The Storyteller

Cory Newbiggin*
The Storyteller


My name is not my name. I do not mean to play with words. I am no poet, nor do I care to be. What I mean to say is that the name I was given is not the name I wear now. Now my name is David. Names mean nothing. I am not David. I am still who I am.

David was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1921. His birth certificate, it says these things. David left Poland to live with relatives in America in 1938. He became an American citizen in 1941. His citizenship papers, they say these things. Sometimes, even I say these things.

David once lived alone in Utah. He was a baker there for a while. His grandfather was a baker, you know. It is impossible to get good bread in this country. But David, he made good bread. Now he lives in a zoo for old people. (Laughs) Nobody ever comes to visit David—until now, yes, yes. You see, all of David’s relatives, they are dead. David does not weep for them. Why should he? Lies shed no tears.

(Pause)

Do you have a cigarette? Ah, yes, thank you. My doctor, he tells me that I must not smoke, but I think it does not matter so much anymore. The noose, it will have me before the cigarette. I think I prefer the cigarette, eh? But the choice, it is not mine to make. So it goes. (Pause, coughing) I am sorry—can we continue this tomorrow? I am.... I do not feel well today. The nurse will show you out.


Much better today, thank you. Sometimes my body, it lets me know how old it is. But enough of such things. I was telling you about David. Ah, but you, you know David’s story, yes? Of course you do. Otherwise, we would
You are not here for David's story. You came to listen to an old man who is tired of lies. So let us begin.

(Pauses) You are not here for David's story. You came to listen to an old man who is tired of lies. So let us begin.

(Long pause)

I must apologize for my awkwardness. I have never spoken of this to anyone. For all my years, I have feared that somehow, despite all of my precautions, I would be discovered. But I was not found out, eh? Instead, I give myself up! This is ironic, yes? Here I find myself telling this thing—telling it!—to you! Imagine.... Ah, it does not matter. I am here, and that is all. But already it has been a day and I have told you nothing. Instead, I retell old lies. Why? I look at your tapes and your suit and I see the noose and so I am scared. But the noose is simply a formality. A “tying of loose ends,” as you say it. It matters little what I tell you now; you will hang me regardless. I think that the truth would better fill what time you have given me. I am already a dead man. I died the day I was sent to Auschwitz. (pause, sigh)

I did not go as a prisoner.

People today would call me a monster, if they knew me for who I was. But they do not know. They cannot know what it was like. Do Americans call their sons monsters when they go off to play at the games of war? It is always the same. “ENLIST!” the posters say, and so the young men come. So it was with me. I was young. I was strong and foolish. (pause)

Because I was strong, and because I was learned in my books, they made me one of Himmler’s Security Service. It was a great thing, to be SS. Everywhere on the streets of Berlin, people would see the lightning bolts on my uniform and smile or wave their hands at me. I remember once playing chess with a friend in the park near the place where I worked, when a woman came up to me and begged me to marry her daughter, right at that moment! It was a wonderful time. I did marry that year, but not to the daughter of the woman in the park! (Laughs)

It is odd, remembering these things. (Pause) I can still remember the feel of the woman’s hand, dry, wrinkled fingers grasping at my hand as she
pleaded with me. I can see the chess board, every piece of it in place. And yet I cannot picture the face of my wife, my Anna. The years have taken her from me. Auschwitz... took her from me. And left me a memory of black eyes.

It was in that summer, 1940, that I married. Anna was the only daughter of a rich member of the party, and we were betrothed six weeks after meeting. Her father accepted my suit with an arm around my shoulders. What father could wish better for his daughter? He saw security in our match. I saw only Anna. She was... everything to me. You do not know how it is, to not even remember her face. To have no picture. (Pauses, sobs)

But these things, they are not the story you want to hear. By November of that year, Anna was with child. In February of 1941, I received my orders. Anna, our unborn child, and I were to go to Poland, where I was to be a guard at a prison-camp for Jewish criminals. Auschwitz had called me. (pause)

Turned that damned device off. I am done for today.

