

LAST STAND

By Mark S. Rosati

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The lessons of history are in danger of being forgotten in this effectively told short recreated from an actual event, in which a lonely Holocaust survivor is forced to confront the horrors of Nazism. The author creates a sympathetic character in Jozef and the low key, uncluttered prose keeps us focused on the story. As events unfold, we are reminded how the actions of the past can sometimes too easily, if unexpectedly, resonate anew in our own day with disturbing consequences. The poignant last paragraph is a minor masterpiece on how to close.*

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In the years following World War II, the village of Skokie, Illinois, north of Chicago, became a refuge for Holocaust survivors. At one time, an estimated 8,000 lived there, seeking safety in a town where more than fifty percent of the 60,000 residents were Jewish. As America became more affluent in the postwar decades, many of the first-generation children of the survivors moved to posher suburbs, but when we bought a home in Skokie in the 1990s, there were still many Holocaust victims remaining in the village. So it was not surprising to learn that one of our neighbors, Jozef, an elderly, unassuming retired tailor from Prague, had been in a concentration camp.

Evidently, the Fates had determined that Jozef's suffering at the hands of the Nazis was insufficient; we later learned that Jozef's wife had died ten years before we moved next door, and that his older child, Beth, was born with severe mental and physical disabilities. At 32, she lived with her father and could rarely leave the house. Jozef's other child, Beth's younger brother, lived in Los Angeles, pursuing a career in architecture, and rarely came home.

Being much younger and in good health, I would offer to help Jozef shovel snow or take out the garbage and recycling; a gentle and quiet man, he would usually politely decline but, when the weather was really bad or the recycling bin too full, he would take me up on my offer, murmuring his thanks. It was clear, always, that he was not a man who expected help, or was comfortable asking for it.

A few years after we moved in, the house north of Jozef changed owners, and the new neighbors had a large German Shepherd which lived up to the breed's billing as a vigilant guard dog and barked constantly at anything that moved. One time I went out to do some yard work - as usual, to the soundtrack of the dog's barking - and, after a few moments, looked over the chain-link fence and noticed Jozef standing motionless in his backyard. After a while, seeing that he hadn't moved, I walked over to the fence. I could now see that he was distressed - staring, transfixed, on something far away. "Are you OK?" I asked. My voice startled him; he had not even realized I was there. "That dog," he said. "Those are the kinds they used in the camp. They never stopped barking, just like this one." He took a deep breath and then slowly walked inside his house, more stooped than usual.

One blistering summer day a year or so later, as I was walking home from the train after work, a somber, well-dressed young man emerged from a taxi in front of Jozef's house and raced inside. Later that night, our neighbor across the street, Ben, told us that Jozef's daughter had passed away in her sleep. Jozef had discovered the body after Beth had failed to come downstairs for breakfast. The young man whom I had seen racing into the house was Jozef's son, David, the California architect.

On the first night of shiva, I went next door to pay my respects. Jozef introduced me to David, a friendly man with a tan that spoke to years living outside the Chicago area, where the previous winter we had experienced ten consecutive days of subzero temperatures and more than sixty inches of snow. After I extended my condolences, David and I made small talk for a few moments, and then he excused himself to visit with an elderly couple in the living room, leaving Jozef and me alone in the kitchen.

Jozef got up, stiffly, opened the bottle of kosher wine I had brought, poured two glasses, and put one before me. Jozef usually wore long-sleeved shirts, but probably due to the heat, on this night his sleeves were rolled up. As he reached forward to hand me my glass of wine, for the first time I noticed the ugly five-digit tattoo on his forearm. It was not merely a case of words failing me - stripped of intellectual response, I could not even think in terms of rational language. Jozef's arm was silent witness to evil, primal and monstrous, alien to anything in my direct experience.

I do not know if Jozef noticed my reaction, which I tried mightily to control. "Thank you for coming," he whispered.

"Of course," I said, again explaining that my wife was out of town but would be there tomorrow.

"She is lovely," he said. I agreed.

"She reminds me of my late wife," he said. "I used to think she left me too early. But I am glad she is not here today. No parent should have to bury their child."

I agreed that they shouldn't, but in a feeble attempt to make him feel better, mumbled, "I know they're together now."

“We believe the same things your people do, but nobody’s come back from there yet, have they?” he said. He was not unkind, just matter-of-fact. I sipped more wine.

