

10-12

A PRAYER FOR KATERINA HOROVITZOVA

Arnošt Lustig

Three

WHEN THEY GOT to the mother camp, Mr. Friedrich Brenske excused himself, disappeared into the German administration building and came out a little while later, dressed in a new gray-green uniform and cap. He was freshly shaved and he even looked as though he had taken a bath. Everybody from the train had gathered in a small area in front of an underground dressing room which had double wooden doors. There was barbed wire all around them, of course. The doors looked very solid.

Mr. Brenske addressed them. 'In order for us to be able, within the time we've indicated in the cable we've sent ahead, to exchange you for our prisoners – and we hope they will be the ones we want, the ones who are important to us – we must have you disinfected, as you know. Vaccinations against typhus and diphtheria won't be necessary because you were not taken prisoner in the field but in the hinterland, and there are different regulations which apply to that. Of course, I don't rule out the possibility that the Swiss themselves might vaccinate you later. They're very fussy about these things and you may have to spend a couple of hours in quarantine over on their side. Here it is essential that your clothes be disinfected and that you take a bath. But that's certainly not so terrible. I mention it simply so you know what's going on and so nobody can accuse me of neglecting something for the good of the cause. Beyond those double doors, as you see yourselves, is the dressing room. We have no unnecessary secrets. Unfortunately, there is no separate dressing room for ladies. I wasn't able to arrange for one in such a short time. I couldn't even have found anybody to do it. The exit is on the other side. This is all just knocked together, sort of, on account of the war. It's not much, architecturally speaking, as you see yourselves. It's all very simple here. Field conditions must be maintained.

'Gentlemen, up to now you have shown – those of you who are standing here now – an exemplary self-discipline and you have nothing to be ashamed of. I've already had dealings with many of your people and I wish they would all have had your good judgment and your patience. This patience has been, is and will continue to be the fundamental condition for the success of this operation. Don't pay any attention to certain discomforts. I must ask you that personally. I admit and I've made it quite clear that this isn't a place full of a lot of unnecessary luxuries, even for us. And I'd like to point out to you once more that we're back on ramp territory again. For this reason it is essential – for you and for us – to abide absolutely by all orders, because regulations are sacred here. So I want you to listen carefully to what I have to say to you now. Take off your shoes, remember the number of your clothes hook and when

you come back through the hall from the other side, go right back to your own belongings without any more reminders. In order to avoid any confusion which might delay us later, put your passports, money and other valuables in the cupboards under the hangers. You'll get everything back from the guards after you've had your bath. I ask you not to talk to any of the local personnel.'

Mr. Brenske planted his feet apart and coughed dryly. 'I've had a cold buffet lunch prepared for you later, so there will be absolutely nothing to delay us anymore. Also, I've just found out that a Swiss physician will be going with us the rest of the way. He is at the same time also an official of the International Red Cross. The airplane bringing this doctor is just landing at the local airport.' Then, with a small, almost vacant smile, he added, 'They say all's well that ends well.'

Suddenly, he was no longer able to look the gentlemen straight in the eye. But he did his best. The guards surrounded them just as thickly as in the synagogue earlier. Everybody was used to it by now and paid no attention. In a way, the underground dressing room and bath resembled the synagogue where they had been before and, by coincidence, this occurred to both Mr. Cohen and Mr. Rauchenberg, who couldn't see very well without his glasses. Perhaps it was also because of the tense way Mr. Brenske looked. He probably thought so too. Apparently he had not lost patience or interest in them, even though his involvement had dragged on for a long time as things became increasingly complicated. Maybe he was looking forward to a rest during their trip. Now, for the first time, they noticed that outside the underground dressing room, behind the cordon of guards in their frog-green uniforms, stood a group of men in prison clothes. For a moment Herman Cohen even thought he recognized the tailor among them. Mr. Brenske, standing even more straddle-legged than before, seemed to be waiting for them to obey his orders. His expression was graver now and slightly sour, probably because nobody moved to do what he had told them.

'Is it really necessary to go through with this disinfection?' asked Mr. Herman Cohen. 'You said we'll be in Switzerland in the morning.'

'It's still morning. Not later than seven o'clock. Switzerland is a little bit closer than Hamburg. It'll certainly still be morning by the time we're ready to leave. We'll reach our destination as fast as we can. The sooner we start, the sooner we're finished. I repeat, it all depends on how much discipline you show now. This is no time to quibble over details. I said 'in the morning' and it is morning.' Mr. Brenske's voice was mild but he was getting angry. Now he seemed to bite off his words, or perhaps it was because he was in uniform. He spoke very brusquely, as though the whole thing made him suffer. They really might have a little pity for him, his piercing eyes told them. He wasn't made of steel, after all.