*Transcript of Interview Session Three. “David K.” 14 October 1999*

I had been at Auschwitz nearly a year when the Romani came. I was very ah... how to say it... sick, yes, sick at this time. Anna had died in childbirth in early November, and my days were... empty without her. I sent her back to Berlin to be buried with her family. I was offered a leave, but I declined and stayed at my post. I could not return, you see. Auschwitz, it had me now. Every day, I would return from my station to sit in my empty house. I would sit. That is all. You see? I died with my wife and my child. Oh, I moved and I breathed, I issued and obeyed orders. I ate, slept, and shat. But I was nothing—a shell. I was dead, as were they. They were buried in Berlin, and I was left to rot on the ground at Auschwitz. This is the only difference.

(pause)

I was a broken man. Auschwitz, it swallowed the broken. Hundreds upon thousands of them. It swallowed me. Every day, more and more Jews would come into the camps, and every day we would lock them up in the yards.
Every day we would bring them food and water. And every day, we would kill some of them. I am not talking about the showers and the furnaces. Those were to come later. This was... worse. One of the guards, he wouldn't like the way a man was looking at him, so he would shoot him. Or maybe he would tie the man naked to the fence, so that he froze to death. Maybe he would set him loose in the yard and set the dogs on him. Perhaps a child wouldn't stop crying. The crying, it was constant thing in the camps, you had to live with it. But some of the guards, they could not stand it. They would... (pause, sobs) ...make the children stop crying. Some of the guards, they kept...souvenirs. Bags of teeth, locks of hair. One man that I remember, he had a box of ears. (pause) I did none of these things. I saw them, but I did not see them—my eyes were as still as those of our victims. I don't mean to tell you that I was some hero, that I was better than the other guards. I was not better. Maybe I was worse, I do not know. I do know that I saw all of these things, but I did not care. The Jews, they were nothing to me. How could they be anything? They were still living. What care have the dead for those who still have life?

But now, nearly sixty years later, it is... horrible to remember. At the time, you understand, it did not touch me. Nothing touched me. And such is how I was when the first trainloads of gypsies arrived from Buchenwald and Dachau.

We spent many weeks in preparation for their arrival. After all, a gypsy was an Aryan, even if he were Zigeunergeschmeiss, “gypsy scum,” and it would not do to house Aryans with Jews. A separate gypsy camp was set up at Birkenau, some three kilometers from Auschwitz. I was one of the guards chosen to oversee this new camp.

The gypsy trains arrived just like the Jewish trains. It was the same with every trainload. I stood, as I always did, with my rifle pointed at the mass of prisoners before me. I had only fired it once. On the day my wife's body left for Berlin, I shot a Jewish man in the stomach. He did nothing wrong but stand in front of my gun. I watched him writhe as his blood flowed onto the muddy earth. The Jews, they stood next to the boxcar and watched. Some had tears in
their eyes, but none made a sound. Even the dogs were quiet. That silence, it was a solid thing. It was as if my emptiness had spilled into the outside world and gobbled up all sound. And then the man began to scream. It seemed impossible that such a sound should come from a man. At once, the Jews began to wail, and the dogs began howling. Guards barked orders and fired weapons. A greater cacophony I have never heard. But I felt nothing. I did not care. After the man had died, I simply left him in the yard. I still do not know what became of his body—one day, it was just gone. So it goes. That is how things were for me then. Now I try, sometimes, to remember his face. It should be easy, yes? Remembering the face of a man you have killed? I cannot see him, as I cannot see...my...my wife. (Pause, sigh) But I was talking of the trains.

I do not remember much from those trainloads. I know that I was there, that I participated in the unloading of prisoners and the march to the camp proper. But I remember nothing of it, nothing of the people. I cannot tell you what they were like. I cannot say whether they cried or were silent, whether they struggled or went obediently. You have seen, I have told you, how it was for me then.

I need to rest now. I am again not feeling well...

(Coughing, retching)

Transcript of Interview Session Four. “David K.” 15 October 1999

...again. It is difficult for me to return there. But I grow tired. I wish my story ended.

