Living Amongst the Indifferent

It was not that long ago when I used to think that there were two types of people. Good ones and bad ones and they were easy to distinguish: the good ones were nice, the bad ones were cruel.

I also used to think that by simply being obedient, I would belong to the good ones. And by doing so, I thought, I should never have any troubles in life. And if I were in need of help, the good people would protect me. I used to feel safe in this world of ours.

It did not take long to change my mind and learn to see things differently. Let me tell you about it.

The neighbour

I began to suspect that the world was a little different on one memorable afternoon on my way home from school.

The sun was shining, and I felt good about my maths results too. I was in such high spirits that I started skipping and hopping on the way home.

When I got to our block and hopped into the hall of our apartment building, I came across Mrs. Szalai as she was chatting to the cleaner. I

greeted them as always, and smiling they asked how school was going.

I liked these people and I thought they liked me too because Mrs. Szalai had often invited me into her apartment, and she would always give me a piece of chocolate. At any other time I would have stopped and chatted to them, but today I did not feel like it.

“It’s going OK”, I said hastily and darted off up the stairs. When I got to the landing, I heard Mrs. Szalai whispering to the cleaner:

“This is a good kid, this Bertie is”, and added “Too bad they’ll take him too.”

I peeped back and saw their faces sagging with sorrow.

I did not quite understand what she meant by “they’ll take him too”. Who will take me? Where and why?

When I opened the door to our apartment, I immediately asked mum about it.

Her eyes turned dim first then I saw signs of anger. Still, with pretend tranquillity she turned to me and asked me to forget the whole thing; “they have no idea what they are talking about”, she said. She ruffled up my hair and walked off into the kitchen and I was left with the noise of clatter of plates and dishes. This is exactly what she did when Dad was taken away to be a soldier, or rather to do “labour service”, as mum preferred to call it.

It was on the day when Dad was gone that the two of us were left on our

own in our home under 4 Dove Street.

And since then, everything has just been going down.

One day mum came into my room holding a star-shaped yellow badge in her hand.

“Bertie”, she sighed. “Here…, take this and every time you leave home, you must make sure you wear this, pinned to your clothes. Do you understand? From now on..., every time and all the time.”

“But why?”

“Because we are Jews. This is the law now and we have to do as they say if we want to avoid trouble.”

I did not understand what good this could do. I also did not really understand what made a person a Jew. I could not see any difference between myself and all the other kids. Just like any other kid, I only had one head, two arms and two legs. My days were also exactly the same: I went to school, I ate and drank, slept and played. Some days were better, and some were worse. What makes *Jews* different from everyone else? What makes them worse?

It was then that I realised that it did not matter how good I tried to behave, I could easily be a bad boy in the eyes of others. It did not matter that I was just like everyone else; I could still be seen as being different. Because

I was a Jew. As if *being Jewish* was some sort of a sin.

So I started wearing the badge from this day on and not for a moment did it occur to me that this would not be enough to satisfy *others*.

The Storekeeper

A couple of days later mum sent me down to the store to get some flour. I hopped down to Mrs. Ilonka's corner store. When I walked in, Mrs. Ilonka's ruddy face, wrapped in a headscarf as always, emerged from behind the counter, but this time she did not say hello. She just glared at me in silence. I was about to start when she snarled at me:

"Can you not read, boy?"

"I…, I can...," I stuttered.

"So then?" and she pointed at the sign stuck on the door. "Get a move on, get out! And don't ever come back, 'cause if you do, so help me god, I will report you and your mother to the police!"

Must be busy doing the stocktake or having a lunch break, I thought.

"Sorry", I said and quickly made my way out.

Then looking back to read the sign on the door, I suddenly understood, even though I could hardly believe my eyes. I had to read it several times to make sure I read it correctly. It said:

“We DO NOT serve Jews!”

I ran all the way home. My heart was pounding and I had a lump in my throat, but I only burst out in tears once inside the arms of my mum:

“They do not serve us! You understand? They do not serve Jews! She even has a sign on the door! What have we done that we are not allowed to set foot in the store?” I cried.

“Don’t cry, Bertie..., stop it...”, my mum begged as she held me tight in her arms and I felt her warm tears on my face as her grip tightened.

It was then that I realised that the trouble we were in was one that even mum could not help.

“What is going to happen to us?” I asked.

“I don’t know”, she said and I knew she was telling me the truth.

I was overcome with fear. If mum cannot protect me, who can?