'You can't go on straining my good will and my patience,' he said. 'I don't behave that way with you. I'm sure nobody's pampered our prisoners over on your side. You've got to take a bath. We weren't the ones who thought that up; the people who are expecting you did. From the bottom of my heart, I loathe telling anyone they *must*

do something – particularly people like you. I know people of your kind would rather make up their minds by themselves. A little bit of hygiene never hurt anybody, though, and the very first thing I did when we got back here was to go into the barracks and have a hot bath and shower. You can't imagine how that picks a person up. Sometimes a bath like that is all we've got left to do. Well, now, enough of that. . . . In the meantime, we'd better have your clothes pressed. You mustn't go away looking all mussed up. Now I'm going to make the final arrangements. While I'm doing that, get yourselves in shape as I told you. Don't act like naughty children. It's your life, not mine.'

Suddenly Mr. Vaksman stepped forward and said, 'I'd like to point out that – as far as my racial origin is concerned – I have documents to show that I'm not completely . . .' He didn't even have to go on and Cell to what degree he was of mixed blood.

'I'm sorry,' Mr. Brenske interrupted, as though he had immediately understood what Mr. Vaksman was trying to say. 'These things are not decided either by you or by me – I mean, at this particular moment. . . .' Again he smiled that quick, vague, almost vacant smile which seemed to say that in the end, what a person is or isn't is not determined by his actual origin or any kind of conclusions which might protect even a victim, but simply and exclusively by him and people like him. His eyes spoke and they said: Dear friend, be good enough to let us judge whether or not you are what we want you to be. We know how to do our job by now. We aren't the first in such a situation and we certainly won't be the last.

Mr. Vaksman looked around him searchingly and there was more understanding and amazement than curiosity in the eyes which met his. Everything that Mr. Brenske had said so verbosely could be summed up in one of his favorite proverbs: if someone wants to beat a dog, he can always find the stick to do it with.

Then Mr. Brenske turned and left without another word. Mr. Lowenstein didn't get a chance to tell him he'd like to see the absent intermediary with his own eyes. Somehow it didn't seem to have much point anymore. They watched Mr. Brenske leave and they noticed at the same time that more soldiers had entered from the other side. At an order of a lieutenant, the men in prison clothes approached and gave everybody a little cake of soap. By coincidence, Katerina Horovitzova was given her soap by the tailor with the ashen eyes. Now they looked even grayer and more opaque.

'We meet again,' she said.

'Yes,' the tailor said, nodding. 'Everybody gets his just reward.'

Not another word was spoken.

Mr. Vaksman kept staring at the floor. That was when he realized that one's race and what one belongs to are never determined by the race itself, but by those who have made these concepts a necessity and use them as a shield. Otherwise it would not make any sense. And he wondered what his colleagues would say if he told them this.

All nineteen gentlemen suddenly seemed oblivious to the fact that they were not alone. Without any more reminders, they moved toward the dressing room as though they had forgotten that Katerina Horovitzova was there and that she was a woman. Perhaps it was because they'd been given the soap, or the atmosphere of the underground dressing room, or Mr. Friedrich Brenske's speech, his promise that a Swiss doctor would be going with them the rest of the way; or perhaps it was because of the feeling of insecurity they had when Mr. Brenske finished his speech and left them, for in a way they had got used to him. They felt orphaned in his absence. Or maybe it was the shower room itself and all those guards and the strange lieutenant and, finally, the fact that they wanted to get it over with. But Katerina Horovitzova did not take off her clothes.

The underground dressing room resembled a garage, with a sloping cement floor down which they moved toward the benches and the numbered clothes hooks. The men in the striped prison clothes had disappeared again behind the wall in the back and the guards moved closer. Now they stood among soldiers whose uniforms were a different, brighter shade of green and up in front stood the new lieutenant. The soldiers' faces were impassive for the most part and if anyone had wanted to describe what was most striking about them, it would have been this very impassivity. They smelled of mothballs and ersatz cloth and something like shoe polish. Except for the open pistol holsters, everything about them was neat and tidy. At first glance, they looked as though they were on leave. Maybe it was also because many of them really were off duty. The lieutenant was softly whistling a German marching tune. He was substituting for Mr. Brenske, who had gone off to wind up their affairs.

Wearily and slowly, the holders of the American passports finally began to get undressed, exposing their white nakedness. The lieutenant prodded them with a thundering roar: 'Come on, hurry it up, gentlemen, so you can get your bath and so the water doesn't get cold. Everything's ready for you over there behind that wall and through the doors in front of you. All you've got to do is get started.'

And then he added in an even rougher tone than he had perhaps intended, 'Now, gentlemen, nobody's got any special privileges around here as far as taking your time is concerned. Everybody – young, old, women and children – they've all got to get undressed in a hurry. There are others waiting. You wouldn't want them to have to wait on account of you.'

Evidently this was a speech he'd often made, because now, of course, there were no children. But while Mr. Brenske had always spoken persuasively, the sharper tone seemed more appropriate and effective here, although the lieutenant added that privileges might be waiting for them once they got into the Swiss Alps somewhere. Here, however, they must keep in step with army regulations, he said. The men who had come in in their bright green uniforms chuckled at that. This apparently encouraged the lieutenant, who began to laugh even louder than the rest.

'Put your passports in these cupboards here. You'll get back all your papers and junk when you get to Switzerland.'

The guards could all see that none of the naked gentlemen wanted to part with their passports, but obviously they couldn't take them with them into the bath. So finally they had to leave them. It took Mr. Walter Taubenstock the longest to do so, as might have been expected.