“My son David, he told me he’s moving back here from California, to help take care of me, so I’m not alone.”

“That’s great,” I said.

“When I was his age, I didn’t have these choices. I was in Auschwitz for seven years. I was 19 when I went in and 26 when I came out. Those are the best years of a young man’s life, and they took them away from me. Every member of my family, every friend from my village, they killed. I survived because I was a tailor. A good tailor. I was useful to them. I made uniforms. That’s how I stayed alive.” There was no anger - not even emotion - in his voice; his flat tone could have been describing everyday annoyances like a traffic jam or getting caught in the rain with a broken umbrella.

After a long and empty pause, he asked: “You remember when the Nazis wanted to march here?”

In the late 1970s, a group of misanthropes styling themselves as Nazis, in a staggering act of cruelty, announced that they would stage a march in Skokie, targeting the community precisely because it was home to so many Holocaust survivors. The threatened march and ensuing legal battles had received international news coverage. Skokie fought valiantly but futilely in the courts before the vile little band decided to have their march in Chicago instead, in

an area of that sprawling city that, ironically, turned out to harbor more than a few former concentration camp guards who had escaped justice in Europe and were living illegally in the United States. But before the gang decided to switch to the Chicago venue, it appeared that the courts would insist the march be allowed to go forward in in Skokie on First Amendment grounds. Rumors swirled that hardened Jewish activists - to whom “never again” was not a slogan - were quietly coming to town to deal in their own way with the latter-day Nazis.

“We came here to be safe. I had a wife and two young children. They said it couldn’t happen here, but it was going to happen. That’s how it started in Germany, small groups of thugs, people turn a blind eye, or they have to protect their rights, or they have other things to worry about. Then other twisted people, they see it happen, they follow. Soon you have mobs chanting, running through the streets. People compare it to cancer, but that’s wrong. Cancer takes over and it makes you sick and weak. Nazism is like getting rabies.”

With a long gulp, he drained his glass.

“I couldn’t sleep, at work I couldn’t concentrate, thinking about swastikas in Skokie. Five thousand miles, thirty years, and they want to make us to look at swastikas again, hear them shout ‘Juden, Juden.’ Why? Six million dead wasn’t enough for them?”

“I thought about buying a gun. I had a wife and two children to protect. But I think, could I use a gun? Wouldn’t using a gun make me like them? And what if one of the children found the gun

and played with it and accidentally shot the other one? One more innocent dead Jew because of Nazis. How could any of us live with that? So I sharpened my butcher knives, and I put new locks on the doors. And I stayed up late every night, and waited, until the storm had passed.

“They say it can never happen here. And it hasn’t. Not yet, anyway.”

A few moments later, the doorbell rang. Jozef, who had lived such a sad, long life, returned to the present, shuffled to the door, and somberly greeted the new guests who had come to sit shiva for his daughter, who had lived such a sad, short life. A few moments later, I heard mourners begin praying in Hebrew while, outside, the German Shepherd barked incessantly.

The End

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AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I conceived ‘Last Stand’ as an allegory for America in the age of Trump, and the UK in the time of Brexit. The story is a work of fiction but is set against the backdrop of an actual historical incident: the plan by a small band of self-styled Nazis to stage a march in Skokie, Illinois, in 1977.*

I have been a playwright for 25 years but more recently was inspired to start writing short stories, thanks in no small part to the magnificent works of Stuart Dybek and the late, great Lucia Berlin.

BIO: *Mark Rosati, a Chicago-area playwright, is the author of 23 plays and numerous short stories, and a member of the Dramatists Guild and The Company Theatre Group in NJ. His plays have had productions and public readings in New York City, Chicago, New Jersey, Boston, Michigan and Brighton, UK. Recent productions include “Exposed” in April 2019 at Between Us Productions’ Take Ten Festival in New York, “Duet” at Theatre East’s 5x5 Drama Series in all five NYC boroughs, “Restoration” in Between Us Productions’ Take Ten Festival, and “Extinct/Extant” at Manhattan Repertory Theatre’s February Event. His short story “Last Stand” was included in a public reading of new works on the theme of “sanctuary” by Cast Iron Theatre in Brighton in June 2019, and his one-act “Our Daily Bread” received a public reading in Boston in the “Pinning Our Hopes” pre-inauguration Resistance event in January 2017.*