

## The Aftermath

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Wide-eyed and innocent, a student once asked me what I considered to be the worst part of the Holocaust. I smiled. Is it possible to answer such a question? How to choose, to single out one horror greater than another?

That day, I had no answer for the student. But the question kept haunting me. I now believe that I know the answer.

I survived the war by hiding -- a hidden child. The idea was to live with the cunning of a hunted animal, and with courage well beyond my years. But mixed among the terrors of this dark world lay the hope of the innocent. If I could escape the clutches of the hunter long enough, this horrible nightmare would eventually end, and things would return to normal, to the way they were. This hope, this faith kept me going.

Eventually liberation did come. Since my father had been deported in early 1942, my main concern now was for him. I lived for his return.

Though undernourished and sick, I walked miles, day after day, to check the lists of names of those who had been liberated from the camps.

The lists were posted at three synagogues in Brussels, each one situated at a different end of the city and at a great distance from the other ones. The most cumbersome to reach was the large *Holländische Schul*, near the *Palais de Justice*, which necessitated a considerable climb up steep streets. But this *shul* had the most complete lists, and I believed with absolute faith that it was only a matter of time until my father's name would appear among the returnees. I waited and walked, walked and waited, coming home more and more exhausted, but unwilling to give up my search and my hope.

I dreamed about my father's return. I knew that we would have to be very careful not to offer too much or too rich food, which could kill him, as had been the case with other released camp inmates.

Little by little, the lists began to dwindle, the names became more and more sparse, trickling down to a mere few. My visits became less frequent, first because of exhaustion, but also because not many new names appeared, and so the same names remain posted for a longer time.

Fear of the unthinkable slowly began to creep into my soul when suddenly one day, there was a postcard in our mailbox.

Did hope play a cruel trick? It looked to me to be in my father's handwriting, though somewhat shaky. It stated simply: "Father is in Hospital St. Pierre."

I didn't care. I didn't care what shape he was in. He was back! I had no doubt that I could bring him back to health, no matter how long it took! It had all been worthwhile, all the suffering, all the hunger, all the fear! Finally things could return to normal. I began crying hysterically, I ran up the stairs to our apartment. I knocked on the door and mother opened it. I was sobbing uncontrollably, unable to speak.

"What happened? What is the matter?" my mother wanted to know. All I could utter was "Daddy, Daddy," as I handed her the postcard.

Mother didn't say anything for a while. She let me cry, waiting for me to compose myself, allowing me to catch my breath. Then she said, ever so gently, "Calm yourself, dear, this is not *your* father, it's Jacob's dad."

That was the moment when my soul was torn apart with one agonizing thrust, as surely as if some demon had reached into my breast and physically removed part of my being, leaving behind a tattered, empty *neshumah*. I cannot describe the pain of that instant.

This was the beginning of my recurring nightmares -- this moment when I knew that life could never truly be complete again. And this then is the legacy, the aftermath which has no end.

The worst part of the Holocaust is what comes afterward. It is the realization that one must continue living for the rest of one's life with part of one's soul amputated.