'Well, you are a nice little spoiled brat,' the lieutenant told him. 'I'd like to have you in my hand for a while. I'd teach you differently. Have they always handled you with kid gloves, or what? You've been spoiled rotten. Switzerland's not going to help you any. What you don't learn now, you never will.'

Whenever he said 'Switzerland,' the lieutenant rocked back and forth on his heels as though he himself didn't believe very much in its existence.

Katerina Horovitzova watched how all the nineteen men, including Herman Cohen, slowly filled the shelves with all their belongings, first placing their American passports carefully on the bottom and laying over them their watches, tie pins, gold cuff links and spectacles, all the while murmuring words of encouragement to one another. Mr. Waiter Taubenstock was the last to do so. She saw them, one after the other, pulling off their wedding rings and the other rings they wore, while the men in uniform kept on laughing. Mr. Freddy Klarfeld put everything neatly in its place. It was a pleasure to watch how meticulous he was, as though the tidiness of his belongings really mattered.

The members of the special crew who worked in the underground dressing room stood motionless behind the wall in the back, ready, perhaps, to pass out towels or to be useful in some way. The tailor was there too. Mr. Cohen hadn't been mistaken after all. They were quiet as mice. The men in uniform – like the prisoners – seemed to be looking intently at these men's shoulders, which Katerina Horovitzova could not understand. Otherwise she thought she probably understood everything now. She was not worried by the reluctant scurry of her fellow passengers. She looked around but still she did not get undressed. She observed everyone who watched her, waiting for her to begin, particularly the lieutenant who was substituting for Mr. Friedrich Brenske. She puzzled over what the tailor was doing here and then she remembered how Mr. Brenske's eyes had flashed when he had referred to the message she had cent out in the suitcase and how frightened the tailor had been and how he had hunched his shoulders. The other nineteen in her group, scared by the shouting and laughter, began to take off their underwear and put it on the shelves piece by piece, until she turned away from them so she couldn't see.

'Here nobody needs to feel embarrassed for the way he was born,' the lieutenant said roughly. 'And especially not in front of us. If you only knew what a parade of nudes we've already seen here!'

The guards chuckled again; they'd been looking forward to the fun while these Americans had been traveling back and forth in the train, while they were admiring the handsome, freshly painted ship, and while they were diligently writing letters after they could no longer contribute from their own bank accounts to increase those of Mr. Brenske and his superiors.

'Hey, sweetheart, don't tell me you're really embarrassed in front of us?' asked a young guard who was standing behind the lieutenant. He probably meant it seriously. The others laughed at him, particularly the lieutenant.

'Right!' goaded a second guard up in front. 'What's embarrassing about the way a person's born?'

'Get back, kid,' the lieutenant shouted at the younger guard. It was Lieutenant Horst Schillinger. He was the one to whom Mr. Brenske had given his instructions when he had gone to change his clothes at first and to whom he sometimes passed on some of his observations and advice, as the judicial branch passes on its recommendations to the executive. He was about forty years old and he looked like a killer.

'Now watch how you handle a flock of sheep that won't behave,' he said, and began to shout, 'Take off your pants, gentlemen! *Dali, dali!*'

This was a German expression which everybody understood. It meant do it fast. In an instant, all nineteen men stood there naked. They held their hands in front of them like substitute fig leaves and because they were really cold. Sly chuckles were heard.

Katerina Horovitzova blushed slightly, but she simply lowered her eyes. She heard and saw nothing of what was happening. These were no longer men in any of the senses in which she had defined men to herself before. She didn't look at anyone in any of the three groups – not at the nineteen naked men, or the ones in uniform, or those in prison clothes. The embarrassment she felt was of another sort and it was turned against herself.

Maybe she had simply forgotten to get undressed as she stood there thinking over what had happened to them during the last few hours, but she looked defiant in her fur coat when everybody else was either naked or stiffly buttoned up in uniform. She might have been able to stay that way for quite a long time, lost in thought, recalling years gone by, in her life and in others' too. But she found a different outlet for the feverish excitement and embarrassment which filled her.

'Hey, now, doesn't that go for you too, you cute little kike?'

And the lieutenant asked, 'Say, where did you dance with those gorgeous legs of yours? We've heard a lot about you. Aw, come on, tell us. Let's see, huh?'

Up until that moment, there had been something of the child in Katerina Horovitzova's face, but whoever knew how to read a person's eyes would suddenly have found maturity and understanding there. She waited to hear what the lieutenant would say next. She didn't have to wait long.

'Well, *dali, dali*, take off those beautiful rags of yours,' he prodded her. 'Strip off everything you've got on your body. Anyway, all the stuff came from here. Go on, take off what you've got underneath too. This is probably the last you'll see of it. No use making such a fuss.'

Without looking into her eyes, which glittered not only with comprehension but with hatred too, he explained, 'We know what's going on, all of us you see here

hanging around and wasting our precious time this way. We've been around and we've seen plenty. It's a fact, they're waiting for you down there in Switzerland, up on some mountaintop, most likely, where the air's first class. But they want you clean as a lily, so you can't get out of taking a bath.'

