

Auschwitz Days

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"FIRE!" — whenever the men roared for it, the sweetness of blood was tasted. The hedonic excitement overpowered the patriotism of human emotion and relationship. "Drink from it, all of you. This is the blood of the covenant, poured out to forgive the sins of many." The Head of Execution peacefully addressed the gathered men in the warmth of the beautiful music played in the background. Their wine tasted like the blood consumed by the mob that echoed the words of their authorities who shouted, "Kill him!"

Darkness had already begun to engulf every source of light that had many obstacles to sustain its fire. Desolation in the city extended to the nearby villages that had previously been affected little by the hatred spread by the stubborn stone-hearted man to many similar souls on earth. Its gradual dissemination gave the victims less hope for survival.

"Daddy, why are you packing your clothes?" little Yehiel asked Goldberg. Though he tried to pretend to be happy, he wasn't. All the men in the village were informed by the army to get ready for work at the places that had been allotted for them. It was disappointing as they had no guarantee that they would get their wages on time. The unfortunate situations in the country made them uncertain about their future. Even amid financial constraints, he showed no hint of any emotional outburst towards his family. On the brink of getting shattered into pieces, he would crush his emotions and put a lovely smile on his face. He knew Yehiel would miss him and cry as soon as he stepped out of the house. As he expected, it happened. He could hear her cry that gradually dissolved in the humidity of the parlous atmosphere until the bus crammed with men took a turn in the right direction. He might have told her that he was going for a job, but his blood red eyes soaked with tears made her question the lack of truth in his words. Many times, she has felt it from him – especially when they met the barbarous officers waiting to torture them in the city.

"Do you have an idea of where they are taking us?" asked a man with a bald head and bulging eyes at Goldberg. He nodded his head as if he knew nothing about the present and the future. It was a mutual feeling among all in the bus which might have been used before for cattle transport. "They might use us to do hard labour. It's our fate as we are Jews," said a man who stood next to them. "There is a rumour in the city that those who were taken for work had

not yet returned even after several months. If we are taken to such a workplace, we will also have to be away from our home for ... I don't know how long!" said the bald man. Though they crossed various streets, buildings, houses, woods, and farms that crossed his eyes while looking through the windows, he could only see Yehiel and Greta. Both were smiling at the same time when they were bitterly sad. Yehiel was five years old. He couldn't provide a better life because of the discrimination and restrictions on Jews working in the city. The kids were aware of the situation and never asked for anything. Yehiel knew that something beyond the realm of her understanding hauled the happiness that she tried hard to nurture with their limited resources. Whenever she went for a walk with Goldberg in the city, she saw officers who struck men and women and accused them of crimes they had not committed. She also saw them treat her aunt brutally. When she asked her, "Why did they behave so badly towards you?", she replied, "They know nothing about humanity. They are monsters of the law, not humans." When she saw them on the streets after that, a huge portrait of a monster jumped out of her mind, saying, "Not humans, but monsters."

"Get down, you bastards!" — an arrogant voice yelled. Hearing this, Goldberg reminisced thoughts of his home and his past. They reached a place fenced with thick walls that acted as barriers. The walls intimidated the men of the strict rules that lay within. He realised that he would be alienated from the world outside. Once the bus drove in, he momentarily stared outside the gates, considering it to be the last he captured of the world outside. The compound was huge with many armed officers, fully armed, positioned everywhere. It seemed like a military base that seized the accused criminals who spent the rest of their lives within the confines of the walls. The pale algal growth creeping through the brick walls epitomized their lives within this enclosure.

Moving in a single file, Goldberg was directed to a hall with men of forty years and above. It took a while for him to get adjusted to the odour of clothes, the shabby room, and the stink of the common toilet at the corner of the room. Though he expected such situations, the reality made him taste the bitter truth behind his journey from his home. He saw a few sleeping, some lying on the bed that barely had any space for one, some in the middle of a conversation with other members in the room, some sitting as if ready for anything that could invite death, and some walking around the space they could find as if restless to fight against anyone who opposes their way.

