

Anatol Chari

Less Than Human

In collaboration with Timothy

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Prologue

There is a right way and a wrong way to pull a corpse. That's what I learned at Bergen-Belsen. That's all you did at Bergen-Belsen—pull corpses. There was nothing else to do. It was four prisoners to a corpse. You grabbed an arm or a leg, you tied a belt or piece of string to the wrist or ankle, and you always pulled feet first. If you pulled head first, you lifted the upper body off the ground. The head would bob up and down and the legs, dragging behind, would spread wide, making the pulling more difficult. If you pulled feet first, the body would be flat on the ground and drag smoothly. The guys pulling the arms would be two steps behind you. The head came last. You dragged the corpse a half mile or so to the pit, a mass grave, and tossed it in. Then you walked back to camp for another one. There were corpses everywhere. It didn't matter much which you chose. They were all emaciated and weighed next to nothing. We dragged them from where they dropped. One time we were pulling a corpse, and one guy said he was tired and needed to rest for a few minutes. Soon we were pulling him. It was total exhaustion. There was nothing left. Just the spirit and bone and skin. No muscle. If the spirit still pulled, that was fine. If the spirit gave out, that was the end of it.

I had been at Auschwitz. That was a good camp to be in, as concentration camps go. You had work. Maybe you dug ditches or you unloaded trains. You had the pretense that you were useful. They might let you live. And if not, at least you died cleanly—to the gas chamber and the crematorium, up the chimney, and that was it. Bergen-Belsen was a bad camp. Nothing to eat. Dirty clothing crawling with typhoid-carrying lice. No pretense of usefulness. The first thing you lost in Bergen-Belsen was hope. And death was an installment plan. It was suffered. Every day a little bit more. You just waited to die. One night I used a corpse for a pillow. What did he care? That was Bergen-Belsen. Nothing but dirt, suffering, and corpses. Thousands of walking corpses dragging thousands of lifeless corpses. We pulled corpses the whole time I was there—ten days, or maybe fourteen, I don't remember exactly. I wouldn't have lasted much longer. There was no hope. Then the British liberated us. April 15, 1945. That was the end of the war for me. It had begun over five and a half years earlier. Five and a half lost years. This is the story of how I survived.

1

My Father's Coattails

The German army invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and a few days later they reached Łódź, a big, dirty, industrial town, the second largest city in Poland. I was sixteen. I lived in Łódź with my father and stepmother. We knew the invasion wouldn't be good for us. Already there was a refugee camp at Zbąszyń, near the German border, for eastern European Jews evicted from Germany a year earlier, so we knew something about the German government's attitude toward Jews. Poland, of course, had its anti-Jewish practices. For example, Jewish children had difficulty getting into public gymnasiums, and universities had quotas on Jewish students. But nobody knew how bad it would become. The day the Germans arrived, there was a commotion in the street—probably military vehicles moving into the center of town. We were too scared to go outside and see. That evening, local ethnic Germans—Volksdeutsche—marched in the streets, celebrating and saluting Hitler. Within a few days, we were hearing stories about Germans grabbing Jews in the street and humiliating them. Some were beaten. Some were forced to clean stairs in military barracks

with a toothbrush. We saw Orthodox Jews with their sidelocks and beards cut off.

My father, Piotr Chari, thought maybe we should flee to eastern Poland—Belarussia—where he was born. Of course, that area was now under Russian occupation, and, as Father pointed out, in Łódź at least we had a bed to sleep in. Go or stay? Neither choice looked good, but the Germans didn't wait for Father to make up his mind. They were rounding up city leaders, university professors—anyone influential who might organize some kind of resistance—and Father was well-known. He owned two apartment buildings and a dry goods store. He was on the inner board of the Łódź chamber of commerce and industry, and he was on the Jewish city council, the kehillah, which attended to the concerns of the Łódź Jews. On November 10—that date I remember—two Gestapo men came to our apartment. One spoke fluent Polish, and asked for Councilman Chari. He didn't say, "Where's the Jew Chari?" They were polite.

"He's not at home," my stepmother told them.

"When do you expect him?"

"I don't know."

So they took me instead. They said they would hold me until Father showed up at the office of a Jewish small business organization where he served as chairman. Father was somewhere in the apartment building, and he saw them taking me out, but he didn't come for an hour. Probably he changed clothes. I know he put on a warm coat. He couldn't be sure how long he would be gone. I was just sitting there waiting. The Gestapo men asked, "Where do you think he is?" I told them I had no idea. When Father finally arrived at the office, he was standing in the outer hallway. I tried to walk over and kiss him, say goodbye. But he just said, "Go home. I'll be back soon." Perhaps he thought they just wanted to ask him some questions. In my mind, I can still see him standing in that hallway, telling me to go home. I never saw him again.

The day before, the Germans had opened a prison at Radogoszcz, outside Łódź, for political arrests, and Father was taken there. Every day for two weeks, my aunt Sarah rode the streetcar to the prison to take him food. One day she was told, "He isn't here anymore." That was the last we heard. But I kept thinking he would return, hoping he would return. I had to go on living my life, waking up each day, even with Father missing, and it helped to have hope. No one told me that the last time Sarah saw him, he looked pretty bad. That I learned from my cousin Chaim only recently.