Nearly three years after the trains stopped coming, one of the other guards summoned me to the gypsy barracks. By this time Auschwitz had, as you say it “come into its own.” The Final Solution had begun, and throughout the day and night the skies were filled with ash. God, the ash.... Everywhere, it was everywhere. On your clothes, in your hair. When you would wake up in the morning, you would be covered in a layer of dust, like a... a mummy, yes? And the scent of it: vile. Every day, I would wash and scrub, sometimes more than once,
but I could not make the stench go away. (pause) I could not make it go away.... I... I am sorry, I ramble. I had just been summoned to the gypsy barracks. Sometimes when I close my eyes, I still see that place. Despite all the horrors of the Jewish camps, all of the sickness and filth and hatred, all of it, the gypsy camp was far, far worse. Some of the stronger gypsies, those who had not yet become weak with starvation or disease, stole what little food we dispensed, hoarding it for themselves while others starved to death around them. The other Roma called these thieves “beng”—devils. Many of the Rom had noma, a horrific disease. It eats holes in the cheeks, so that a person could see their teeth and tongues working in their rotted mouths. They nearly always died of gangrene, and the stink of it was in the air. It was through all of this that I walked to meet the soldier who had called me, but even it could not touch me. In my mind, the gypsy barracks merely proved what I already knew: this was Hell, and I was a demon.

The guard was standing by the corpse of a woman and two living children, a little girl and boy. The boy was wailing, but the girl simply sat and looked up at the guard, who was looking at me with a question in his eyes. The dead woman was the mother of the two. Her head was bent so that she faced toward her right shoulder. Sometimes I still see her face, one eye like dead glass and a half-grin of teeth framed by a rotten hole of flesh. “What is it?” I asked the guard. He told me that the woman had been the only living relative of the two children, and that the other Rom could not care for them. “You know what needs to be done,” I snapped at him and turned to leave. The stench of the place was making me ill. I remember, quite clearly, what he said next, for it seemed so ridiculous.

“They are only children.”

I wanted to ask him what made these two special, what made them different from the thousands upon thousands of Jewish children who had been executed, sent to showers and furnaces under our watchful eyes, what made them different from the man I shot in the belly. Why were they somehow more than the ash of countless others that even now filled our lungs. Why should they be different?
But as I opened my mouth to ask him that very thing, I glanced down at the girl. She was small, maybe five or six, certainly no older than six, and she was looking up at me. She had black eyes.

“Are you going to bury our mother?” she asked. The boy was looking at me now, too. The two were nearly identical. He had the same black eyes.

Suddenly, the...(pause) zombie—that is how you say it—that I had been was gone, and I was left without the shield of my indifference, staring at two helpless children in that place of ashes. I thought of my wife, of my son, dead in her, dead like hope, and I nearly began to cry. I told the guard that I would take care of the situation and that he could return to his post. I waited until he had gone. And then I did something that I had never done before. I spoke to a prisoner.

“Yes, I will bury your mother,” I told the little girl. And I did. I dug a grave for her in the hard dirt in the southeast corner of the prisoners’ yard. As I kicked the shovel again and again into the ground, something inside of me broke, and I began to weep. (Coughing)

The next night I returned to the prisoner barracks with a large sack full of rolls of hard bread and some sausages. These I passed out to the weakest and sickest. To Irina and Bair, the two children, I gave sweets as well. The following night I returned with another sack, and found that thieves had stolen some of what I had brought from those to whom I had given it. So on the next night I returned with more food, and on the night after, still more, until my pantry was nearly bare. I would go to the barracks every night, and every night I would talk with Irina, the little girl. Bair never spoke, but Irina, she would call me “Onkel,” would beg me for sweets or a story. I would tell her and her brother fanciful stories of a world without Auschwitz. Sometimes, I could almost see the far off places that I described mirrored in those black eyes. (Retching)

Perhaps... Yes... Perhaps we should continue tomorrow. I ask your patience for one more day. One... (coughs) ... one more day. Then make your phone calls, take me where I need to go. One more day, and then my story will be over.
Transcript of Interview Session Five. “David K.” 16 October 1999

It is funny how much a life can change in one day. Sometimes, I do not think it should be possible, for life to be so fickle. Tomorrow I will most likely be in an Israeli prison. Still, perhaps that will be not much different from this place, yes? They will stretch my neck, and I will be rid of these memories. I do not want them anymore. I have spent too many nights with ghosts. I want... I want to be rid of them.