"EVERYONE, MARCH TO THE CORRIDOR!" An army officer shouted through the grid that separated him from the prisoners. As instructed, within seconds, everyone began to queue and find their place. Though he requested for a spot, he was rejected. He wondered why

they declined such a request. *Has everyone turned selfish? Have they had enough by this time to be inhuman to a fellow being? I haven't asked for anything that belongs to them – it's just a little space that the earth has granted everyone.* Goldberg began to have random thoughts in his head. As he searched for a space, hoping that the line would end soon, he saw an endless loop of people, one behind the other, that came from nowhere to join them. *Where the hell did they all come from?* As he moved to the backside, hoping to secure a spot in the line, he discovered more room-like halls, thickly populated. *Good God! This is horrible.* He thought to himself. A man with a white beard, saw Goldberg standing helpless outside the row, dragged him inside as if nothing had happened. Goldberg turned back to see who was the person. The man forced him to look straight. *Who is he? Why did he get me in when no one was there to help me? Why did he restrict me from looking at him?* Goldberg uttered several questions to himself. "Do not turn. It will cause trouble for both of us," the old man said. *Thanks, at least he spoke.* "Who are you? Why did you help me?" – asked Goldberg, slightly moving his head to his right., "I'm Norbert Brady. I don't think you know me. I'm an old friend of your father, Mr Benjamin. We were neighbours." Though Goldberg knew nothing about Norbert, his response was satisfactory enough to make Goldberg happy.

The line of prisoners marched to the corridor where the higher officials of the place were present to evaluate the strictness and order of the labour camp. They had to sign a book that registered their official entry into the place. Goldberg was given a number to identify him inside the compound – 9034. They were directed to the factory that worked on the backside of the compound. While moving there, the old man held his hand and asked, "Why did you come to this hell?" It was a question immersed in an utter reality that had the power to dissolve every statement of the lie the officers had announced in the village.

"Did you say 'hell'?" Goldberg asked.

"Yes. If not hell, what is this? Tell me," Norbert said.

"Workplace?" Goldberg replied with doubt.

Norbert laughed hard at this response. "Even when we get a goat for our holy sacrifice, we take proper care of it. We give them what they require right up to the last moment. Don't expect it here. We are taken not to live but to serve them," he said. "I have heard some rumours spreading in our city. People say, we will return to our home only after a few months, if I am right," Goldberg said. Norbert laughed again. That wasn't out of joy, but because he knew that he wouldn't be able to go back to his hometown anymore. He did not say anything to Goldberg. He thought it would be better for him to gradually discover what awaited him in the camp.

That day went quite well for Goldberg. He had the work of assisting his fellow members in transferring loads of goods from one section of the factory to the other. Day two, three, four, ten, fifteen, and so on went as normal. He felt it was like a labour camp that was guarded by officers who always had aggressive eyes and mouths towards them. The Jews did not expect a warm welcome in a place controlled by the German Armed Forces. The harshness and negligence of the officers increased daily. Goldberg found out more secrets regarding the place they inhabited, the reason for their arrival, and what had happened to people who had come before them to the same place. Though he knew it was actually possible to happen, he couldn't believe it. One day, when Goldberg was busy at work in the factory, he saw someone shouting. It could be an officer using his authority over one of the workers, he thought. He still wanted to find out the matter. He saw a superior officer reprimanding his junior who made some mistake. Without a doubt, he looked for a clear sight of the junior officer's face. It was Joseph Heinrich. He knew him well. They grew up together as friends. When Joseph's father was transferred, they moved to another place. *That's a surprise! How could a shy and soft person like Joseph make his way to become a member of such a group? Has he changed, is he not as innocent as he used to be? Those years have passed, he may hate the likes of us!* Goldberg calculated the years and the many incidents triggered by the political and social conflicts in the country. It flashed through his mind. Power blinded men, who now act as demons.

After a few minutes of the session conducted by the superior, Goldberg walked downstairs to console him. Joseph was silent. He might have been sobbing. "Joseph, it's okay. You need not take it seriously," Goldberg said softly. "WHO THE HELL ARE YOU ON EARTH? GET TO YOUR WORK AND FINISH IT SOON," Joseph shouted at him with a wave of great anger that broke the walls of the soft-layered heart that Goldberg expected in him. "I'm sorry," Goldberg said and went back to his work. *He has changed a lot. He isn't the old Joseph who used to come to my house to play with my toys. He isn't who I expected. Isn't that Joseph? I made a mistake as I was excited to see him. I deserve it.* Goldberg murmured. He was sad because he was insulted in front of his co-workers. "Joseph wasn't like this. Maybe these men changed him, or he wanted to change himself to adapt to his job," Goldberg tried to convince himself by sharing his feelings with his fellow roommates. Whenever he saw Joseph later, he tried to hide from his sight.

