigarette as rain came down harder and harder, faster and faster. The huge steel door on Chamber #4 slammed shut. A moment passed, then another. The flowers outside the gas chamber quivered as the rain pelted them. There was the sound of a prayer being sung in the gas chamber but when the engine revved into a higher gear the singing turned into screaming. At first it sounded like they were all going down a roller coaster together, but then it turned into absolute terror. It was like a breaking wave of screams. Above it, a man shouted out words of love.

"I'm here, boys! I'm here!"

Hans-Peter Guth looked at the sandy path covered in little footprints. The rain began to fill them in.

More trains would be arriving tomorrow and he needed to send the weekly numbers to Berlin. He walked across camp, opened the door of his office, and leaned his umbrella against the wall. Thunder crackled across the sky, booming and rumbling. It made

the windowpanes shake. Guth sat down in front of his typewriter and consulted the train schedules.

They came from towns with names like Zakrzówek, Biłgoraj, Szczebrzeszyn, Sokal and Sambor. Turka, Kolomyja, Włodawa, Zamość, and Sasów. Kielce and Grabow. Kraków and Lublin. Two came from Paris. One came from London. Two hundred and twenty-three from Berlin.

Hans-Peter Guth rolled in a sheet of paper. He began to type.

21.8.1942 – 3,837

22.8.1942 – 3,914

23.8.1942 – 3,966

24.8.1942 – 3,801

25.8.1942 – 3,972

26.8.1942 – 3,999

27.8.1942 – 4,152

They were just numbers to him. Just numbers.

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