I went to the display cabinet to look at Dad’s photo. I just stood there watching his timid face, which was full of strength. Yes…, if Dad were here, he sure would not let this happen to us. He would be back soon though. He would come home and restore order in this messy world.

The Gendarme

A few weeks later we had to move to another house in Pozsonyi Street that

was designated for use by Jews only. There was a large yellow six-pointed star painted on the gate. We had only taken the most basic necessities with us: clothes, documents and Dad's photo.

Several different families were put up in each of the apartments inside the building so life was not at all easy. Mum and I had got a smaller room to ourselves because we were only two. The larger room was home to a family of four and the smallest room was occupied by an older man on his own.

It was difficult to get used to living with so many strangers, but mum said we were safe this way and Jews would be left alone here because it was a "protected house". Still, I missed home and my room with my toys that I had left behind.

Life was dull in the protected house although there were other kids too; every day we played hide and seek, tiggy, or soldiers. We were only allowed out in the street in the mornings for two hours, which was barely enough to get food.

The evenings however had an eerie excitement to them. The adults would gather on the corridors to listen to the radio, smoke cigarettes and talk about future prospects. At ten in the evening, the lights had to be put out. Everyone would retreat into the quarters to sleep with their fears and the faint hope that tomorrow would be a better day.

The summer soon turned into autumn and autumn into winter. Although

the radio would talk about the advancement of the liberating soviet army, time moved slowly like sooty mud. The adults would grow more and more concerned and tensions would intensify day by day. We learnt from the radio that the Jews were being rounded up and taken to railway stations in masses to be forced into cattle wagons and deported to distant camps for slave labour.

“This will not happen to us, Bertie. We are in a protected house, remember that”, said mum and looked me deep in the eyes.

From then on, I took Dad’s photo with me every day wherever I went. Looking at his face was always a great comfort. I decided that I would keep the photo in my pocket so that I would have it on me all the time.

The days went by unnoticed and uneventful quite until the 24th December, a harrowing day that I knew to be Christmas Eve.

During the morning leave, mum got hold of a branch of pine in the park. She was hoping to prepare a treat for the evening by baking a piece of flat-bread from the remaining corn flour we had and bring a few people together to celebrate Christmas. She wanted to make this day different from the rest, but there was little she could do to make it a special day. Then good news came on the radio: *“the liberating Russian army have reached the outskirts of Budapest*!”

“This means, Bertie, that the war will be over soon”, explained mum with

sparkling eyes.

The afternoon went as planned, but when mum had taken out the bread from the oven, there came shouting from the corridors outside:

"*Here come the Arrow Cross! Here come the Arrow Cross!*", but the voices of warning were silenced by the sound of gunfire.

Panic broke out in the house, some started to scream, others were crying. Many were silently waiting for the inevitable to happen.

We heard the thumping of boots from outside then the door burst open:

"*Jews, outside*!" yelled an Arrow Cross soldier with pulsating veins in his neck, his machine gun pointed at us. His fellow soldiers in the neighbouring apartments were shoving terrified people out the door. Everyone was driven out onto the street.

Outside the gate, rounded up from nearby residential buildings, a group of Jews was already standing and waiting for us.

Once everyone was gathered, the gunmen at the front of the group bellowed the order:

"*Move, Jews! We'll go and see the sights at the banks of the Danube! Anyone stopping or falling out of line will be shot*!"

We started. I do not know how many we were, but there were lots of people. We were moving slowly as we staggered behind each other in our tattered boots. I was cold. I did not have a coat on. Nobody else did.

The procession moved steadily until it got to the hat shop, where it stopped for a short while for some reason. With mum we stopped right in front of a gendarme, his eyes cold and calm, gazing at the procession, skimming the people. He caught sight of me and smiled. Patting me on the head he said:

"*So…, boy. What will you be when you grow up*?"

I was just about to answer when mum squeezed my hand and whispered:

"*Don't answer him. We'll die anyway*."

I felt an icy pressure on my chest, my throat tightened and I could hardly swallow. I looked at mum. She was staring stiffly in the distance and I knew she was swallowing her tears inside. She was not crying for herself, but for me, her hardly ten-year-old son.

The procession started again. We were heading towards the river. I was no longer fully conscious of the world around us, I was just clinging onto my mum's icy hand in terror.

I don't know how long it took us to get to the bank of the river, and I cannot remember how they lined us up; all I remember seeing is the sheets of ice floating languidly in the river.

