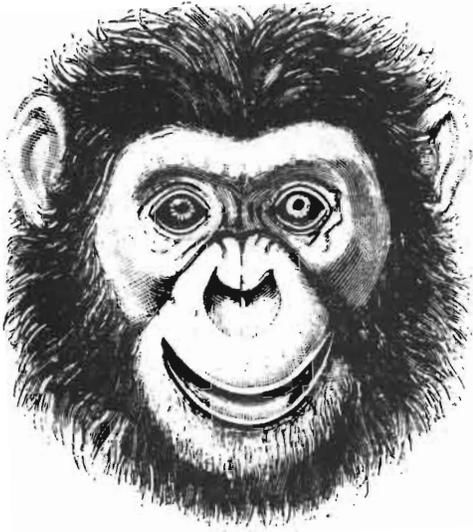


# MY POOR PRISONER

Roberta Kalechofsky  
Jews for Animal Rights



There is an unpleasant incident which took place in the fortress prison of Oranienburg in 1934, when the quixotic cabaret poet of the 1930s, Erich Muhsam, was brought there and imprisoned in the Gestapo roundup of left-wing intellectuals after the Reichstag fire.

Muhsam was known in Berlin circles as a "kaffehaus poet," bohemian in style, outrageously satirical in his poetry, and Blakean too, as if his writing was squeezed out between bitterness and vision. He was physically unmistakable: bushy red hair and wild red beard crowding an emaciated face; scrawny body and wiry fingers. He was loved by his friends and hated by his enemies for the same quality -- "something Christ-like," the friends said sentimentally and the enemies said snickeringly, when anecdotes were told of him, of how poverty-stricken Muhsam, who had scarcely seed to put in his mouth, gave his coat to a beggar. The comparison was flattering, but dangerous from his enemies to whom he snickered back with a manic need to bait

them, "Why not something Jewlike?"

Nor could he resist the visionary in him from working out a similar compulsion towards destructive acts of generosity, when some friends-- for he had them not only among the bohemian writers of Berlin, but even a few randomly powerful ones-- secured him a train ticket to Prague when it was known that the Gestapo was looking for him.

As luck would have it, a similar set of circumstances surrounded another young man, also wanted by the Gestapo, except that we know nothing more about him than this: as Muhsam had his foot on the first step, about to board the train, he saw the conductor rough-handle this man who was also trying to board the train, but without a ticket. The look on the man's face tore Muhsam's caution from him.

"It's all right," he said to the conductor with a disappearing smile. Anything more was superfluous, for when offered the ticket the young man grabbed it and ran and Muhsam's singular generosity is recorded with the enigma embedded in his personality. He did his last act as a free man to the conductor and a platform of strangers who indulged him with smiles.

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## FICTION

"Quite all right," he said to them, for the young man had disappeared into the train, "please don't thank me. Think nothing of it. Well, hey! I've been in prison before. Put your conscience at rest. I can perform there as well as anywhere," and he blew them a kiss.

He was arrested the next morning. If the other young man had been imprisoned instead, if Muhsam had taken the train to Prague, if Jesus had not been crucified, the following thoughts about good and evil would not have been written, for aside from the fact that Muhsam felt an affinity between himself and Jesus, there are some events which suck the whole of an era into them. Beyond the heart-rending nature of the following episode--the torture of an animal to get at the poet (the sole aim of his jailers was to drive him to suicide)--there is the fact of its parallel in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, and this difference in the two cultures: that when the lion refused to do the guards' bidding and attack Daniel, they did not revenge themselves upon the animal by torturing it, but took it as a sign from God and let the Hebrew go.

Night after night, morning after morning, they tortured the chimpanzee and brought Muhsam to look at her and whispered in his ear: "Why don't you kill yourself and save this poor animal her agony?"

The chimpanzee lay shrivelled in a corner. Much of her fur had been torn from her. Keeping her conscious, they had carefully mutilated her teats. Her skin was raw with cigarette burns. She lay stunned, semi-conscious now, roaming on the border of her pain.

Spared from an experiment, they had brought her to Muhsam's cell at the Commandant's suggestion that she could be goaded into attacking him (they were determined not to do their own killing), but the animal had sat down next to him, put her arms around his neck and smacked him a kiss on his cheek.

Surprised and delighted, Muhsam slipped into his cabaret manner. "Well, old girl," he said, "somebody's giving you lessons in loving. What a couple we would make on the ballroom floor, Millie and me." What her name was, or if she had a name, we do not know. Muhsam called her Millie for its comic effect, teasing her animal nature, as human names applied to animals do, as if to explore the boundary between us and them.

He wrote his wife, Zensl, about the incident: "It

was the kiss of death, for they have taken the animal and torture her for this. They want to drive me insane with her cries. No," he wrote, "they don't care whether I'm sane or not, they only want me to kill myself. What can I do? What should I do?" He crossed out the last line out of sympathy for Zensl, even though he was only writing the letter in his head.

They dragged him back to his cell with truncheons under his armpits. The other prisoners watched him with the intensity of a shared destiny. His footstep--a shuffle in untied shoes, for his fingers had been broken and he could not knot his laces--was known, and why he was taken and where he went, for even prison life, and especially prison life, consumes itself in the social need for gossip; except for the gypsy who kept himself apart with a wry confusion bred from his distrust of the "others," the ones who represented Europe, who "own it," as gypsies say among themselves. They had left him his clothes, his baggy pants and jacket, a striped shirt and Stetson hat, and the medallion he wore around his neck.

