

Camp, 1944

I remember the cold. Cold so hard it would drip under the seven fingernails left growing on my hands and stab shards of pain under them. My hands were bony and aged looking, far too scarred for a fifteen-year-old girl to be carrying around. One fingernail had been snatched my first day in camp, minutes after departing the railcar, when my grandmother's emerald ring was yanked, pulled from my finger with such vengeance and greed by a uniformed Nazi that my knuckle skin and my soft fingernail went with it.

I had no time to dwell on my losses—the childhood spent scurrying among the back alleys of Berlin, hiding, losing my family one by one. In camp there was no time to spend on anything but pursuing what knowledge I could about the rules and expectations of this camp. I stowed it away in my mind and trained my responses so I could survive, not forever, not for years, but for the next period of the day, the next eighty minutes. Survival was clocked in minutes and success was a two-hour period when no one noticed me, looked at me, made mental notes about me, touched me.

Untouched, I made the journey from back-street life to this camp Heinderwitz, the camp of old Jewish men and young Jewish women. One other type of female did roam here, Nazi matrons, many of them lesbians, more feared by the young gas-camp girls than the Nazi men. The men would rape, dole out a treat—a cookie or cracker—and leave. The females fondled your belly, rummaged your private parts with their full finger-nailed hands. The Nazis hated homosexuals almost as much as Jews, patching them with pink triangles. These women avoided detection, never accosting in public areas, only in hallways or behind trees where you were yanked and violated and shoved aside. The most hated woman in my section of the camp was Marguerite, a squat, black-haired Nazi who looked more Jewish than I did. She took great joy in her job of shoving filthy pieces of cloth at me, as long as I still had enough body fat to produce monthly cycles. She held out her hand for coins, for money she knew I didn't have, then laughed roughly as she refused me the clean bits and pieces of used fabric she portioned out to her favorites.

Clear-skinned and well-bosomed girls fared better than most in this camp. One morning my breakfast included broth—only for me, in a crowded bunkroom of thirty or more women. The broth was cold, topped with worms of gray fat that slithered their way across the top of the dipper and dropped into my tin cup as it was doled out only to me. I could feel myself being watched. I dared not slip the broth to my friend, Gretel, stalking death in a body broken by sixteen-hour days spent shoveling coal for the officers' houses or digging in the burial pits. Gretel was pregnant with a Nazi half-breed and counted each day she lived a triumph. I tipped the filthy cup and drank the broth quickly, the taste of rancid mutton fat triggering involuntary spasms in my stomach. I knew the broth was a treat, fat in it a special signal. I kept my eyes down as I was taken away from my group, away from the place where I had managed to survive and marched across the camp, beyond the paths where boxy German cars and a few English MGs roared and rumbled with important people on urgent missions.

I walked. Every now and then the troupe of young women was halted and another bunkhouse entered by three of the guards, returning in what seemed only seconds with several more young women. The quick turns and the sudden orders to halt kept me off balance. I fought to walk secure, not stumble, not call attention to myself. The guards were young, probably less than a couple of years older than myself. Energy oozed out of them; you could smell their cleanliness, their health, both proof they were showering daily and eating well. Uniforms were exact, buttons polished to a gleam and boots worn with young authority, stomping and quick.

The guard who marched beside me, then behind, then just one step ahead, was one of the privileged Aryan types, blond and blue-eyed, probably culled from his youth group and given this job to keep him from fighting on the Russian front. I looked at his acceptance of his duties of herding half-naked, cold and undernourished Jewish girls, and wondered if he would ever acknowledge his soul.

Starvation, rape, beatings. The despair of squalidness had pushed pain so deep inside my eyes were brown holes, letting no secrets out. I expected no pleasure, no bread, nor even sleep. I sought only to be invisible. The contrast was great. The guard was ready for the world's attention, its applause.

We were stripped and pushed toward showers, the matrons handing out hard, yellow soap for the right hand and pouring lice-killing shampoo into our left palm. The water was cold but the concept of cleanliness was flooding through me. I stopped not to look around, or to rebel or notice anything but to grasp the opportunity offered, and accepted, to become clean. I was jealous, carefully guarding, of the dollop of shampoo, lathered it hard on my head, wasting not a drop, scrubbing where hair was once again trying to grow after the last shaving, the head where lice lived and body mites roamed.

