

“Like dawn in the darkness, Thy light arises.”

We were finally informed that Berlin had been occupied on May 1, 1945. Joy and hope filled our hearts, but nothing changed. It was “business as usual” with even more death. Following such feelings of hope, our despair became more profound than ever. The end seemed so close, yet so far away. A few SS tried to escape, and the others lost no time in hanging them.

Our leaders learned that there existed an order: If enemy troops were approaching, the prisoners would be machine-gunned and the camp burned down. We made a deal with the guards: some of us went to meet the approaching Americans and bring them in.

May 4, 1945, the Americans arrived! The young men from overseas risked their lives and saved ours. They were liberators bringing freedom and the beginning of an unexpected new life. What a relief it was to see their kind faces as they threw food, clothes, and candy to us. I had to crawl to pick anything up, since I could not bend down and still keep my balance. The vanguard American troops—who had fought the Germans all the way from Normandy until they met the Russians in the East—even they were puzzled by our situation. They couldn’t believe their eyes or our stories. Who could? Who could believe that we suffered our “Calvary” only because we had a different religion?



“Even death could not come between us.”

I learned that my father had been taken away. Even in the camp, he gave his food to the needier ones, explaining, “I always have enough.” He hoped to meet with me along the way, but our paths never crossed. He was remembered as saying, “If one man can do this to another, there is no reason for me to go back.” And he didn’t come back. My beloved father, who always gave to others, starved to death. What had become of “Live and let live”? He was so greatly respected in the camp that he was the only one not buried in a common grave.

After the war, an eyewitness told me all this and led us to his grave. We brought him back, and he was the first to be buried in the Jewish Memorial Cemetery for the Martyrs in Budapest.



“And the whole country mourned—
families and individuals.”

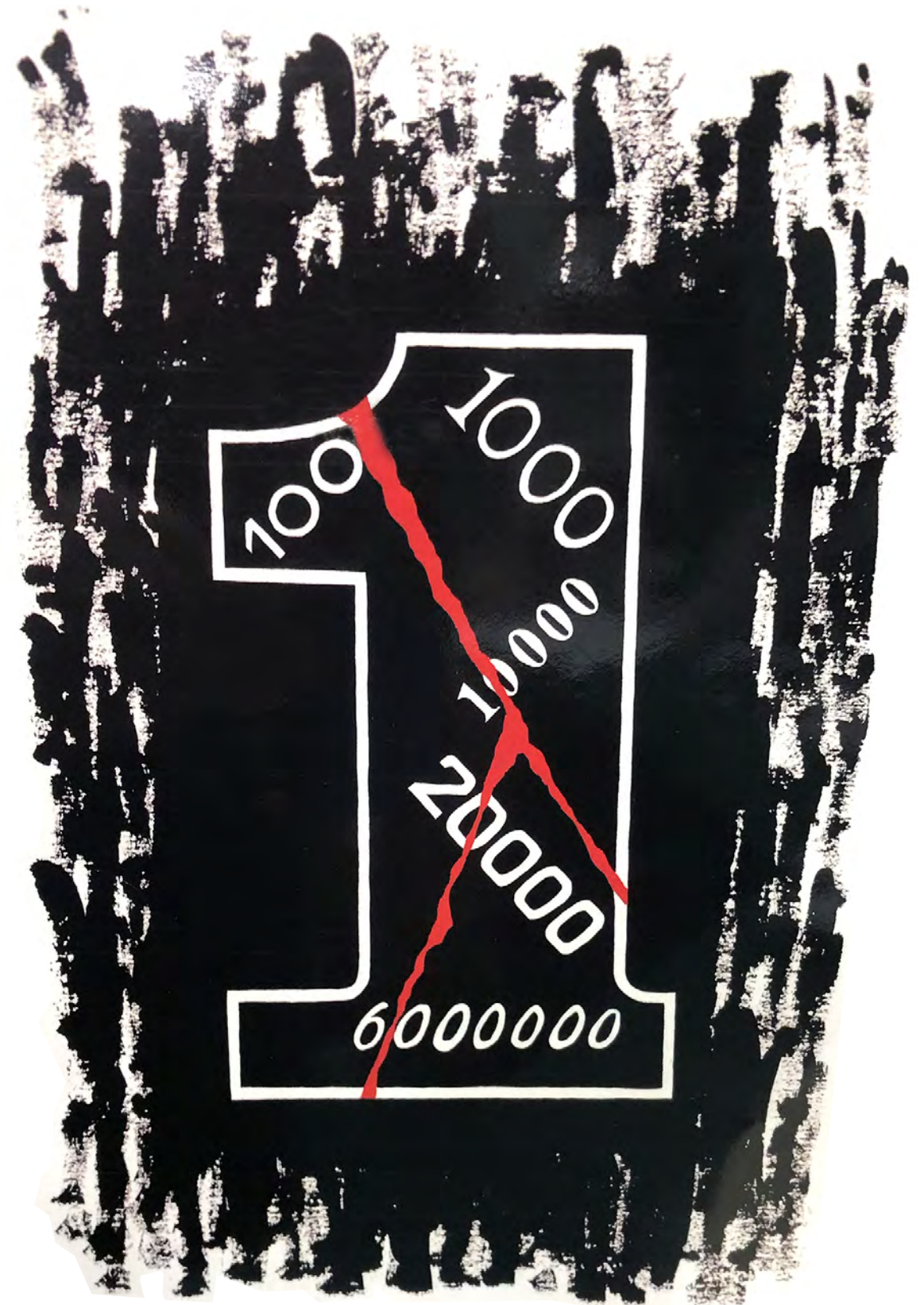
Out of 280 men, only 120 were still alive. The number had decreased that much in only three months. On my 20th birthday, I had to crawl over a single step because I was too weak to walk up on it. My hatred of the Germans was simple: “I will kill them all!” Then on encountering my first German as a free man, I had to make a choice. He was dirty and hungry, begging for food. I asked myself whether I should do to him what they had done to us, or if I should do what my father would do. . . . I gave him some food.

