

Gotz and Meyer

David Albahari

Chapter 1

Götz and Meyer. Having never seen them, I can only imagine them. In twosomes like theirs, one is usually taller, the other shorter, but since both were SS non-commissioned officers, it is easy to imagine that both were tall, perhaps the same height. I am assuming that the standards for acceptance into the SS were rigorous, below a certain height you most certainly would not qualify. One of the two, or so witnesses claim, came into the camp, played with the children, picked them up, even gave them chocolates. We need so little to imagine another world, don't we? But Götz, or Meyer, then went off to his truck and got ready for another trip. The distances were not long, but Götz, or Meyer, was looking forward to the breeze that would play through the open truck window. As he walked towards the truck, the children returned, radiant, to their mothers. Götz and Meyer were probably not novices at the job. Though the assignment was not a big one – we are talking of no more than five thousand souls – the efficiency required meant that only trusted colleagues could handle it. It is entirely possible that Götz and Meyer wore decorations of some sort on their non-commissioned officers' lapels. I wouldn't be surprised. I'd be more surprised if one of them had a moustache. I cannot picture Götz, or Meyer, with facial hair. In fact, I cannot picture them at all. The moustaches are no help. It is simplest, of course, to fall back on stereotypes – blond hair, fair complexion, pale face and steely eyes – but I would only be demonstrating my vulnerability to propaganda. The chosen race had barely got off the ground, Götz and Meyer represented only one link in a chain stretching far into the future. But what a link they were! Sometimes it is precisely the little tasks such as theirs that form the cornerstone of a vast edifice; their sturdiness ensures the stability of the foundations. I am not saying that Götz and Meyer dwelt on this – perhaps they merely did their job conscientiously as they might have done any other – but they did, undoubtedly, know what their work was for. Their job, more precisely, that was how they referred to it, their assignment, their order, their command. Military terminology cannot be avoided here. Götz and Meyer were, after all, members of the army, one cannot doubt their loyalty to the Reich and the Führer. Even as they came into the camp, swung children up off the ground, Götz, or maybe it was Meyer, never thought for a moment of what was to come. Everything fitted, after all, into a larger plan, each individual has his own destiny, no-one, least of all Götz, or Meyer, could change that. He was with the children, therefore, only while he was with them. As soon as he'd ruffled the last tousled head, given out the last sweet, lowered the last pair of little feet onto solid ground, they faded from his thoughts and he retreated into his fantasies. Götz, or Meyer, had always wanted to be a fighter pilot. I have no proof whatsoever that this was what he dreamed of, but I find the thought appealing that he'd step up into the cab of his truck as if sliding into the cockpit of a bomber, wearing a leather jacket, but not a pilot's cap because that would have been a little awkward with his fellow traveller sitting there. The truck was a Saurer, a five-tonner with a box-like body, 1.7