Unfortunately, the Germans were making it clear that life would not remain normal. Our apartment was on Piotrkowska, the main street of Łódź. The Germans renamed the street Adolf Hitler Strasse and declared it off-limits to Jews. I was still going to Schweitzer Gymnasium, a private Jewish high school, so I had to run across the street to a large apartment building with a courtyard where we sometimes played soccer. I could cross the courtyard and exit onto another street and go to school. The Germans imposed a curfew on the entire city. After five in the evening, you were not permitted outside. You were supposed to surrender your radio if you had one. I spent the evenings playing cards with the neighbors. There was little else to do. Also, the Germans announced that all Jews had to wear a yellow armband. You had to comply. It was punishable by death. You could be shot on the spot. Jews had no protection. We were fair game. But if you carried a coat or a blanket, and placed it to cover the armband, you could cross the street or go somewhere forbidden to Jews without being noticed.

The German soldiers began stealing from us. A couple of soldiers went into my Aunt Fela's leather goods store. They used old German marks, revoked and worthless, to "buy" some of the fancier items, and wouldn't take no for an answer. A soldier came into our apartment and saw my fancy bicycle in the hallway. "I want it and I will have it," he said. He came back the next day and took it. In our apartment building, there was a warehouse which held cotton and other raw materials for the textile factories. German soldiers drove up in a truck and started looting the warehouse. The owner ran to the German military commandant to complain. A general showed up and stopped the looting. However, within a week, the man who complained was arrested and never seen again.

Next, the Germans ordered all Jewish residents of Adolf Hitler Strasse to relocate. There were two nights of terror. SS men went into two large apartment buildings, called out the inhabitants, and beat people up. They killed a few children by slamming their heads against the wall. Within two days, there were no Jews living on our street. My stepmother moved in with her sister, who lived in a small apartment with her husband and two sons. I decided to live with my maternal grandparents. My father's parents died before I was born. My parents divorced when I was two or three, and I had gone with my father, who remarried when I was around ten or twelve. I was never really on good terms with my mother. She was a strong-willed woman, a very successful high-class clothing designer, educated in Paris. She usually lived there or in Belgium or in Warsaw. I know I visited her once in Warsaw. Otherwise, I only saw her two or three times a year. I remember she would bring pineapples, a real delicacy in pre-war Poland. But I was close to her parents, closer than she was. My grandfather was a leatherworker. He once owned the biggest, most fashionable leather store in Łódź. He sold billfolds and suitcases and everything in between. The store went bankrupt during the 1930s depression, and Grandfather retired. He and my grandmother lived in a huge apartment on Narutowicza Street, about a twenty-minute walk from my school, and sometimes, if I had an extra period between classes, I would run to see Grandma. She would make an omelet for me. It was an unexpected pleasure for her to see her grandson. When the war began, my mother was in Łódź, staying with my grandparents. With Father gone, and my stepmother in a crowded place, I joined them. I didn't go alone. My mother discovered I had brought lice. It wasn't my fault. This was my first war, and I didn't realize that lice know when a war begins, but somehow they do. My mother boiled all my clothes, and the lice were gone. I would see them again.

The Germans weren't finished. One day, when I was home alone, a huge SS man came into our apartment, looked around, and began opening all the doors and drawers in the dining room sideboard. He had all the tools needed to open them, and he took whatever he wanted, including some of Grandfather's fancy crocodile-skin billfolds. He demanded I give him some paper, then he ripped a cord off the drapery, and wrapped up his treasure. Then he ordered me to clean up the room. He promised he would come back the next day to check on it. He didn't, but I was scared enough to obey.

Scared and cold. Winter was coming. Father was gone. The Germans destroyed the Łódź synagogues. Blew them up. I remember wishing I could just go to sleep and wake up when the war was over. Then we had to move again. The poorest, dirtiest part of Łódź was the Jewish Quarter, called Bałuty. In December, word spread that the Germans were planning a Jewish ghetto. They would force the Polish residents of Bałuty and nearby neighborhoods to move out and all Łódź Jews to move in. Although thousands of Jews were fleeing the city, the ghetto would be extremely crowded and uninviting. The order to relocate came in February, 1940, and the Germans increased the terror to speed up the process, but my family had already moved. It

was first come, first served. You could make arrangements with Polish residents, perhaps pay a small bribe, to take over their house or apartment when they moved out. If not, the Judenrat, the Jewish Council selected by the Germans to administer the ghetto, would assign you a place to live. In January, my uncle Arek went to Bałuty and obtained a little house from a Polish family. We put a few belongings on a cart and moved there. I took practically nothing—a few shirts. When we were cleaning out the apartment, going through drawers, I found two old Cuban cigars from the time of World War I. The wrappers, the outer leaves, were so pale they were white. I smoked them. They were nothing like the cigarettes I smoked occasionally. The cigar smoke was soft and nice in the throat. I still remember that.

(...)