With his last words, he took pity on her and became serious. He stepped closer as though he wanted to help her off with the fur coat.

But just then Katerina Horovitzova began to take off the coat herself, probably so the lieutenant would not touch her.

She let the fur coat slip from her shoulders and down her back. She glanced around the room and because the clothes hooks were on the other side, she let the coat fall to the floor. Lieutenant Schillinger watched her closely and when it was obvious that she intended to continue, he stepped back so the others could watch. She had been successful with the initial effect she had wanted to achieve. Her fingers toyed with the buttons on her blouse and skirt, while she watched him contemptuously, with no more trace of a stubborn child's capriciousness. Her glance swept over the men in uniform who stood in front of her, but it did not touch for a flicker of a second those in prison clothes or the naked ones. Her eyes were the color of old honey, glowing with a weary defiance. She was no longer frightened by what the lieutenant had said to her. She didn't believe a word of it, and if she was still afraid, for the first time in her life she succeeded in overcoming fear. She smiled to herself at the way she had watched that big beautiful ship, the *Deutschland*. She had probably stared at its strong steel prow for longer than any of the others. They had allowed them to gaze, she thought to herself now; it was worth it for them to go to such expense, just to put more money in their own pockets. They had extorted huge sums of Swiss gold right from under the noses of these nineteen Americans. She could not appreciate the value of so much money. Some of the naked men there in the dressing room were watching her reproachfully because she was holding things up. They probably still didn't realize what this was all about. But she knew by now she knew everything, or almost everything. She wondered why the tailor was there. This had surprised her. She belonged here, on the other hand. There was no getting away from it. The camp was everywhere. She had her race and her origin and there was no escaping them. Suddenly she wondered whether there really was any other world beyond this camp. Her fingers dropped from the buttons on her blouse and skirt. It was obvious to everyone that she was not going to get undressed now, if indeed she had ever intended to when she had removed the fur coat. All the men in uniform were properly dressed, even snugly, and they couldn't catch cold like the naked men who stood there, huddled together to keep warm. There was no longer any difference between those who had American passports and those at the other end of the underground washroom in their zebra-striped clothing. Mr. Landau and Mr. Klarfeld nervously inspected their white bars of soap, which were about the size of matchboxes. Freddy Klarfeld memorized the factory number stamped into the side of the soap as though it were a matter of commercial importance. It must be a pretty

cheap brand of soap, he thought to himself. Katerina Horovitzova realized she wouldn't be able to keep on her clothes much longer and she stared at the floor. Lieutenant Horst Schillinger hesitated for a minute, but encouraged by the way she had averted her eyes, he shouted at her suddenly.

'Well, what's wrong?' It sounded much better in German. *Was ist denn los!* As though he were herding cattle. But it wasn't necessary to translate it, or most of what he said after that, and fortunately this didn't even occur to Mr. Herman Cohen. He had even forgotten about the debits and credits filed away with Mr. Friedrich Brenske and perhaps he'd forgotten everything else too. His soft white hands, which he held in front of him, were trembling, and this affected the other eighteen gentlemen.

Katerina Horovitzova could feel the debility which emanated from the huddle of human beings there beside her as they shivered in the raw autumnal air. She wasn't embarrassed any longer, as the men in uniform thought she was. She had stopped getting undressed for quite a different reason. She understood everything that had happened during these last few hours and she did not think about what was to happen in the years ahead. There were no longer any years ahead. Only a blind man could believe there was still hope. For a moment she could still see the huge, apparently unsinkable ship, the *Deutschland*, and hear the roar of the sea and the rattle of the Pullman coach wheels as they rushed along the rails. She stepped sideways so she wouldn't fall if Horst Schillinger or someone else stuck the muzzle of his pistol into her ribs. She imagined she heard Mr. Friedrich Brenske's voice.

'Get undressed,' Lieutenant Schillinger said. 'You made a pretty good start. What're you stalling for now? Got your soap? You have! Did we give you the number of your clothes hook? Sure. We've done our part; now get a move on and don't hold things up!

And to emphasize his words, he put his hand on his pistol butt.

She noticed his gesture without the slightest fear now, prepared for anything.

'What's holding up your stockings? Is that the main hold up?' He chortled, pleased with his wit. 'Come on, come on, do what you're told! Get those clothes off. *Dali, dali, dali!*'

He saw that now his orders would be obeyed. He grinned complacently. People almost always obeyed him. (Later, Mr. Brenske told Lieutenant Schillinger's platoon that 'if we assume our enemy's character is like a fortress we must storm in order to grind him into dust, then we must also assume that this fortress has its weak points. But we mustn't ever be too sure of ourselves. When you're looking for examples, I might compare the walls and its loopholes to a tiny door which has been overlooked in the fortifications of what was once the most important city in the world when it was conquered and yet it was a city on which its would-be conquerors broke their teeth.' Mr. Brenske could feel how much vital experience breathed from this sentence, experience few people before him had ever had. He savored all its many meanings and he had no more to say, even though, in other circumstances, he was never chary with words.)

