

1Göppingen. Beautiful area. In the distance, the Dreikaiserberg mountain. Like many of his compatriots, Capesius did not go back to Transylvania after 1945. A court in Kolozsvár had sentenced him to death. Was he homesick? Yes, he was homesick. I was at Capesius' home, at "Vik's", as my mother used to call him, I was paying him a visit in Göppingen. And he was happy to have found a fellow countryman; he would have been risking his life to go back home to Transylvania.

Capesius was mother's dancing school teacher during her high school days in Sighişoara; the heavily built SS-druggist, the man from the ramp, so frighteningly close at hand? He and his wife greeted me as a compatriot, almost touched to see the son of their old friend from back home standing before them. But I felt a cold shiver run down my back, I had to conceal my trembling hands after they had clasped them warmly.

2.

They are herding us toward the showers. I see a long trench blazing with flames, I hear screams, children crying, dogs barking, gunshots. I see leaping shadows, half-hidden behind the high flames. Smoke, ash, and the smell of burnt hair and flesh fills the air. "This cannot be true," cries someone near me. Women, children, and invalids are chased, alive, into the flames by German shepherds. A wave of heat, then shots. A wheelchair carrying an old man plunges into the flames; a shrill cry. Infants trace an arc through the air like falling white blossoms as they are hurled into the fire. A boy runs for his life, the dogs chasing him; he is pushed into the flames. His scream hangs in the air. A mother is nursing her child at her naked breast. She and the baby fall into the inferno. One swallow of mother's milk, for eternity.

Adam saw it, Adam knows it, he knows something we do not know, something we will never know.

But he survived it.

So even he doesn't know what the dead know.

Writing helped him survive. He wrote there, and he wrote in German.

Adam: I am a German, it was they who made me a Jew. German is my mother tongue. When I couldn't go on, when it became so unbearable that all I wanted to do was to jump into the fire with my fellow sufferers, into that pit of burning human beings, then I gave it all to German, my mother tongue, as if only she could heal this, she alone. Here, read it: I cannot forget. And he handed me one of his pages, covered with tiny script.

This is Adam, who was there, a member of the crematorium "Sonderkommando," a man who has something within him we cannot comprehend:

Adam's experiences cannot be told in words: *It's like that for us all, Adam says, we who went through it, we come from another world...an abyss separates us from you, a sort of vacuum of horror, it has to do with naked life itself.*

For everything on earth has changed since THAT!

Eliminato: "there,"

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Eliminato: THERE

And he quoted a poem of Paul Celan, (also from Czernowitz, like Adam), speaking to himself softly, very softly, for now it was the dead speaking, the victims, the murdered ones, it seemed, coming from beyond the border back to us, the living, as if wanting to give us hope and comfort, because everything was different now, because that old death no longer existed, because we didn't need to fear it any more, for now THEY were actually there, quiet, hopeful, but barely audible: *If there can be any sense in the death of millions of victims, it would have to be in the sheer crazy hope that a crossing has opened on the frontier between life and death. Celan: "In the mills of death you grind the white meal of / promise, you set it before our brothers and sisters / we shake out the white hair of time..." "...and let something now come which never was before!// Let there come a human being from the grave."*

Adam's tiny rolls of paper, which looked like miniature papyri written in German, contained things which even he had forgotten, indeed, had had to forget, so he could go on living. He pulled out these rolls, as if they were the witnesses, and not he, as if it had all started with them...he took them hesitantly from the ancient, beat-up desk, tentatively, as if they didn't belong in the everyday world, things that could not be seen or felt, like copies of burned Torah rolls...that was how he touched them, these yellowed paper rolls...lying in his open hands...he bent over them... sniffed them...then he held them out to me...as if he wanted to tell me something that was impossible to impart in any other way...and no, they didn't smell like old paper...they still had smoke, ash, and the smell of burnt skin in them...

Once I had asked him how he could possibly bear speaking German after "that." At this he became very angry, he shouted: *"But it was these SS guys who wanted to turn me into a Jew, before that I didn't even know I was a Jew--I was a German with this language I had babbled even as a baby. It comforted me, this language, it wept within me, this, my language. I clearly heard its weeping when these human animals --they did come from Germany, yes, they were "Germans," but could not speak proper German—when these animals would shout their false "German" phrases, these anal-phabetic who could only bark German like dogs . I refused: I was the German, and they were the animals...clearly, and they did not succeed in making me a Jew. I am a German AND a Jew, a gift, he laughed bitterly, "may it remain part of me and all my feelings, my very existenece, my poems and diaries,--, these un-Germans and murderers cannot be allowed to win, even afterwards, and claim that THEY stand for what is "German."*

Eliminato: , these anal-phabetic,

Eliminato: , anal-phabetic

II

Adam: When we opened up the gas chambers, we Sonderkommandos always pulled our gas masks on, since otherwise the gas still remaining among the bodies caused the most horrible coughing attacks and choking fits, even in small amounts. We carried water hoses as we entered the chamber of horrors, which was flooded with harsh light. You can hardly imagine what we saw before us: at first I covered my eyes, I didn't look, I just sprayed the hose with my head turned away.

So at the bottom lay the children, babies, and old people, and on top of them the stronger men. And they were all clutching each other tightly, their bodies covered with scratches, blood running from their noses and mouths. Their faces were bluish, swollen and disfigured beyond recognition. And yet among the bodies we would occasionally recognize someone, relatives, or acquaintances. Sometimes, even, a brother, a sister, a mother, children...

Adam needed a break. I could hear his quiet voice say:

Tenebrae: Tenebrae. // Lord, we are near. / Near, and touchable. // Touched already, Lord / Grasping one another , as if / the body of each one of us / were your body, Lord// Pray, Lord,

/pray to us / we are near // Your image was cast into our eyes, Lord. / Eyes and mouth are so open, so empty, Lord.

We are close, Lord

Close and within reach.

Seized already, Lord,

clawed into our selves as though

the body of each of us were

your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,

pray to us,

who are close by.

Against the wind we went there,

went there to bend

over hollow and ditch.

To drink we went there, Lord.

It was blood, it was

That which you shed, Lord.

It gleamed.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.

Our eyes and mouths stand open and empty, Lord.

We have drunk, Lord.

The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.

We are near.