Rough towels were issued for drying. I could feel my inch-long hair squeaking with cleanliness. I was pointed toward a line. I stood, still, in my bare feet, as the cold from the cement floor snake-slithered up into my body. I was issued a robe, knee length, made of gray rayon, and I belted it snugly. It appeared to be new. I dared not let worry enter my mind, nor question the consequences of a new robe. I ordered myself to stand motionless for as long as I could.

The matron yelled; I moved in step, playing my invisible game, as my line entered a room filled with furniture. We stood. The overstuffed parlor furniture remained silent and empty. The room was big and easily held the three sofas and fifteen or twenty easy chairs placed around the edges of the room, in areas defined by red and black oriental rugs. We stood in the center of the room, less valuable than the brown plush furniture sent from Berlin.

Late morning, when the effect of the broth had worn off and the constant rumbles of hunger returned, I was pulled from my line, with three other girls, all of us with rounded hips and mature breasts. Herded once more, we marched to an old farmhouse on the edge of the compound. We were hurried to the second floor and led into what appeared to be a hospital ward. Iron cots rusting, covered with filthy, inch-thick mattresses of gray and blue striped pillow ticking

filled the room. A hole had been widened in the outside wall between two windows to accommodate a wide canvas sling-seat and a crane operated by pulleys.

Some cots were empty. A few held naked men. Although it was hard to determine age, they looked to be at least seventy. At the far end of the rooms, the cots were occupied with withered, shaking bodies of men. Two naked women, one on each side, clung close in their attempt to cover, to warm the man, their faces pushed into the foul mattresses, the trio over-filling the narrow bed.

A clothed guard raised his arms and pulled on the chains, hand over hand, setting the pulleys into action and dropping the chair-sling out the hole in the wall. The guard shouted and was answered from below. The chains reversed and another naked man, left in the cold for hours, was dragged through the window. He was beyond shivering, could not walk.

The door at the opposite end of the room opened, and a group of Germans strode toward the commotion at the wall opening. You could tell the difference between them and us; their hair was full on their heads and some wore glasses. All had clothing with buttons as well as shoes for their feet. The two men wore white doctors' coats, long, to their knees; the four or five women had shorter versions of the same double-breasted jacket, either linen or cotton, with a series of pockets spread down the left side. The women's legs glistened from the shine of rayon stockings rising out of black oxfords, substantial shoes, closed by black laces. Everyone in the group carried pieces of lab or medical equipment: beakers, thermometers, syringes, clipboards, stethoscopes. They surrounded the man brought in from outside, turned the unresisting body over and then rolled it back, chattering in staccato sounds.

I was ordered to strip. Another girl, barely thirteen, was pulled out of the group of three women and ordered to strip. We did so. I was proud to see that her head stayed as high as mine, her eyes revealing nothing.

We were ordered to get in bed, one on each side of the old man. A nurse read us instructions.

"You are to cover as much of this man as you can with your own bodies," she said. "It is your duty to warm him and bring him back to life. Do it now."

We got into the narrow cot and clung to the freezing body, our arms holding clammy skin that smelled of death. I heard snatches of conversation. This was an experiment for the glory of the Fuehrer and the honor of the Reich. The doctors and professors were gathering data to determine what temperatures the human body could fall to and still be warmed back to normal conditions, using a coarse salt rub and warmth from female bodies to stimulate circulation.

Liberation came eight months later. By then I no longer tallied the men who failed the experiment, who died, who were thrown away, forever to wander Ezekiel's valley, full of dry bones. I cradled the men, loving them at first, making them into my grandfather. Old memories winked at me, crept through my barriers, crooned to me. I invited these thoughts in occasionally; I sent them away when I could not cope. I struggled to warm the men. The Germans let them refresh themselves, fed them, gave them medicine, then slung them out the window to freeze again.

FITZGERALD

The doctors and the professors fled the camp and paddled off to South America when it became evident that the Fuehrer's glory, as well as any importance attached to this mad experiment, had been lost.

I have been clinging to frozen, dead men in my dreams for fifty-seven years.



photo submitted by Amber English