Everybody's attention was fixed on Katerina Horovitzova now. She lifted her skirt, revealing smooth white legs from her thighs down past her knees and to her ankles; she slipped off her shoes and left them lying next to the fur coat. Horst Schillinger gulped, without even realizing that during the past twenty-four hours many German men who had been responsible for her or who had been in her presence had done the same. He didn't have to remind himself about the other women he had had or about his own Hildegard, because all that was quite different. And unconsciously he gulped again, lecherously, enviously and appreciatively. He was entranced and he did not conceal it in front of any of the other men. Katerina Horovitzova didn't have to be urged anymore. She no longer seemed to be paying any heed to what was going on around her. With a slow deliberateness that grew out of something somewhere inside of her, she took off the skirt with its five buttons, which had been made for her not long ago, then the black silk blouse. She didn't even bother to take her clothes over to the hook; she simply let them fall to the floor. Nobody said a word.

'What do you say about that, kid?' Lieutenant Schillinger addressed his young deputy hoarsely. 'Take a look at the handiwork of the Jew god.'

Now Lieutenant Schillinger decided he would make her take off her last garment. His lips were moist, as though he had been drinking. Suddenly he cursed her coarsely.

'What're you so scared of, you Jew Carmen?'

And he added something even worse, which almost gave the game away to the huddled bunch of nineteen naked men.

This was the cliff, the chasm which they had been approaching for a long time; but its dimensions had been adjusted in their own minds to it their hopes. Up until just a little while ago.

A lot of words had been kneaded into different shapes in order to make this self-deception easier for them and a great deal of effort had been invested. This in itself may be looked at in different lights. These people had been transported to the brink of the chasm, to the edge of the cliff, accompanied by debits and credits and Wagons Lits. They could hear the rustle of the leaves in their bankbooks as a great ship rocked at anchor and words were spoken to them, assuring them that life can be bought and death be paid off. Now preparations were being made to give it the form of a bath and an empty shower. It was no longer so easy to tell oneself that there was a lake on the other side of the chasm or beyond the cliff and that if a few chosen people had enough strength and the opportunity, they could swim to safety on the other side. There was only the great, gaping pit, nothing more. They could see it now, right in front of them. Mr. Leo Rubin began to say his prayers. Mr. Rauchenberg squinted and Mr. Cohen fixed his gaze on the girl's head and on her expression, which was sterner and more austere than it had ever been before. He foundered in the brown and green depths of her eyes. They were infinitely deep.

Lieutenant Schillinger cursed again. It was the worst curse Katerina Horovitzova had ever heard and he wound up by ordering her, 'Take off those rags! You're going

to dance for us like we tell you to!'

He said a lot more, but there is no need to repeat it. She touched her underclothes.

'Don't worry,' Horst Schillinger encouraged her. 'Every well brought up lady takes her sunbaths naked at this swimming pool.'

This touched off even louder laughter. That is probably why he added, more for the others' sake than hers, 'Rent your underwear from our company. Fully guaranteed. Use our brand.'

She had to lean slightly backward to unfasten her brassiere. She bent her arm sharply at the elbow and suddenly ripped off the delicately embroidered piece of white lingerie, striking Horst Schillinger right between the eyes with the hooks at the end of it, just as he was laughing hardest. He was momentarily blinded by surprise as well as pain. Hundreds of thousands of people had already passed through this dressing room, as docile as sheep, and nothing like this had ever happened before.

Lieutenant Schillinger couldn't react, either with amazement or by fighting back. He had been entirely unprepared for the blow he had been struck. Eyes blinded by stinging tears, he could feel Katerina Horovitzova yanking the pistol out of his open holster. It felt as though it were happening far away. He groped for the gun but it was gone and she shot him in the stomach. He crumpled to the floor with a wolfish howl. His deputy, the young man he'd just called 'kid,' had his wits about him and jumped forward. German soldiers have always been trained in a spirit of close comradeship and no one had ever undermined this moral character of theirs. Almost at the same moment, another shot flashed from the muzzle of the pistol in Katerina Horovitzova's hand. It was only a tiny flicker in comparison to all those belching chimneys and, unlike them, it soon went out. But the kid's body crumpled too. She could feel her heart beat, but she had heard nothing. Not even the dry crack of the bullet. She simply understood and killed. And it wasn't at all as impossible as it had seemed all her life or even at the moment she was pulling the trigger. Now the other Germans swiftly drew their pistols, but some of them didn't have time. Others fumbled and dropped their guns in the shuffle which followed. All of them, without firing a shot, moved back to the first door so they would not injure their own men, so they could keep their backs covered and so that the naked group which was shifting uneasily from one foot to the other could not escape. But it hadn't even occurred to the nineteen men to try. Two young soldiers held the unarmed herd at bay while two of their uniformed comrades carried out the wounded. They were followed by the rest of the soldiers. They were probably afraid that Katerina Horovitzova might fire another shot. All that stayed behind was a stretcher which one of the retreating platoon had shoved in from outside like a taunt. And the nineteen men. Mr. Leo Rubin was still saying his prayers.

Suddenly Mr. Friedrich Brenske's frosty voice sounded from the back of the dressing room.

