Out of the Shadows

Mary Jane Staples

Chapter One

A man who had been known to his SS comrades as 'The Wolf ' was released from a prison in Bavaria in May 1958. In 1948 he had been tried and convicted as a war criminal for his part in the inhuman elimination of untold numbers of Jewish men, women and children in the Auschwitz concentration camp of infamous memory. For the appalling nature of his crimes, he had been sentenced to a prison term of twenty years. His release came after he had served ten.

As a sergeant in the wartime SS, Ernst Thurber earned his nickname by reason of his mouthful of large white teeth that seemed to gleam with animal-like pleasure whenever he was torturing or brutalizing an inmate. However, in April 1944, following a bout of severe influenza, he began to have nightmares, as if the horrors of his own deeds were catching up with him. Before he could disgrace himself, and the SS itself, by having a breakdown merely on account of eliminating Jews, his commanding officer sent him on home leave.

His arrival coincided with that of his younger brother, Hans, a German army corporal on leave from the fighting in Italy. Although they were very different in character, they had a mutual empathy that made each the other's greatest friend, the more so after their parents were killed in an early bombing raid on Berlin. It was to Hans that 'The Wolf ', temporarily ravaged by nightmares, disclosed what he had officially sworn not to, all the grisly details of the events taking place in Auschwitz. His brother, a disciplined soldier rather than a fanatical Nazi, was appalled, so much so that the nightmares were transferred from the guilty to the innocent.

The guilty, refreshed, returned to Auschwitz to carry on as before. The innocent, suffering, returned to his unit in Italy, was captured by the British following the German defeat at Cassino and, still traumatized by what he now knew about Auschwitz, unburdened himself to a British staff officer, one Colonel Robert Adams. He was taken to London for interrogation. There, he hanged himself.

The release of ex-SS Sergeant Ernst Thurber from prison in 1958 did not attract any great attention, although it was noted among other reports in the Polish press by a minor official who worked for a government department in Warsaw. But the Polish press was noted for reporting on German war criminals who had acquired their murderous reputations in occupied Poland. That being of no consequence to 'The Wolf ', still a Nazi at heart and contemptuous of Poles, he used his freedom to set about tracing the only

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person he cared about, his brother Hans, from whom he had not heard since their reunion on that fateful day in 1944.

His first request for help was made to the regular Army Records Office. He was advised after some while that because the wartime records of many regiments were still in a state of flux, no details of his brother were presently available. He thought this a piece of bureaucratic unhelpfulness, so he contacted an ex-SS war veterans' association, an underground organization. In a Germany committed to rebuilding itself after the war under a democratic government, ex-SS officers and men could still wield some power and influence, provided they remained invisible. More time elapsed, and then 'The Wolf ' was told to get in touch with one of the senior officials at the Army Records Office. He was given the name of this official. He made contact and asked again if anything was known of his brother, whose unit had been the 114th Bavarian Regiment.

The answer took time to reach him, but it did come, and to the effect that Corporal Hans Thurber of the 114th Bavarian Regiment had been taken prisoner by the British in May 1944. The details of the capture were given.

When was it, he asked, that his brother was released from the prisoner-of-war camp and returned to Germany?

The answer was that Corporal Hans Thurber had never returned, since he died as a prisoner of war in England.

Died?

Yes, according to details supplied by the Red Cross, he had committed suicide.

That seriously disturbed the Wolf, and since no other information was forthcoming, he made further contact with old comrades of the SS. They ferreted around on his behalf, and eventually provided him with an answer. His brother had hanged himself while under British interrogation in London. Ex-SS Sergeant Ernst Thurber no more believed that than any other kind of fairy story. He smelled a cover-up by the British. He knew about methods of interrogation. He had used them himself on more than one concentration-camp inmate, bringing death to the victims.

Quite sure that British methods were no different, he was easily able to believe his beloved brother's death had come about through torture, not suicide. The belief incensed him, although he did not examine his conscience about his own record as an interrogator. The temporary nightmares he had once suffered were long gone, and, like many of his kind, he still believed that his actions had been undertaken for the good of Hitler and Germany. He decided, after being given further details by old comrades of the SS, that he had a score to settle on behalf of Hans.

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