During work, Goldberg was informed to report at the officer's launch. He walked slowly as he did not know why he was called personally at the odd time. Reaching an area that was covered with thick shrubs, he was dragged to the place behind a giant tree. "Why are you here? I didn't expect you here." It was Joseph. His eyes had a tone of sympathy that

overpowered his helplessness. "So, you remember me," Goldberg asked. "I know you. If I had not reacted like that on that day, it would have been you who would have suffered. Don't you know that no workers here try to have a conversation with the officers?" he asked. "I know. It happened out of my excitement. I was happy to see you ... but was sad to see you getting fired on that day," Goldberg said. "We shall speak more. I need to speak more. Now, get to your work." Joseph said.

They conversed through gestures so that other officials wouldn't notice them. Joseph had sympathy for Goldberg's situation in the camp. He knew there was no life inside or out for Goldberg. Whenever they got a chance to meet, they made use of the time. Through Joseph, Goldberg could sort out conversations with his family. He felt relieved. Joseph informed Goldberg about the changing situations in his village and the how the Nazi ruled every part of the country.

"Why do you work for them?" Goldberg once asked Joseph.

"To live and not die," Joseph answered.

Once, when there was a mock drill for the officers in the camp, Joseph tried to help Goldberg escape from the place. He managed to get Goldberg out of his caged room, walked through the corridors, overcoming the watchdog-sight, moved through many cells packed with prisoners and asked him to wait on the backside of the vineyard. While moving through each cell, Joseph informed Goldberg about the plight of their lives. For the first cell, he said, "These people were once proud of their existence until they were imprisoned. These men have forgotten the value of humility. They are now disturbed, aggressive, and violent. Be careful."

As they covered one after the other in the cell and reached the second, Joseph said, "Have you ever had envy, Goldberg?"

Goldberg said, "Yes. To people who saw me as not worthy of living in this world."

Joseph said, "These men were brought here because they had everything, at least something that made my officers envy them."

Goldberg asked, "So, you mean... if we had nothing, they would liberate us? I have very little possession of my own."

Joseph said, "Not in the way you think. They envy your life, your race, and your existence." Moving towards the third cell that was stinky and suffocating, Joseph said, "Their envy has turned to great anger. They might cook you in it. Do you know why these men stink?"

Goldberg said, "No. Why?"

Joseph said, "Look at their legs. You see why it is." Their legs had swollen skin that excreted some kind of white liquid that covered them surrounded by wet-sucking flies. Seeing it, Goldberg controlled his ache for vomiting. "Never mind. Come fast." Joseph said.

They passed the third cell and reached the fourth. "Do you know why the officers make you work day and night without proper food and shelter?" Joseph asked.

"No," Goldberg replied.

"You might have seen how the officers in the corridor work. Half-sleep and half-rest. They are too lazy to do their work. That is why they make you do everything in the name of service to the nation. What kind of service? Just serve their wish." Joseph said. Goldberg nodded his head while walking slowly to exit the room where everyone was asleep. They reached the fifth cell.

"You are here not only because they are arrogant, angry, envious, and lazy. You are here because they love you." Joseph said.

"Love us? Are you joking? They love us when they spit on our food!"

Joseph said, "They love you. They love what you have. They love your land. They love your wealth. They love your peace. They love your love. They take everything from you, and you are left with nothing here. This place becomes the place of nothing." Goldberg agreed to it, saying, "You are right. They took every happiness that I had. My family, my village, my people. I'm here as nothing."

Reaching the sixth cell of prisoners, Joseph said, "But, you know, Goldberg... that's just nothing. I can say that they won't gain anything by grabbing whatever you have. They won't become anything that they have thought to conquer and become." Goldberg asked, "Why? They are powerful. They will continue to be powerful and will surely eradicate my race. I'm helpless other than to witness it."

Joseph said, "I know. But remember, the same way you lost everything in your life..." Goldberg interrupted him, asking, "So you mean, these men won't be able to get back to their families soon to regain what they lost?"

Joseph said, "As you said before, they are powerful and sometimes ... I don't know, may eradicate your race. I'm helpless other than witness it."

"So, you mean, they will also kill me? Kill my family?" asked Goldberg, nervously. "That's why I'm trying to save you, Goldberg," said Joseph. "We should have told others the same. We need to save them too," Goldberg said in a hurry. "Not possible. If you get out of here, the authorities may not notice it soon. If they all manage to escape, that will get me in trouble." Joseph said.

