

A Mother's Courage
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In the long cold Vienna winter, it was often barely daylight when we got up for school. Nevertheless, I did not mind, for even as a first grader, I was an avid learner and loved school. I was also an early riser, so I was always eager to start the day.

Yet this time when my mother came to wake me, I had difficulty opening my eyes. I remember rubbing them groggily and peering at the window. It was pitch-black outside, not a glimpse of dawn. I pointed this out to my mother:

"*Mutti*," I said, "are you sure it's already time to get up for school? It's still so dark outside!"

"Get dressed quickly," my mother replied in a soothing voice, and she started to help me dress. This was unusual and, sleepy or not, it caught my attention. Mom as a rule did not believe in pampering her children when it came to routine chores such as dressing for school. Becoming more alert, I noticed that Mom was somehow different, more subdued, less matter-of-fact than she usually was in the morning. I now saw some light filtering in from the side and base of the kitchen door, which was slightly ajar. My sleepy mind registered this as being normal. But then I heard voices, male voices, and this once more was out of the ordinary. I knew something was definitely amiss when I distinguished my father's voice for, as a rule, Father left for work long before we children were awakened.

I finished dressing as fast as I could. When I went into the kitchen, my older brother was already there, fully clad. My father and two Austrian policemen were engaged in what seemed a friendly conversation. The clock said 2:00 AM.

My mother helped me with my coat and hat, and we all left together. Outside, a storm was raging. The wind howled, the rain came down in sheets, drenching my face in seconds. One policeman took me by the hand and helped me along, shielding me with his body when one of the heavier wind gusts nearly lifted me off the ground. I felt a sense of security under the protection of this strong officer of the law, and I bravely tried to keep pace and march into the howling wind. The officer, however, had a less cheerful attitude.

"How cruel!" Addressing my father, he attempted to over shout the wind: "I wouldn't even force a dog out into this weather," he proclaimed angrily, "much less women and children!"

Our destination, it turned out, was the local police precinct. There the friendly policeman vanished. We were ushered into a dimly lit room. My first impression was a smell of heavy cigarette smoke mixed with moisture permeating the air, making everything appear as if in a dense fog. The room was crowded and noisy, with a dampness which emanated from the saturated clothes of the constantly new arrivals. I noticed a desk somewhere toward the center of the room and to our right, behind which a man in black Nazi uniform replete with swastika armband was sitting, speaking to the first person in line. Two more uniformed Nazis stood on the right and left side, in front of the same desk. Given my size, what was most visible at eye level, and hence most frightening to me were the leather uppers of their spit-polish shiny black boots, reaching nearly to the top of my chest. A single light hung from the ceiling, directly over the desk.

As we entered the room, my father was immediately separated from us and led to a door at the rear left side of the room. An SS man reached for that door to admit my father. As it opened, a mass of male human bodies expanded into our room. They stood, crammed like sardines, in an area which appeared to be either a storage room or a windowless closet. Their arms tight

alongside their bodies, some had bent their elbows in an attempt to gain some additional breathing space. The black-shirted Nazi raised his leg, intent at pushing this mass of people back into the closet with his boot. He accompanied his gesture with an outburst of vicious curses, the likes of which I had never heard in my sheltered life.

Before the door could be shut, however, several voices from the rear of that area shouted out that someone had fainted. The SS man stopped and lowered his boot. About six or seven men stepped, or rather tumbled out, so as to try to allow access to the rear, but they were stopped by the SS man. As I observed with increasing horror, one lifeless body was finally pulled from between the legs of those still imprisoned in the closet. Then everyone, including my father, was pushed back in. Using his booted leg very efficiently, the Nazi managed to get everyone to recoil so that the door could be shut once more.

This frightening episode had captured my total attention thus far. I now realized that we had moved forward, were standing in front of the desk between the two SS men, and my mother was pleading with the person seated behind the desk.

"We are law-abiding citizens," she kept repeating. "We have never broken any law nor harmed anyone: please let us go."

My mother was normally blessed with a strong-willed, authoritarian personality. She certainly was not, to my knowledge, given to pleading. Her complete change of attitude heightened my fear to a panic. Surely the worst was about to happen!

Yet my mother continued: "I have a sick child here," pointing at me. "She throws up all the time. We are good, law-abiding citizens. Please allow me to make take my sick child home."

This statement was a half-truth at best. In reality I was a very healthy child, but was prone to vomit under stress or anxiety. The situation here now surpassed any childhood fear or panic I had ever encountered. In the pit of my stomach, my whole insides were churning, demanding to be free. Oh, how I tried to hold back the upcoming flow; but to no avail. In an act of desperation and fright, I raised both hands towards my mouth. Too late. It all burst out, projectile style, and to my horror landed all over the spit-polished boots of the SS man to my right. I had seen similar boots in action at the closet door. Terror struck at the thought of what would happen to me now. I wretched some more, then started trembling.

The rest is somewhat vague. Perhaps I did indeed pass out, perhaps I have just blocked it all out of my memory. Apparently my mother, brother and myself were allowed to return home. My father stayed behind. All I remember is waking up the next morning in my own bed, with only my brother and myself in the apartment. My mother was gone, leaving a note for my brother. She would be back soon....

As it turned out, come morning, my mother had composed herself and regained some of her strong-willed attitude. Although she was anything but tall, she was well proportioned. Her pretty face, her beautiful auburn hair and milky white skin made people notice her. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind. This time she had gathered up our tax receipts, *Sittenzeugnisse* (good citizenship certificates), and other documents attesting to our exemplary citizenship, and had marched down to police headquarters where she demanded to see the police chief himself. Once in his office, she documented in detail what superb citizens we were and requested with authority that her husband be released at once.

The police chief, seated behind his desk, listened to her quietly and without interrupting. When my mother finally ran out of the steam. He beckoned her to scratch that. When my mother finally ran out of steam, he beckoned her to join him at the window, located behind his desk.

"Come," he said, "and look."

The window gave on to a large courtyard, around the perimeter of which stood hundreds of people. The center of the courtyard was mostly clear, except for a few SS men taunting and having some fun with an old, bearded Jew.

There was a sadness and resignation in his voice. "They have been there all night," he said, pointing at the people in the courtyard, "standing in the pouring rain and howling wind. Pregnant women, women holding children, children themselves. The young, the old and the sick, With no exception. Some were singled out to be beaten, some to be teased, others to do exercises beyond their ability. I don't know what you did to be allowed to go home. I know even less how you got permission to see me today. All I know is that at present I no longer have any authority to grant you anything whatsoever. Go home to your children and count your blessings. And when you leave my office, hold your head up high and walk with a strong, self-assured and steady gait as if you belong. For if they stop you and ask for identification, you might just wind up down there with them." And he pointed again to the courtyard.

My mother was shaken, but not yet willing to concede.

"I demand to know what will happen to my husband," she insisted. The police chief shrugged his shoulders in despair.

"I don't know," he replied. "All I know is that whatever's going to happen will happen this morning. So if your husband is going to be released, it will be before noon. Now please go, and remember what I told you about the way to walk."

My mother left thinking of her children, and following his advice on how to walk in the hallways. By 12:00 noon, my father returned. Once more, I wanted to believe that it was all over. And of course, once more, that wish was not to be granted.

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