metres high and 5.8 metres long, and it could be hermetically sealed. At first, the Gestapo used smaller trucks, but the Belgrade Saurer was part of a second series, a more perfect series: a full hundred people could stand in the back, apparently, according to what witnesses tell us. One can run a simple calculation based on that and conclude that it was essential for the transport of five thousand souls to make at least fifty trips. During these trips, the souls became real souls, no longer human in form. Götz and Meyer most certainly knew what was happening in the back of the truck, but they definitely would never have described it like that. After all, the people they were driving had no souls, that, at least, was a commonly known fact! Jews were nothing more than mildew on the face of the world! And so, day in and day out, they repeat their practised routine. First Götz, or Meyer, would drive the truck to the gateway of the camp, and then Meyer, or Götz, would open its capacious back. Orderly and calm, the prisoners would climb up into the truck: women, children, a few of the elderly. Beforehand they would place their belongings in another truck, parked within the confines of the camp. Convinced that the moment had finally come for them to be transported to Romania, though there had been talk of Poland, as if that mattered, what mattered was that they were leaving this gruesome place, no matter where they went from here it couldn't be worse, and a flash of relief would have crossed their faces. I don't know where Götz and Meyer were at those moments. It is entirely possible that they were sitting in the truck, or maybe there were administrative chores to do, the signing of orders, the filling out of forms. Whatever the case, when they finally got underway – a guard, a German, would come over, take the paperwork from them, confirm that the loading was finished – when they got underway, everything proceeded according to a precise schedule. And it could be no other way, since the bridge spanning the Sava River had been damaged and traffic was crossing it in alternating directions, using just one lane. The truck had to get there at precisely the moment when the Belgrade lane opened. They'd cross the border without stopping, they had a special permit and special plates, and the camp commander would escort them in a special car. Once they'd crossed the bridge and covered a little distance, they'd pull over, and Götz, or Meyer, would get out, crawl under the Saurer and hook the exhaust pipe up to an opening on the underside of the truck. After that, Götz and Meyer no longer had anything to do but drive, of course. The truck with the belongings had left them behind long before. The souls in the back of the truck had not. They would fly off all at once, precisely when the truck arrived at its destination. The door at the back would open, the corpses would tumble out, the German soldiers would look away, and Serbian prisoners would start the unloading. This was a group of seven prisoners who had been specially selected for the work. The story was that there had been five of them, but since the job turned out to be pretty strenuous – they had to lug the corpses out and bury them in a grave in no time flat – seven is a more likely number. At first they used to take care with the corpses – this was a dead person after all, an asphyxiated woman, a convulsed little child – but then they got to the point where they grabbed each one they came to, there wasn't time to be respectful, not when there were so many, and each one was heavier than any living being would have been. Death is heavy. Another group of prisoners had dug the grave, though the first seven never saw the others, the graves were already ready before they got there, which was, at least, some sort of consolation. What were Götz and Meyer up to at this point? I expect they were chatting with the camp commander, one of them was certainly smoking, and there was the business of crawling back under the truck and reattaching the exhaust pipe. Little by little, the day

would pass. There was always something to do. Götz and Meyer took their seats in the cab, the camp commander got into his car, the four German guards drove the seven Serbian prisoners off in their vehicle. Behind them, the freshly filled grave was still, but by the next day the soil would start buckling, the gases would cause blisters of earth to bulge. There was no avoiding it, Götz and Meyer might have thought, every job has its downside. They drove slowly, there was no hurry. Later, in the evening, one of them would read a book, while the other went for a stroll. You could say that they felt no aftereffects from their everyday duties, suffered no discomfort from nightmares. They were in fine shape, had a good appetite, there was no residue of disturbing thoughts, not even nostalgia for their homeland. They were, in fact, the best proof of how advances in technology enhance the stability of the human personality. They were living proof that Reichsführer Himmler had been right when he claimed that a more humane form of killing might ease the psychological burden felt by those members of the task forces assigned to shooting Russians and Jews. Here, Götz and Meyer felt no burden at all. Himmler would, I'm sure, have been delighted had he met them. Apparently in August 1941 he was present at a large-scale execution before a firing squad. When he peered into the grave and saw that several of the victims were still alive, and that they were twitching and moaning, he was nauseated. I have no idea whether he vomited and stained his trim uniform, but going pale, knees knocking, was highly improper for a German officer. So when he got back to Berlin, he issued an order to all the services to work out a method of killing that might boost the morale of both the victims and the soldiers assigned to the executions. All the challenges inherent in such a task were met within fewer than four months, and after successful trial runs with Soviet prisoners of war in Sachsenhausen, by the spring of 1942 they had completed the production of thirty special trucks, twenty large ones like our Saurer, and ten smaller ones, Diamonds or Opelblitzes. This truck, one should note, had its predecessor in a hermetically sealed vehicle used as part of the euthanasia programme for the mentally ill, in which the victims were put to death with pure carbon monoxide. The brilliant innovation that made Himmler's idea a reality, and that was, after all, key to the further advancement of massmurder technology, consisted of using engine exhaust instead of carbon monoxide from steel canisters, not only making the whole procedure considerably less costly but also enhancing the impression that the interior of the truck was completely innocent: it looked like the *genuine* interior of a *genuine* truck, which certainly had a salutary effect on the victims. It was difficult, I admit, to resist such attention to detail. It did turn out, however, that things were not as simple as that, regardless of the improvement to the victims' spiritual state, because the members of the task forces found that unloading asphyxiated people actually provoked greater psychological discomfort than ordinary firing-squad executions did. At the camp where Götz and Meyer worked, this problem was resolved by engaging the efforts of the seven, or possibly five, Serbian prisoners. They were the ones who dragged out the dead, lined them up in the graves and buried them. Once they had finished filling the last of the graves, they were shot. I believe that Götz and Meyer were there, though it is also entirely possible that before this happened they had already set out, following the commander's car, for the Fairgrounds camp, which was emptying. There were always bureaucratic details to be seen to. This happened, as the documents tell us, on May 10, 1942. A month later, the Saurer was on its way back to Berlin. Götz and Meyer went with it. Its rear axle had broken, so it was transported by train. Götz and Meyer most certainly had their own compartment. Those four German policeman had a special