"Okay. As you wish. But please try to let them escape soon. You were saying something..." Goldberg said.

"Yes. I was saying, the same way you people lost everything in your lives, they will also lose one after the other. You see, no autocracy that tortured people has sustained for a long time. Everything in this world will have its fall one day." Joseph said. "But the question is, will we both be there to witness it," Goldberg added.

They moved to the seventh cell. "Have you ever eaten until your stomach said it was about to burst?" Joseph asked. "No. Not even to the required quantity." Goldberg said. "Have you seen the dining tables and food plates of your officers?" Joseph asked.

"No. Never. How can I?" Goldberg said.

"I have seen it several times. Fully loaded plates that wait to dispose of the waste as soon as they finish it in the midway," Joseph said.

"That's what I have heard. Very cruel," Goldberg replied.

"I know that these people you see here may die within a few days. I'm helpless. If I give them food, I will also be thrown here," Joseph said. Goldberg looked at them with great fear, anxiety, and sympathy.

They reached the last cell. "Have you ever felt the warmth of lust?" Joseph asked. "Not from anyone other than my wife," Goldberg answered.

"Do you believe that the women here in this camp are safe from it?" Joseph asked. Goldberg had no answer.

"I know women who are forced to submit themselves to my officers. That's why I hate them." Joseph said.

"Do you believe that your wife and child are safe at home?" Joseph asked. Goldberg looked at him helplessly. "You said they are safe. You met them last time, right?" Goldberg asked. "I did. They are safe for now. I can't guarantee that safety any longer," Joseph replied. They reached the gate that opened to freedom. Joseph managed to move the guards from the gate for some time. He opened it for Goldberg. With great gratitude, Goldberg hugged Joseph. He had no more words for him to say a formal goodbye. Having shed a few drops of tears on the ground of the camp, he left there.

Goldberg hid behind the walls, shrubs, and under the vehicles. Joseph had told him to stay beneath a vehicle that would leave the camp in the morning. Goldberg did as per his instructions. He waited there patiently. The morning welcomed him with a great noise, cries, and howls. He looked in the direction of those sounds and saw Greta and Yehiel in the long row of people who were made to march into the camp. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Without thinking about anything at the moment, he got out of the bottom of the vehicle. As soon as he got out, the vehicle moved. He ran to them. Upon seeing him, Yehiel came towards him with great joy. As he was about to touch her hand to get her to him, he was kicked by an officer to the ground. He saw them taking Yehiel away from him to his wife. He was dragged in front of them to one of the prisons in the camp. Joseph ran to the place and stood helpless without being able to say anything to support of Goldberg. He could only see Goldberg's wife and child, tears and emotions that made anyone immerse in its sadness.

Though they were in the same camp, they were not allowed to meet each other. Goldberg could only see them from a distance, and that too, when they got out for work. One day, Joseph came to Goldberg and said, "You are allowed to see your family tomorrow." For more than a month, Goldberg waited for this moment of happiness. On that day, he saw Greta and Yehiel on the other side of the grid. Their eyes were soaked with the saltiness of their lives. He could touch their fingers that had many memories to share. Though he couldn't kiss them properly, he managed to touch his lips on their cheeks. They were crying and did not stop it even when they saw him. Though he stopped them from crying, his words did not have the power to console them. After a few minutes, they were separated again. Greta tried to hold on to the grid to resist the officers taking her back to the room. She couldn't resist the power that ruled her. Joseph had told her the truth that Goldberg would be taken to the gas chamber that evening. She couldn't control herself from crying. It was more than what her heart could take. After their meeting, Joseph said to Goldberg the same. He had no response. He was calm. He knew he had no option other than to face it. "Maybe, that's why you allowed me to see them for the last time, right?" Goldberg asked. Joseph had no words for him other than to have his head down for not being able to help him in any way.

When the lights were turned off, when there was no ray of hope, men and women were taken to the gas chambers. Goldberg saw many faces that tried to speak to the world from their hearts. He saw light, and he saw darkness. He saw shadows of humans around him until he went unconscious to embrace the truth of life – death!

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Goldberg jolted out of his bed. Nurses came to him and calmed him down. He couldn't believe what he saw. "Are they alive?" he asked them. "Who?" the nurse asked. He had no idea where he was or what had happened to him. He saw the digital clock that was kept on the table. The time was 12:15 pm. Friday, April 15, 2022. He could also see a translation of the book *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri kept on the table near him. He took it and turned the pages to trace the secret of what he had just seen.