At the end of the line a machine gun started firing. The approaching sound of gunfire and the thump of bodies soon fused into one. It was only my mum's cry that reached me distinctly:

“Close your eyes, Bertie!”

I did so and she let my hand go. All I was able to feel was a sharp pain in my shoulder and the burning sensation of ice on my skin. Then there was deafening silence. I could not decide if it had come from outside or it was my mind that had shut off all outside noise.

I realised that I had not died. I started to move my head slowly. I was looking for mum. She was lying motionless right next to me.

“*Mum..., mummy...*”, I called for her in desperation. She did not respond. I dragged myself closer to her. I did not dare look at her face, but I had to find out if she was alive. I placed my hand on her chest, but could not feel her heart beating. My heart started hammering; I knew I could not stay next to her. I had to flee, and I had to flee right then. I had no idea where I would go, but I knew I had to make it out of the water and get back onto the bank of the river. Then I would have to hide somewhere.

The Passer-by

I soon reached the rocks on the bank and a few minutes later I was standing in the street. I started running, but my shoulder started to hurt me more. I could feel my wet clothes starting to freeze onto my body. I may have passed a couple of blocks when I ran into the hands of two gendarmes. They grabbed me straight away:

"*Well…, have a look at that…, a wondering Jew! You will not get away this time!*"

One of them was clenching my aching shoulder with iron fist, the other one was shoving me along from behind.

"That's it", I thought. "They will hand me over to an Arrow Cross soldier and I will be killed on the spot."

On the other side of the street a man in a hat and a black winter coat was walking. To my amazement when he saw us, he turned around and quickening his steps he walked up to us.

"Good day, gentlemen", he said. He had a decisive look in his eyes as he was gazing at the gendarmes from underneath his hat. It was then that I recognised him: this is Mr. Béla, the dad of my classmate, Ági Kardos! I wanted to signal to him, to let him know that it was me, Bertie Schreiber, but he did not even look at me.

"What do you want?" asked the gendarmes.

"How much do you want for this kid?"

"What?", they stared at him dumbly.

"Here, how much will you sell me this kid for?"

The two gendarmes peered at each other. They did not understand what was going on.

The man then took off his gold watch and placed it inside the hand of one

of the gendarmes.

“Here, I guess this should be enough”, he added. The gendarmes exchanged looks again. One of them shrugged and the other pushed me into the hands of the man in the hat:

“Here, have him! And get the hell out of here, now!”

We walked a few steps when Mr Béla started talking to me quietly:

“Listen to me, Bertie, listen very carefully...”

“So, you *did* recognise me?” I wondered. “Mum...”, I muttered, but my throat choked up.

“I know..., I know all about it”, he said. “Don’t talk now, I’m going to help you, but we must hurry! If you do as I say, you might just make it. I’ll take you to a place where people like you are hiding. The war is almost over, Bertie, you will only have a short time to endure there.

Mr. Béla then took me to the basement of a factory nearby. There were about ten people there, women, men, old and young alike. I could hardly make their faces out in the darkness. They saw my wound and my drenched clothes. They helped me out them, sterilised my wound with alcohol, and got me some dry clothes. Mr. Béla left.

I have been here for three days now. My shoulder no longer hurts that much, but my heart aches ever more. Lucky that I still have Dad’s photo.

I'd rather have it in my shirt pocket. Just under the yellow badge. This way I feel him much closer to me.

There is a little girl here too, Jolika Horvath. She is smaller than me and has long black here. She is being persecuted for being a gypsy. This means, I guess, that she is also *different*.

It's good to have her here. We have made up a few games, which we play. For example, when it is dark outside and all the adults are whispering in the dimmed light of a few candles, we play a guessing game with our fingers: the idea is that you a show a number using your fingers, and the other has to guess the number by feeling out your fingers. This helps us forget the ever consuming hunger we feel.

Bedtime is always the most difficult. Jolika and I embrace each other tightly, she strokes my head and softly sings to me and perhaps to herself too. At times like this I think of mum and cry.

Anyway, I am here now. Seemingly not much has happened during the days spent in the basement, but inside of me lots of things have changed. A lot, I think.

I now think that there are good, bad, and also indifferent people. The latter ones are not much better than the bad ones. Maybe not at all.

And knowing which one you are dealing with is not a simple task at all. In

both groups you come across apparently friendly and smiley ones just as often as you find mean and callous ones.

I have made a vow though. When I grow up, I will always have a gold watch on me. You never know...

THE END