

MEYER LEVIN, IN SEARCH, NEW YORK 1950, P. 231 FF.

We passed through Gotha and when we halted the following night we ran into a number of cadaverous refugees, milling along the road. They were like none we had ever seen: skeletal, with feverish sunken eyes, shaven skulls. One of them approached our jeep and began to talk. Polsky, Polsky, he kept saying, and then in broken German he tried to tell us about a place we had to see, where he had been prisoner. He motioned. Only a short way. He would take us. No more Germans. No more SS.

We began to understand something of his tale. People buried in a big hole. Death commando. "Come on", said Erik. "It's a camp."

We motioned him onto the jeep, and following his directions, turned down a lane. After about half a mile the road began to have that strangely forbidding atmosphere so soon recognized at the front. There were twigs and leaves from trees that had been hit; nobody had passed here, since. We pulled up. It was too dangerous. The road was possibly mined, or we might still run into Germans. We drove back to the village, gave the Pole some cigarettes and chocolate, and told him to meet us in the morning.

In the morning we tried again. Another division had come into the area during the night, linking up with the Fourth Armored. The main road was now clear as far as the town of Ohrdruf. Our Pole directed us to a camp on the outskirts of the town.

We drove through the gate and halted. A circle of dead men lay there, in the striped slave uniforms which we now saw for the first time; these cadavers were fleshless; in back of each tight-skinned shaven skull was a bullethole.

The Pole opened the door of a shed. There was a cordwood stack of stiff naked human bodies, a stack as high as we stood. The bodies were flat and yellow as lumber. A yellow disinfectant was scattered over the pile.

We had known. The world had vaguely heard. But until now no one of us had looked on this. Even this morning we had not imagined we would look on this. It was as though we had penetrated at last to the center of the black heart, to the very crawling inside of the vicious heart.

[...]

We walked to the barracks. "Typhus, typhus", the Pole repeated. The cabins were utterly vacant except for some scant filthy bits of straw on the floors. The slaves had been evacuated yesterday in trucks; the little circle of dead in the entrance were the only ones left behind; the Pole and his few companions had managed to hide out and escape.

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Under the straw in another barrack we found a wraith with eyes like burning coals, a Belgian, arrested for resistance; he shook ceaselessly with fever. "Don't leave me, don't leave me here alone!" We told him there would be doctors, soon.

There was more to see, the Pole told us. His German was inadequate, but he kept motioning up the hill, beyond the camp, and finally we got into the jeep and he guided us again. There was no road. He seemed uncertain of the way, and yet persisted passionately – we had to go. He alone remained to show us. Death commando. The other workers had been killed.

On top of the hill there was a rut that gave out, and then nothing. We began to get jumpy again. There might be mines. And there might be a bitter-end SS who could pot us off. We were going to turn back when the Pole suddenly got his bearings and motioned to a clump of trees. We saw nothing. We drove there and got out and still we saw nothing special. There was indeed a half-dug pit as large as a swimmingpool, filled with ooze. Some sort of work had been going on there. Perhaps excavation for a building foundation. A section of narrow-gauge track lay beside the pit, reaching from nowhere to now here. There were some shovels and other worktools lying on the ground, all muddied over with the gray ooze.

The Pole was talking excitedly. He pointed beside the tracks, and in the mud we saw a few striped rags from prisoners' uniforms, and little heaps of cinders, then bits of bone, a half-charred body, a skull.

There was a pile of logs for fuel. Now we comprehended. The track with the logs laid across simply became a grate.

The survivor had picked up a long pole terminating in a grappling hook, and now he was pushing it around in the ooze in the pit. Presently he levered it up just far enough for us to see what was on the hook. Then he let the half-decayed human body fall back into the slime.

[...]

Now we knew. Nothing afterward told us more. Buchenwald, Bergen Belsen, Dachau – we became specialists.