After a few weeks with Chaim's family in 1940, I moved again. You see, when my father was taken, I lost a sense of home. When we were evicted from Adolf Hitler Strasse, from my father's apartment, I lost any feeling of belonging. I was nobody's baby. It didn't matter that much who I lived with. This time I moved in with my stepmother. The one exterior wall of her room was cracked and cold air seeped in. On winter mornings, to determine how far below zero the temperature was outside, I would check the thickness of the ice that had formed inside. In that cold room, we were eight: my stepmother; her sister Bronia and a son, six or seven years old; another sister, Hella, her husband, and two sons, aged eight and twenty; and myself. The younger boys went on the children's transport, in 1942. Hella's husband and Bronia both died of tuberculosis in the ghetto. Hella, her older son, and my stepmother were sent to Auschwitz in 1944 and probably gassed immediately. That's how it was in the ghetto. Crowded rooms, not enough to eat, deportations, disease, and death. But I survived, thanks to my father.

Before the war, my father was a respected and well-connected politician, especially in Jewish circles. He belonged to the liberal Folksparty. As chairman of Jewish small business organizations, he once sued Orendownik, the most virulently anti-Jewish newspaper in Poland, for libel. The newspaper had published an article accusing a "merchant with sidelocks" of fraud. My father brought the lawsuit on behalf of Jewish merchants, and he won. As a dozer, an elected Jewish city councilman, Father sat on the finance committee, which allotted tax money to soup kitchens, orphanages, and homes for the elderly. He served as chairman of an organization that ran two soup kitchens to feed impoverished Jews during the 1930s depression. He also took food and clothing to Jews in the Zbąszyń refugee camp. To this day, I feel bad if I decline a request for charity. It feels like refusing my father.

(...)

In the ghetto, it was my stepmother who first figured out how to use Father's influence: she spoke to Rumkowski. Like Father, Chaim Rumkowski was on the Kehillah, the Jewish city council, before the war. He was responsible for the Jewish orphanages, so he knew Father well, even though they were from different political parties. The story goes that when the Germans invaded Łódź they asked who on the council was "Eldest," meaning had the most seniority. Thinking they meant oldest, Rumkowski came forward. The Germans took away the rest of the council, including my father, and made Rumkowski the chairman of the Jewish Council for the ghetto. First, though, to be sure he knew who was boss, they gave him a beating. I'm not sure if that's exactly how it went, but everyone knew that Rumkowski came home beaten up and then was appointed "Eldest of the Jews." In the ghetto, Chairman Rumkowski had a labor office that assigned jobs. The Germans maintained the ghetto as a source of labor for the war effort. The head of the Ghetto



Administration, a German businessman named Hans Biebow, took orders from the German command and subcontracted them to Rumkowski, who ran the ghetto as a big labor camp. To survive, to eat, you needed a job, and there weren't enough jobs for everyone. If you had some training—for example, if you were a tailor or shoemaker—you had work for sure, making goods for the German forces. If you had any kind of connection to the ghetto administration, you could arrange a job. If you didn't get a job, you were in trouble. You were considered worthless and were soon shipped out to someplace worse. My stepmother went to Chairman Rumkowski's office, and, because she was Hinda Chari, wife of Councilman Chari, she received a position as a bookkeeper in a food distribution center. She also made sure Rumkowski, who had authority over tens of thousands of people, remembered Tolek Chari. "Consider Piotr's son to be in my charge," he told her. "I will take care of him as if he were my own."

Hinda Chari was a kind woman and always a good mother to me, and now she tricked me. I needed about six months more of classes to graduate from lyceum, which is the final two years at the gymnasium. Rumkowski had started a private gymnasium in the ghetto, but I wasn't all that eager to continue my education. I was a teenager, turning seventeen that June, and didn't want to go to school. My stepmother went to Rumkowski and explained that I was embarrassed because I couldn't afford to attend the school. Her husband, the councilman, was gone, after all. I'm not sure if we could have afforded tuition or not—I wasn't exactly in charge of the family treasury—but I think that's what she told him. Anyway, he gave her a letter that said something like, "Please admit Anatol Chari to school with my compliments." When she brought the letter home, having taken the trouble to help me, I could hardly say no. That was the trick. Now I had to go to school.

I went to Rumkowski Gymnasium for six months, finishing lyceum in November, 1940. I took the normal things—history, Latin, German, Polish, math—earning a Matura certificate, the equivalent of one or two years of college in the US today. At the graduation ceremony, Chairman Rumkowski made a speech and said the future of the nation lies in education. He promised to protect the graduates as best he could. And he did. Of the thirty to forty boys and girls in that graduating class, plus the next year's class, only one died in the ghetto and about half survived the war. The survivors include a world-renowned physicist, a concert pianist, and assorted other doctors and psychiatrists. After we graduated, Rumkowski made sure we got good jobs that paid decent wages (in ghetto money), didn't require physical labor, and brought access to extra food. The food was the most important thing. Ghetto conditions were worsening, and the average food rations, distributed by the ghetto administration, were insufficient for basic nutrition. You could only remain healthy and strong if you ate more than the standard allotment.