'Now, now, what's all this, gentlemen? It would be a tragedy if you aren't able to get going in time. Everything's arranged and your diplomatic representative will have

a word with you after you've had your bath. Everyone I've spoken to is waiting for you by now. The Swiss physician is just outside – a Red Cross official. Gentlemen, for goodness' sake, calm down.'

His voice, without any trace of excitement, echoed with all the other things he'd told them between the two sundowns. It had a hollow ring to it, as though it were coming from a great distance. Perhaps he was trying to control himself so he could speak calmly – or speak at all.

He was answered by another pistol shot from Katerina Horovitzova, whom he had overlooked in his appeal. She fired, but it didn't hit anybody because she didn't really know how to aim the gun. With each shot she fired, she said somebody's name. The last was Lea's.

Mr. Brenske spoke up again, but this time not to the chosen people with American passports. 'Commandos, get busy!' It sounded reluctant.

Then several men in prison clothes rushed out from around the corner of the wall where they had been crouching to protect themselves from ricocheting bullets. The tailor was among them. They snatched up the weapons which had been dropped, but they didn't turn them toward where Mr. Brenske stood. Instead, as he intended when he shouted his command, they aimed the guns at the nineteen men and one woman who stood huddled together. They herded them all into the washroom, after which a man in prison clothes slammed the outer door and secured it with an iron bolt. The tailor wearily rested his skinny hand against the bolt, and for a second he closed his eyes as Mr. Rauchenberg had been doing. He understood a lot; there was a lot he didn't understand and there was a lot which had been inevitable. When Lieutenant Schillinger had at first questioned whether the tailor should be present at all, Mr. Brenske had explained that 'when a lion tamer shows any weakness in front of an animal, he's finished.' Then, too, Mr. Brenske and Lieutenant Schillinger had realized for some time that blood and blood relationships alone are never decisive, even though German professional magazines were full of that very thing just then. It was strength that counted, rather, and the realization of which side has the superiority and power and who will be the one to present the bill when the rebellion is over. For Lieutenant Schillinger, the exception had simply proved the rule. Reward played its role here too. So the whole thing, like everything which had happened before and that which came after, really took only a few seconds.

Katerina Horovitzova was closest to the door and she could feel Herman Cohen's cold body behind her. At first, she beat against the door with the pistol buff and then she used her fists until her knuckles began to bleed. While the light was on, she could see how the room looked inside. Mr. Samuel Landau and Mr. Freddy Klarfeld were clutching their soap as if they didn't want to part with it for the life of them. There was a blue light like a cellar bulb set deep into the rough concrete ceiling and covered with a rustproof wire grille. The shower heads were pear-shaped and the dilapidated floor drains stank. The doors were tightly shut and nothing made sense anymore. She could feel the dampness, probably because people just like them and naked just as

they were had taken showers here not long ago. She was wrong. The dampness had another cause. But they were the same kind of people.

'Those were our own people who herded us in here . . .' said Herman Cohen. There was a shocked astonishment in his voice. Then he added with much less surprise, 'Rappaport-Lieben knew. Maybe we all knew, really.' And then he said, 'I smell gas.'

Now he understood what the people had been whispering about on the ramp. Their 'there' was *here*.

That was the only time Katerina Horovitzova almost screamed, but just as she opened her mouth, she almost strangled on her own saliva. It was all she could do not to choke. After that, she was quiet, but she began to beat against the door, which was made of good strong German oak. Mr. Schnurdreher was losing his senses, because first he said that Mr. Rappaport-Lieben had saved himself from this and then he corrected himself and said he'd brought it on himself. With Mr. Klarfeld's shoe, which had somehow found its way into the washroom, he began to hammer at the light bulb in the ceiling, destroying their only source of light. Nobody even tried to stop him. Katerina Horovitzova's pounding on the door gradually grew feebler too. They were in darkness.

After a few minutes, the doors opened suddenly and the blinding glow of a flamethrower drove the little throng into the farthest corner of the room.

Suddenly Katerina Horovitzova's grip loosened and the pistol she had been holding slipped from her fingers to the floor.

Mr. Friedrich Brenske and a dozen men in frog uniforms, wearing helmets and armed to the teeth, set up their machine guns in the doorway of the washroom. The Jewish commando crew stood behind, the ash-eyed tailor among them. Without much fuss and at the command of Mr. Brenske, they began to mow down the twenty people, one by one. Mr. Brenske didn't even try to deliver one of his grandiloquent prologues. He didn't say anything anymore about how nice it would be if both sides joined forces against their most deadly enemy, as he had made a point of doing so pertinently before. He didn't bother with any eloquent oratory. It wasn't a part of the program and it wouldn't have been appropriate anymore.

'Fire,' he said again. 'Now it's your turn. . . .'

Mr. Brenske had accepted without objection the request of Lieutenant Schillinger's platoon that it be handled this way and with these weapons. It was neither a wise idea nor a foolish one; it was simply following the precept. 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' as one of the soldiers said.