(Pause, sigh)

About two weeks after I had begun my visits, Dr. Mengele visited the Romani camp. I had heard rumors, of course. He was doing research, important research, in medicine, using Jewish “volunteers.” Of him and his research I had heard little since my transfer to the Romani camp. He rode through the main gates on a white horse, then dismounted and handed the reins to the guard stationed at the gate. He began to strut through the prisoner yard, swinging a riding crop and humming Wagner. I walked with him, supposedly to protect him from the prisoners, but they were so weak and malnourished that none could have done anything to harm him. He said nothing. He was in the yard for less than fifteen minutes. When he left, he left with four children, two of whom were identical twins. They trailed behind him, laughing, sweets clutched in their little hands. At first, the visit did not alarm me. Guards or doctors from other sections of the camp would often take a prisoner or two off for some chore or test, only to return them a few hours later. Sometimes, they would assign the prisoners to a new task, and then they would not return, but this was very rare. So I did not worry for the children.

After three such visits, however, I began to grow uneasy. Mengele had taken twelve more children, and no less than eight of those children were twins. Block 10, where the medical facilities were housed, was not very large, and had no prison quarters. Were the twins that Mengele took Jewish, I would assume that they were being kept in a Jewish barrack. But there were no Romani barracks outside of the gypsy camp, and it was forbidden to house the Rom with the Jews.
After Dr. Mengele's fourth visit, I knew that the children would never return. He picked them out like a man choosing which lobster he wants for his dinner. That night when I went into Irina and Bair’s barracks, I told them that they could no longer be together. I told them that if the Doctor saw them together, saw that they were brother and sister, he would take them away from me, and they would have no one to tell them bedtime stories. Bair began to cry as I told them this, but Irina understood. She was a very wise little girl. (*Sobs*)

From that night on, I visited them separately. Each time I saw the Doctor in the camp, I would shake inside. It is no easy thing, to sit and wait for someone to take your children away, and not scream. No easy thing. Those were strange weeks. Fear and the Doctor filled my days, but the nights belong to me and the children. We continued as we always had. My stories grew more and more fantastic with each telling. We would travel to Egypt to see the pyramids, or climb the Himalayas. Now even stoic Bair would smile as he saw me coming to visit him. It was such a beautiful thing, to see a smile on the face of a child who hadn’t worn one in three years.

(*Pause*)

And then the Zigeunernächte. Gypsy-night.

It was like a bomb falling. Not even the guards were ready for it. We received the order on the last day of September in 1944. Every prisoner in the Romani camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau was to be executed in the gas chambers in the early morning of the first of August. Four thousand mothers and fathers, grandparents and grandchildren, and we were to kill them all. I went to Irina immediately upon receiving the order, while the other guards began to prepare the trucks that would take the first Romani victims to the gas chambers. I told her that it was okay to see Bair again, and that she should go fetch him so I could tell them both a story. I tried to act cheerful, but she...knew. She had to know. (*sobs*) She was such a wise little girl. (*Sigh*) But she returned with Bair anyway. If you have seen the pictures, seen the horrible faces on the bodies that went to the gas chambers, you won’t ask why I... did what I did. And pictures...pictures,
they can never tell all, can never bring you to hear the screams, to smell the stink of fear, sweat, and urine; to feel the burning... *(coughing)* ... the burning in the back of your throat from the lime we threw on the bodies. I told Bair and Irina one last story. And that is all. No one cared that two of the bodies that went to the crematoriums that night bore bullet holes rather than the fingerprints of Zyklon-B. No one except for an old man who waits for the rope.

*End of Tape.*