compartment, they had earned an extra week of leave, so why not Götz and Meyer? There is nothing to suggest what led to the broken axle, nor is it known why the truck stayed on in Belgrade, unused, for a month when, at least we know this much, its services were sorely needed elsewhere. It is also not at all clear why that axle, if it had to go and break, hadn't snapped long before, thereby slowing the inevitable pace of the suffering. God was not doing much at this juncture for his chosen people. Perhaps he was busy in some other corner of the world, or perhaps he wanted to let the people know they weren't so chosen after all? If a person can't trust the gods, how can he trust other people? The children, for instance, trusted Götz, or was it Meyer, when he strode briskly into the camp, warmed by the spring sun, picked them up and gave them sweets. How Götz, or was it Meyer, loved children! It would be hard to find the right words to describe the warmth he felt when his hands rested on those tousled little heads. He gave no thought to lice at moments like that, although he could often spot them crawling in the closely cropped hair. Should I assume, therefore, that Götz, or was it Meyer, was married? Did he have a wife, perhaps children, somewhere in Germany or, maybe, Austria? The other one, the one who did not venture into the camp, probably wasn't married. Love for children doesn't come from heaven – God was not there anyway – rather, it's something you learn, like everything else. Although, I must admit, there is no harm in thinking that he, the other one, in fact refused to pretend. He was there on a certain assignment, and nothing but that job existed for him. While the other fellow was in the camp, he was seeing to administrative work or sitting in the truck with his foot on the accelerator, waiting. Maybe he smoked. He probably smoked. Everyone smoked back then. As far as that is concerned, the world hasn't changed. Cigarettes have got thinner, filters have reached design perfection, tobacco has become more aromatic, but nothing in them evokes the flood that, at the time of this story, had enveloped the world like slippery slime. Flood, perhaps, is not the best word to use when speaking of people dying from poison gas, but the sensation of submersion is the same. You reach bottom, and that is the end, there is nowhere left to go. Death is not a balloon but an anchor. The souls, indeed, flew up when the truck arrived at its destination, frantic for fresh air, but the bodies stayed below, sometimes so tangled that the Serbian prisoners cursed softly through their clenched teeth as they did what they could to disentangle the arms and legs and crisscrossed fingers. They'd been promised, I read this somewhere, that after they'd completed the job successfully they'd be sent off to a work camp in Norway, and so they lived for two months within a delusion that was part and parcel of the greater delusion, a performance in which each played the role he had been assigned. No improvisation was permitted. All of it, even art, served the stated goal. If each of them had acted according to his own free will, the whole thing would have crumbled early on. The camp prisoners pretended that they were on their way to Romania, or Poland, and climbed into the truck as if they were marching off to noman's land between barbed-wire borders. The Serbian prisoners, mud-splattered, plunged their shovels into the soil and sprinkled it on the overflowing graves as if they were building a bridge spanning the North Sea. And just as the truck was not, in fact, headed for Romania, or Poland for that matter, the bridge they were building took them nowhere. During a flood, there is no dry land. Who could have known? Life is full of tricks, anyway, in war and in peace, it makes no difference. It is always that same convulsive effort to survive just a little longer than planned. Present or absent, God is cruel, there is no genuine mercy in him. When he blinks, he blinks, and there is absolutely nothing to be done about it. Souls cluster around him, voices waft his way

