

"Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Will I be able to use my leg?"

He stopped smiling. I became very frightened. He said, "Listen, son. Do you trust me?"

"Very much, Doctor."

"Then listen well: in two weeks you'll be fully recovered. You'll be able to walk like the others. The sole of your foot was full of pus. I just had to open the sac. Your leg was not amputated. You'll see, in two weeks, you'll be walking around like everybody else."

All I had to do was wait two weeks.

BUT TWO DAYS AFTER my operation, rumors swept through the camp that the battlefield had suddenly drawn nearer. The Red Army was racing toward Buna: it was only a matter of hours.

We were quite used to this kind of rumor. It wasn't the first time that false prophets announced to us: peace-in-the-world, the-Red-Cross-negotiating-our-liberation, or other fables . . . And often we would believe them . . . It was like an injection of morphine.

Only this time, these prophecies seemed more founded. During the last nights we had heard the cannons in the distance.

My faceless neighbor spoke up:

"Don't be deluded. Hitler has made it clear that he will annihilate all Jews before the clock strikes twelve."

I exploded:

"What do you care what he said? Would you want us to consider him a prophet?"

His cold eyes stared at me. At last, he said wearily:

"I have more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He alone has kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people."

THAT AFTERNOON AT FOUR O'CLOCK, as usual, the bell called all the *Blockälteste* for their daily report.

They came back shattered. They had difficulty opening their mouths. All they could utter was one word: "Evacuation." The camp was going to be emptied and we would be sent to the rear. Where to? Somewhere in deepest Germany. To other camps; there was no shortage of them.

"When?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Perhaps the Russians will arrive before . . ."

"Perhaps."

We knew perfectly well they would not.

The camp had become a hive of activity. People were running, calling to one another. In every block, the inmates prepared for the journey ahead. I had forgotten about my lame foot. A doctor came into the room and announced:

"Tomorrow, right after nightfall, the camp will start on its march. Block by block. The sick can remain in the infirmary. They will not be evacuated."

That news made us wonder. Were the SS really going to leave hundreds of prisoners behind in the infirmaries, pending the arrival of their liberators? Were they really going to allow Jews to hear the clock strike twelve? Of course not.

"All the patients will be finished off on the spot," said the faceless one. "And in one last swoop, thrown into the furnaces."

"Surely, the camp will be mined," said another. "Right after the evacuation, it will all blow up."