Mr. Hans Adler was the first to be shot, as though things must always be done alphabetically. Then Johann Ginsburg and Stepan Gerstl were executed, almost together with Oldrich Ekstein. Herman Cohen came next. He had been trying so hard to convince himself of his own manliness that he had not even thought to pick up one of the loaded pistols which had been dropped in the melee. Then it was Katerina Horovitzova's turn. Thanks to the perfection of German weaponry, it was

all over in a second. Even the clack of the machine guns and the ping of the empty gilt cartridges were soon over. Those who had been manning the guns crouched there for a second and then they all got up together.

Slowly a few of the men entered the washroom, along with Friedrich Brenske, followed by the prisoners from the commando crew. Among them was the tailor with the ashen eyes, who moved with noticeable listlessness. He had been assigned to the crew as a punishment by Mr. Brenske, because of the message for Katerina Horovitzova's family which had been found in the bottom of the suitcase in which he had brought the lingerie to the synagogue. That was scarcely twenty-four hours ago, counting last night. The tailor had known what his daily duties were going to be from now on and he knew that his days were numbered too. The Chief of Cremation made no secret of this to any of them. The men in Lieutenant Schillinger's depleted platoon finished off the last two moaning survivors, short-sighted Mr. Otto Rauchenberg from New York City and Mr. Sol Raven from Los Angeles, originally from Warsaw. German military language has an apt and much-used word for this: *Genickschuss* – the *coup de grâce*.

Mr. Jiri Vaksman and Messrs. Josef Varecky and Benedict Zweig lay across one another as though someone had stacked them up into a pyramid or for a campfire so all that was needed was to strike a match. The others were scattered around on the floor like logs.

Mr. Lowenstein's mouth was half open as though he had wanted to ask for something at the last minute.

Mr. Friedrich Brenske, the specialist for this group of twenty with their genuine American passports, went into the washroom because he was conscientious. He wanted to find Katerina Horovitzova. He said to himself, All I do is step out for a little while and all sorts of things begin to happen. Well, here I am, back again, so everything's going to be all right.

The men in uniform kept on shouting at one another excitedly and bumping into the commando crew in their striped clothing.

The tailor leaned against the wall like a pillar of salt. Katerina Horovitzova was lying to one side of Herman Cohen, who had always been right up front as the intermediary and interpreter (though he wasn't always absolutely accurate), whose word carried the most weight between Mr. Brenske and the side which his own officials so inadequately represented. But if he could have done so, Mr. Brenske might have comforted Mr. Cohen now and told him that long before he and his American friends had come on the scene – and long after they would have left a lot of people more vigilant and less credulous than they had been had also been lured from the path of judgment and reason. Mr. Brenske was an expert at the job. Or perhaps he wouldn't have said anything like that after all, simply because their trip to the final solution had run so smoothly, until a little while ago, accompanied by illusions, which can be lovely things even if they're lies. Such illusions can escort their victims to heaven or hell to the accompaniment of the sweetest-sounding words.

What Katerina Horovitzova had done came as a real surprise to Mr. Brenske, even though nothing usually surprised him and he could have written a book about human credulity and what fear can make a person do. She had been killed by one clean shot right through the heart. The machine gun had behaved with tact and moderation. There was only a tiny, bloody-edged circle on Katerina Horovitzova's soft and strikingly white breast, a spot which of itself – or perhaps because of the resilience of her young skin had drawn inward as though it wanted to hide. Mr. Brenske gave orders that her body should be left here for the time being while the others could be burned in the usual way. And then he commended the Jews from the commando crew who had helped the men in uniform in such an exemplary way, as though they had been bound in an invisible comradeship to those who killed against those who were killed. As a reward, they were to receive larger food rations tomorrow and for the next three days. Each of them would also get a can of blood-streaked horse liver paté, a can of smoked fish from the German seas and a bottle of domestic rum. Then he ordered everybody to tidy things up so the next operation would not be delayed. Mr. Brenske smiled with dry contentment. He was rather tired, but he didn't let it show because he was still on duty. He knew how to reassure and comfort other people and that is why he had got as far as he had. Under different circumstances, he might have devoted himself to the occult, but even this assignment had its advantages as a temporary alternative. Actually, a momentous idea was taking shape in his mind at that very moment.

The next day, starting at sunrise, the body of the nineteen-year-old Jewish dancer Katerina Horovitzova was exhibited on the order of Mr. Friedrich Brenske in the warehouse next to the oven where hair was usually dried, hair which had been cut from the heads of dead women when they came out of the gas chambers. Everything had been thought of with meticulous care. Part of the commando crew hosed down the waxy bodies they had just removed from the gas chambers, to cleanse them of all undesirable discharges and excretions. This might be blood choked out of ailing lungs or it might be the normal blood of childbearing women or young girls. Sometimes the blood had been drawn by its owner's fingernails or by someone who was standing close. Some groups included a great many children and it sometimes happened that a few of them survived because the bodies were packed in so tightly that the gas did not penetrate all the way down to the level of their heads.