like the sound of a thousand little bells, but God merely shrugs them off. That was precisely Götz's, or was it Meyer's, shrug of vexation when he saw the broken axle. Something like that must infuriate a person, even if he is as disciplined as Götz and Meyer were. Some things are simply stronger than all that the human spirit creates. And besides, Götz, or was it Meyer, or both, had had it with that wild country, the crude people, the lack of order. It isn't that Götz, or was it Meyer, was nostalgic, his sense of duty was far greater than any homesickness he might have felt, but it was nice, it had to be said, in the quiet of his room, to eat sausages and drink beer. Had he had supernatural powers at his command, Götz, or Meyer, would have fixed that axle with his own hands and returned it to its original condition. Other trucks in the series had indeed been damaged, especially on the rough roads in Russia and Ukraine, but this was no consolation for Götz, or Meyer, or both of them. A person gets accustomed to things and starts expecting the things to accustom themselves to him with the same ease, and when those things betray him, he is rightly disappointed. Not so much so, at least in the case of Götz and Meyer, that he might kick them, here I am referring to the truck, or say something nasty. And not just because the truck had served them well, but because, unlike the people it transported, it had a soul. Götz, or was it Meyer, knew it did, because countless times, while he had been driving, he had felt the cab envelop him in a maternal sort of way. It did all it could to ease his every movement. If the truck had been able to, Götz, or Meyer, was convinced, it would have flown. It only took two days in Berlin to repair the damage, and, as of June 15, 1942, the truck was on its way to Riga. I do not know whether Götz and Meyer were dispatched along with it. If they were not, it is difficult to comprehend the vastness of their grief. They had cleaned it and polished it so often, wiped down the headlights, washed the windscreen and the interior! A tougher man than Götz and Meyer might find tears welling up in his eyes at the thought. In fact, that first night after they were faced with the horror of the broken axle, Götz, or was it Meyer, did, indeed, feel despair as he lay in bed. There can be no talk, here, of tears, but something clutched in his chest, pressure from within him and from without, he could barely breathe. He stretched his arms and crossed them under his head, but that didn't help. There was no light in the room, and he could see the sky through the window, sprinkled with stars. Their flickering said something to him, he couldn't grasp what they were saying, but he felt that the message was somehow related to the discomfort he felt, which was not letting up. Was this the cosmic pain he had read about somewhere? Poor Götz, or was it Meyer. I would have liked to have seen his photograph, perhaps then I could describe the expression on his face. I never saw them, Götz or Meyer, so I can only imagine them. My interest in the two of them came at a time when I was trying to fill in the empty slots in my family tree. I had just turned 50, I knew where I was going with my life, so all that was left was to figure out where I had come from. I went round the archives, visited museums, brought books home from the library. That is how Götz and Meyer came into my life. Almost all the women from my father's and mother's families died, as people usually put it, at the Fairgrounds camp, though in fact they died on the streets and byways of Belgrade, in the truck Götz and Meyer drove out to the execution grounds in Jajinci. Those two names are first mentioned in a telegram from SS-Obergruppenführer Heinrich Müller, head of the Berlin Gestapo, sent in mid-March 1942, to the chief of the German police in Belgrade, SSStandartenführer Emanuel Schäfer. The telegram announces the arrival of the specialists with the purpose-built truck, and that they will present their orders upon arrival. I have to confess that this drew me to Götz and Meyer, the fact that they were

not little cogs in a vast mechanism, blissfully unaware of what the mechanism was for, rather they were entirely aware of the nature of their assignment, being simultaneously the heralds of death and death itself. I tried to picture the moment when their superior officer informed them of the purpose of their journey. Götz and Meyer are standing at ease, barking their Yes, Sirs, but maybe they didn't even need an explanation, maybe they had already gained enough experience on the Eastern Front, this is plausible enough, especially if you consider the requirement for maximum efficiency. In that sense, the staff must be so smoothly rehearsed that they would present no risk or weak link in the chain, so Götz and Meyer could hardly have been novices. I tried to picture how, if they were married men, they had said good-bye to their wives. Götz, or maybe Meyer, would kneel before his wife and rest his cheek on her stomach, while Meyer, or maybe Götz, would plant a kiss on his wife's head. What did he say to her? How much did his wife know?