

ONE SUNDAY, as half of our group, including my father, was at work, the others, including me, took the opportunity to stay and rest.

At around ten o'clock, the sirens started to go off. Alert. The *Blockälteste* gathered us inside the blocks, while the SS took refuge in the shelters. As it was relatively easy to escape during an alert—the guards left the watchtowers and the electric current in the barbed wire was cut—the standing order to the SS was to shoot anyone found outside his block.

In no time, the camp had the look of an abandoned ship. No living soul in the alleys. Next to the kitchen, two cauldrons of hot, steaming soup had been left untended. Two cauldrons of soup! Smack in the middle of the road, two cauldrons of soup with no one to guard them! A royal feast going to waste! Supreme temptation! Hundreds of eyes were looking at them, shining with desire. Two lambs with hundreds of wolves lying in wait for them. Two lambs without a shepherd, free for the taking. But who would dare?

Fear was greater than hunger. Suddenly, we saw the door of Block 37 open slightly. A man appeared, crawling snakelike in the direction of the cauldrons.

Hundreds of eyes were watching his every move. Hundreds of men were crawling with him, scraping their bodies with his on the stones. All hearts trembled, but mostly with envy. He was the one who had dared.

He reached the first cauldron. Hearts were pounding harder: he had succeeded. Jealousy devoured us, consumed us. We never thought to admire him. Poor hero committing suicide for a ration or two or more of soup . . . In our minds, he was already dead.

Lying on the ground near the cauldron, he was trying to lift himself to the cauldron's rim. Either out of weakness or out of fear, he remained there, undoubtedly to muster his strength. At last he succeeded in pulling himself up to the rim. For a second, he seemed to be looking at himself in the soup, looking for his ghostly reflection there. Then, for no apparent reason, he let out a terrible scream, a death rattle such as I had never heard before

and, with open mouth, thrust his head toward the still steaming liquid. We jumped at the sound of the shot. Falling to the ground, his face stained by the soup, the man writhed a few seconds at the base of the cauldron, and then he was still.

That was when we began to hear the planes. Almost at the same moment, the barrack began to shake.

"They're bombing the Buna factory," someone shouted.

I anxiously thought of my father, who was at work. But I was glad nevertheless. To watch that factory go up in flames—what revenge! While we had heard some talk of German military defeats on the various fronts, we were not sure if they were credible. But today, this was real!

We were not afraid. And yet, if a bomb had fallen on the blocks, it would have claimed hundreds of inmates' lives. But we no longer feared death, in any event not this particular death. Every bomb that hit filled us with joy, gave us renewed confidence.

The raid lasted more than one hour. If only it could have gone on for ten times ten hours . . . Then, once more, there was silence. The last sound of the American plane dissipated in the wind and there we were, in our cemetery. On the horizon we saw a long trail of black smoke. The sirens began to wail again. The end of the alert.

Everyone came out of the blocks. We breathed in air filled with fire and smoke, and our eyes shone with hope. A bomb had landed in the middle of the camp, near the *Appelplatz*, the assembly point, but had not exploded. We had to dispose of it outside the camp.

The head of the camp, the *Lagerälteste*, accompanied by his aide and by the chief Kapo, were on an inspection tour of the camp. The raid had left traces of great fear on his face.

In the very center of the camp lay the body of the man with soup stains on his face, the only victim. The cauldrons were carried back to the kitchen.

The SS were back at their posts in the watchtowers, behind their machine guns. Intermission was over.

An hour later, we saw the Kommandos returning, in step as always. Happily, I caught sight of my father.

"Several buildings were flattened," he said, "but the depot was not touched . . ."

In the afternoon, we cheerfully went to clear the ruins.