As every informed person knew, this warehouse was the place where Rabbi Dajem of Lodz reigned. He never stopped saying his prayers, even when they finally brought in the body of Katerina Horovitzova and piled it on top of the others as if on a catafalque. He entwined himself with the religious articles which – for most people – bear unintelligible Hebrew names, and after that he gazed night and day at the person whose marriage service he had performed and who in death still had all her hair, which was as beautiful as silk. It was black as coal. Sometimes, in moments of clarity, which were like something between a sunrise and a sunset, Rabbi Dajem from Lodz compared it with the souls of his jailers. He was not allowed to die because once,

when he had begun to sing in the transport group which was going to the gas chambers, Mr. Friedrich Brenske had heard him. He picked him out and let him live. After that, Mr. Brenske kept insisting to him that they must be friends because comradeship is never impossible, no matter how improbable it might seem. He assigned him to sing to the dead women's hair until it was dry and ready to be shipped off to Germany, where it would be used for making nets and mattresses and cloth. Suddenly the place was full of rats. Surely there were more of them than there had ever been before. They weren't even afraid of people.

For three days, from dawn to sunset, the camp directors came to look, at the invitation of Mr. Friedrich Brenske. First the officers came from the camp and from the secret division, then noncommissioned officers, and finally the enlisted men. After everybody else had come and gone, some of the Jewish prisoners were permitted, or rather commanded to come. The tailor provided the commentary about what had happened. At first, when the others came and hence there were fewer visitors than later, Mr. Brenske asked him whether he could make a few adjustments on the suit he had made for Herman Cohen so that Mr. Brenske could wear it himself. It had looked so nice when they left for Hamburg. And he also asked him to find another fur coat for his wife, Gerda, just like the one he'd got in the warehouse for Katerina Horovitzova. A little bigger through the shoulders and around the waist, though. She was coming to visit him during winter vacation.

'Yes, sir,' said the tailor respectfully.

But after that, Mr. Brenske ignored him. The tailor didn't look quite so benumbed anymore, just preoccupied. He felt as though he would be able to do anything now; a condemned man finally puts his own head in the noose because even when he stands under the gallows, he is willing to believe, if someone persuades him in the right way, That sulfur and fire are sugar and cream and that he'll be able to enjoy them to his heart's content after they send him away to where he doesn't know a soul. Naturally, they would execute him without a qualm because the dead can no longer testify against themselves to show they were mistaken. At most, he might still be able to shed a few tears while still alive, either with the rope under his chin or else with the first whiff of gas in his lungs. Because it never should have turned out this way. But until that time, why shouldn't he make himself useful?

Mr. Brenske was daydreaming; he thought about the tailor, the fur coat for his wife and about a thousand other things, most of them different from the others. Each such thought was like a very minor sin and all these banal offenses and omissions had their own built-in rebuttal.

In his report submitted somewhat later to headquarters in Berlin, Friedrich Brenske described in detail the case of this group which had been captured in Italy after July 9, 1943, had held American passports until the end and had been so grossly rejected by their own authorities (at least from the administrative aspect). As though the worth of German generals and high-ranking officers could not be measured in gold! He told how he had undertaken an exhausting – but, from his point of view,

successful – train trip to Hamburg, thereby gaining additional valuable experience, as well as a tidy additional sum for the German Reichsbank. He mentioned Katerina Horovitzova's mutiny, making a point of her beauty and her expression of almost childlike innocence, using this as the excuse for the death and wounding of members of the secret division, particularly the late Lieutenant Horst Schillinger and young Sepp Hoyer, known as 'the kid' among the other men in the platoon, who had been shot while he was trying to take the pistol away from her. He wrote about the danger which had faced all twelve men who might have been seriously injured and he mentioned that Sepp Hoyer would probably remain a cripple all his life. But at the end, he noted the amount of money which this operation had brought in. To this he affixed a period and his signature. (With all his experience and erudition, Mr. Brenske had no idea that his story of Katerina Horovitzova would remind his superior in Berlin of another woman, who had cut off the head of a certain general. Of course, she'd got him good and drunk beforehand. So it was no surprise that Mr. Brenske didn't refer to it in his report. Even so, it made a fascinating story.)

Mr. Friedrich Brenske glanced over his work. It looked very nice. In the meantime, his adjutant had opened the window and from the nearby drying room he could hear Rabbi Dajem from Lodz. He was singing. His song was awfully melancholy, but undeniably beautiful all the same. Thoughtfully Mr. Brenske smiled to himself and said, 'For them it's natural and for us it's madness. Or is it the other way around?'

But he didn't answer his own question.

And Rabbi Dajem from Lodz began to caress Katerina Horovitzova's hair as he had once before. Then he stroked her cheek. As he did this, he spoke to her. 'Ah, my little one, ah, my gentle little one. My brave child. May your name be blessed, even before God's own name. You courageous little one, my fighting spirit. May your name be blessed a hundred times.'

And later he watched how her body burned, after the hair had been cut off. He said it all once more in his song, which neither Mr. Friedrich Brenske nor his adjutant nor any of the others understood.

'... A hundred times courageous, a hundred times good, a thousand times just, a thousand times beautiful,' he sang.

In: Lustig, Arnošt. *A Prayer for Katerina Horovitzova*. Translated by Jeanne W. Němcová. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.