

One True Day

(December 7, 1941)

Published in the 2008 Edition of: In Good Company, Volume Six

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Second Place Award at 24th Annual Writers' Conference, April 2005

The following review was written by the Judges of the 2005 Annual Writer's Conference: "This is such a simple and brutally potent story. I love the survivor's voice, and the poignancy and torn beauty of his mission to bear witness. The writing works very well in its quickness and simplicity, in the paradoxical innocence of the recounting of horrors. We feel the spiritual depth of this survivor powerfully. The story is laced with great lines and images like wounds: the last cold winter light through the stained glass windows, the pine trees singing their Kaddish in the wind, and it rings true in its brutal details, right down to the scrotums of the naked village men, shrunken by the cold. "Survive, survive to tell, tell the world," indeed. This is a gorgeous, appalling, very moving story. Congratulations on the courage it took to write it, and on the discipline, craft, and dignity it took to write it well."

"I am Motke. I am the last of my village left standing. I will tell you a story so true you will have to venture past the radius of words to believe.

I survived The Chelmo death camp! At the age of forty seven years I returned to this Rzuszow Forest in Poland to tell you this story of one true day. The ghosts of memory still haunt the margins of my words. I tell you voices from un-lived lives. Voices will speak in a mingling of past and present. I returned to this peaceful tree covered spot to kneel and kiss a holy ground. Returned to hear the humming beat of a thousand human hearts. By pressing my ear to spirit earth, I hear the beat of Mama's pulse. I hear the sound of brother Itzhak's scream and Papa's moaning curse at murder's gun.



Time's memory causing the rocks themselves to chant. Pine wind songs enter my senses as I stand in this green carpeted camouflage. Planted to conceal their murder scene from all generations of a future world.



The memories float out of my soaking mind like visions. Visions I pushed back for thirty years.

We lived as family in Grabow village, a short twelve miles from this killing field. At first, they came for only a few of us as product pieces for the gas. Then, the day before "Hanúkkáh" they came for all the rest of us. The German "S. S." troops and Polish police prodded us with clubs into Grabow square. In huge trucks, before daylight, they transported us to Chelmo village. We rode together as frightened children in

dark swaying vans. Adults held their babies. Old grandmothers were pushed screaming to the floor. We could not see or know each other. The Polish police unloaded us with clubbing and constant shooting. There was always noise and cursing. It took only four uniformed German soldiers to guard us. The Polish police did all the work.

We unloaded like cattle, driven with clubs into a huge Catholic church in Chelmo. Its thick stone walls provided a convenient prison. Our Rabbi prayed we trade our hidden gold for mercy and release. Some held high their silver candelabrum in a pleading tradition set for a past thousand years. Some, fearing our path ahead, prayed to the cross and Mother Mary painted on the ceiling over our heads. Our large hysterical eyes sought hope from any icon, from any faith, for any comfort and deliverance. Dawn lighted up our last winter's day beaming down through rose tinted windows: beaming down on hungry Hebrew mothers waiting, with a plate of devils at their door.



The church's double front worship door were opened to three transport trucks. Our human sorting had begun. Women and children were pushed into first two loads. Our men were herded by Polish police into a third truck. My Papa and Uncle Franz were brave. They struck a guard screaming, "Why?" The guard, a Polish neighbor they had known, curses a luger shot, point blank into the open foreheads of them both. I watched a "Capo" throw their lifeless bodies into our truck of men and boys. We took the short swaying ride to the open doors of Chelmo Castle.

The shouting, shoving guards unloaded us into the two large front halls of this cold, half ruined ancient fort. We strip and stand and wait. Soon, I watched naked, freezing white bodied women driven down a ramp into waiting vans of death. Marched by are Mama and her sister Mista for their slowly measured rides to forest graves. Slower rides were timed to force the killing carbon monoxide gas into the dark closed vans of screaming souls. The gas soon muffled all screams to moans and silence. The tall green pine trees sang wind songs, as the final "Kaddish," for ditch side deaths beside waiting open graves.



As I stand here on their grave spot, telling you this story of one true day, brother Itzhak calls to me. His voice is as clear as on our childhood playground. He calls in a scream that has haunted my sleep for thirty years. We were brother twins. They separated us from the unloading truck at the castle door. Separated us from the boys without pubic hair. Being blessed with strong young working backs and looking older than our thirteen years. We were chosen in the lucky lot. Chosen with six other muscled men to buy some life days by working to bury the dead and sorting their shirts and shoes. We were marched with rifle guard to an outside barrack, built beside a white wooden fence.

Watching our freezing line of naked men with cold shrunk scrotums was the handsome Commander "S. S." Major Rudolph Link. He stood, soldier erect, dressed in long coat of black and green with warm fur collar. He was holding the leash and harness of a huge black shepherd dog straining and snarling toward our line. As we marched by, brother Itzhak, our high school running star, broke ranks and ran toward the wooden fence. "S. S." Oberscharführer Link waved down the aiming rifle guard, to bend



and unleash his great beast "Bruno." The dog's huge jaws pulled brother down biting into Itzhak's open throat. Huge white teeth crushed his carotid, causing dark red blood to spurt over Bruno's lips and ears. Brother's shrieking death scream ended in a gurgle. Proud Major Link rehooked the beast and petted proud "Congratulations, Good Dog," for a job well done. Some of brother's blood dripped from Bruno's jaws on the Commander's shining black uniform boots.

I stood shaking in line watching the Capos take brother away. My feet turned to follow them when two strong hands grabbed my naked shoulder from behind. A voice said, "Stay-stay-swim. You must stay and swim on top as long as possible. Float on it! Ride each new wave at all cost. Think of nothing else. Survive, survive to tell, tell the world." The fingers squeezed so hard I became conscious of pain. I recognized the voice of our soccer coach, a neighbor who knew us from our village.



I survived the Chelmo death camp. I worked as part of the mess detail separated from the other prisoners. I lived in the rabbit shed with shackled feet. My work was to raise, feed and butcher rabbits for the soldiers mess. I swam on top watching other villages of innocents from all over Poland and Lithuania die in Chelmo. Two hours before the Russian army liberation, all prisoners were shot. I survived a glancing bullet to my head. A Russian surgeon saved my life. I survived to tell you this one true day. I lived to return at age forty seven to this Rzusow Forest. My telling is a kind of prayer! I did not tell my wife. I did not tell my son. To live I must forget again. I deed my story to you. I am the last of my village left standing. I am reunited by "The Book." I am Motke."

The End