When I arrived home in Budapest I found my mother alive. Anna and her family had given her refuge. But my father wasn’t home, and all of my other relatives had vanished (except for my brother, safe in Switzerland). Out of 600,000 Hungarian Jews, only 80,000 had survived.

“Because of them, our eyes are full.”

They say that one man’s death is a tragedy, 100 a disaster, 1,000 a statistic. At a memorial concentration camp cemetery there are many grave-stones. As people walk through it they see one stone that reads, “Here are 10,000”; another reads, “Here are 20,000”; and so on. At the exit is a stone that reads, “Here is one.”

According to the Talmud, the book of Jewish tradition, God created Adam alone in order to teach us the importance of life. “The destruction of a single life is like the destruction of the entire world.” The loss of more than one person, even if multiplied by 6 million, cannot be measured in mathematical terms. The death of my father was the death of the world as I had known it before.



“Those martyrs live.”

How can the suffering and death of 6 million people be illustrated and appropriately described or expressed? What can we learn from it? In the case of tyranny, the individual has to stand up and fight. You become part of either the suppressors or the suppressed. There is no third way. No one nation can take all the blame, nor can another be the only victim; all humanity shares in both the guilt and the sacrifice.

The impact on all of us who survived remains in our experience. Whether we recognize it consciously or unconsciously, it is like a shadow accompanying us to our graves. I rarely think about it; however, I did gain insights. To me, bread is a symbol, as it is for Catholics. For them it is a symbol of the body of Jesus; for me it is a symbol of life. It is such a joy to go to the grocery store and buy food. (Remember the boy who wanted to eat a second order of bean soup?) Nights are a different story. As a European-born writer in Israel said, “We might win all the battles against the Arabs during the day but lose against the Germans every night.” At night I died a hundred times.

I feel that all of us who were marked by the yellow star were tattooed inside. We have a special obligation, not a privilege, in being alive. As survivors, our moral and human obligations are essential, and our standards have to be based on human principles rather than on practicalities. We must take a stand against suppression and injustice. It hurts me more when injustice is done by Jews than by others. I do not have any hatred. I did not become a judge, even though I was a victim. Now I have a special obligation to show that my life is more than survival. We who survived are not different from others; we just played a special role in a special time.

One night in a dream I asked God, “Are we the chosen people?”

“The world turns on its axis and each segment receives an equal share of sunshine.” That was the answer.

