

Altschuler

The perspiration evaporated and condensed into droplets that covered him in a fine mist. On the first night he stood at the side and heard the drops whistling. On the second night doubts were already piercing his heart. On the third he got up to stop the water that had penetrated the cellar. On the fourth night resourcefulness turned into a thick layer of ice on his hands and feet. On the fifth night he managed to hear the hunting horns. On the sixth he waited for the dogs to bite his feet that hurt from the cold.

The water in the cellar covered his waist. His kidneys ceased functioning. His testicles were drawn up into his body and pressed against the inflamed bladder. Tomorrow, he calculated, the liver will stop being the safe haven of the dead blood. Every now and then he put his hands into the water and massaged his lower back, hoping to send a little blood to the damaged internal organs. To me he seemed like a beached whale.

On Saturday the Swastika Army retreated and the city was ablaze. The cellar door opened and somebody shouted, "There are Jews down here." Three went into the water and lay him down in the snow. Two Jewish Brigade medics covered him with a woolen blanket and carried him to a truck. When the truck was full they drove to the nearest hospital.

In the first week they fed him glucose intravenously and wanted to locate relatives for him. They tried to save his legs and amputated them above the knee, hoping it would stop the gangrene. In the second week he wanted to eat moss instead of the dissolved glucose and minerals. In the third week he fell asleep and his whole body shook. In the fourth the shaking was replaced by vomit. In the fifth week he could hear the church bells. In the sixth they expected him to die.

The kidneys recovered, the liver remained damaged. In the seventh week they took him to Eretz Israel by boat.

To me he seemed like a sliced carp. To the rabbi, like a charred Torah scroll.

For the doctor who treated him for seven weeks, he cast light like an ember saved from the flames.

The psychiatric counselor demanded that relatives be found for him before he immigrated to Eretz Israel. "*Warum?*" he asked the head nurse.

"What? What?" And she couldn't believe she was so angry that she wanted to scratch his healed stumps. At the Jewish Agency offices in Haifa Port he rolled his eyes from

the stretcher. "*Warum?*" he asked. Avrum, Avrum Shochat, son of a Jewish mother, Manya, and an Austrian father. Married to Sarah and father of Dorit, Rachel and Na'ama who are no longer living.

In the first year he was sent to a hostel in West Jerusalem. To stay there, acclimatize and turn a new page. There he lost control of his voluntary muscles. In the second year, held in by straps, he managed to sit in a wheelchair but couldn't lift his head. To me he seemed like a mosquito-infested pool. In the third year he couldn't control his left arm. In the fourth he slept with the prostheses on his stumps. In the fifth year supported by a nurse he moved around the hostel's halls. In the sixth he was already smoking and looking around.

I met him in the accursed summer of 1965. My wife had suffered a stroke and lay restlessly next to him, shaking uncontrollably. The moment I came in he asked, "*Warum?*"

*Warum* what.

*Warum* was.

I imagined he was a Holocaust survivor who had come through the war in a flooded cellar, his legs had been gangrenous and his psyche had not recovered. On my third visit I amused myself by looking for the number tattooed on his arm and didn't find one. On my fourth visit I hoped he'd die. On the fifth I thought he was a scion of Polish nobility, a Righteous Gentile saved by the Red Army. On the sixth visit he vomited all over the white sheets. On Saturday my wife died.