A priest--a Cardinal--he was stripped of his robes--kept his eyes on the Bible he held in his hands--a ploy--for his eyes fluttered knowledgeably as Muhsam went by. Practiced in discretion, he had less difficulty adjusting than Muhsam did, who succumbed to expressions of his old style buffoonery, a lifetime habit of escaping the self, or intensifying it by raising the pitch of rebuttal to folly; or Wyzanski, the young Polish communist, who still possessed vitality in spite of his beatings, and a self-protective self-righteousness which transformed his pain into argument. Anti-clerical, he was suspicious of the Cardinal's presence in the prison. It represented a mockery to him, a tour-de-force. "The Pope will get him out," he said on several occasions.

The Cardinal had at first been confined to a private room, on the recommendation of the Commandant, who respected his office and gave him a comfortable chamber, with a library, with a Louis Quatorze desk in it with the original inkstand on it, velvet drapes and a seventeenth-century pianoforte, befitting one whose status had been created by fiat in the tenth century for members of the Roman aristocracy who had no place in the new Christian world. The Commandant regarded it as a privilege of

the ruling classes to create classes, the morphology and the taxonomy of history.

Here the Cardinal had spent two years, deprived of little except his liberty (which did not surprise Wyzanski). He had a good bed to sleep on, satisfying food, wine with his meals, even visitors. (Like Muhsam, he had his allies.) Still, he wrote constantly to the Pope, not only regarding his imprisonment, which he took to be fundamental to the issues of the day, but regarding the issues. ("Surely, you are mistaken in thinking the fight against Bolshevism to be our primary struggle. You cannot engage in arguments about lesser and greater evils as other governments do.") In spite of his outspokenness against the German bishops who sympathized with Hitler, his imprisonment remained a token imprisonment, he conceded, but the whole world knew of it, and as such it had the symbolic force of the tacit acceptance of the Vatican in the face of an opposition it would not--or could not--(in the end these differences are indistinguishable) contend with.

"I should like to know," he wrote the Papal secretary, "if you have some suggestion--practical or otherwise--in which civilized people can contend with the barbarities that are now abroad. I do not speak for myself. I am treated civilly (he wanted to write, "except for the interminable conversations I am forced to hold with the Commandant who finds my company 'enlightening'--his term, not mine") but resisted any expressions that could give rise to interpretations of personal vexation.

"Believe us," the Papal office responded, "when we say that we have your good permanently in our hearts and that your welfare is ever present to our souls."

If nothing further was said or done, it was felt that his imprisonment should be kept in perspective: he was not in morbid danger, he was not even in much discomfort.

The Cardinal did not see the matter in this way. A growing disillusionment with silence as a strategy--the sense that it formed his essential prison--made him write constantly. He filled boxes of "reflections" and wondered if they would ever be read, or if read would make a difference. The continual scratching of his pen, hour after hour, struck his ear morbidly, and he would raise his head

for breath, look around at the rococco ceiling above, angels in adoration like misplaced cupids, and write more furiously. He kept up such a fury of letters--which finally found their way to the newspapers--the Papal office sent a delegate to inquire after his condition.

"My condition!" he said, vexed, waving his hands over his rooms to the Papal delegate. "Do you mean my condition or the condition of my rooms? My rooms, as you see, are in excellent condition," and he waved his hand again over the velvet draperies and gold panellings. "Perhaps you'd like some wine and a canape. I'll ring for the guard to bring some." His tone was not pleasant, but the delegate sat down on a tapestried chair and said, "A cup of wine would be grand, thank you. As for the other matter, surely you see he is not at liberty to make a public statement."

The Cardinal's mood did not fit his; he exploded with anger, "He makes many public statements on other issues."

"Well, then, he cannot make them on all." The delegate dropped his chin and regarded his wine. "No one person can address himself to every issue. For some issues, silence, as the English say, is the better part of valor."

The Cardinal squinted his eyes, which gave him both an inquiring and a menacing expression. "Yes, and what then of the English?"

"You know the strength of the enemy. What are we to do? England will have to fight alone which, after all, is neither here nor there with respect to us."

The Cardinal threw his hands up. "Are there no Christians in England?"

"We must certainly hope so."

The Cardinal could not restrain his exasperation any longer--two years of letter writing--but his exasperation was also neither here nor there, an irrelevancy, as they both knew, in the historical process to which the Church itself was now tied with less choice than either cared to calculate.

"Tell the Holy Father that for some of us his silences speak louder than his pronouncements."

"That may be," the delegate said, putting his cup of wine on the desk with an air of delicate conclusion, "but between the two, speech and silence, nothing is more discreet than silence," and

he left. "I regret," he soon wrote the Cardinal, "that the Holy Father has no practical suggestions to make at this time, concerning those issues which you so feelingly raise and which we ourselves acknowledge with our full hearts. Be assured that the conflicts of Europe are foremost in our thoughts and that we do always plead for pity, mercy, compassion, and that the nations will be enlightened in their duties towards one another. We pray for brotherly love and faith abundant among all the nations, but of those practical suggestions of which you spoke, we are not at liberty to regard them, but be assured of our love and our faith and our continual prayers for your welfare."

The Commandant knocked on the door, and entered before the Cardinal said, "Come in." "I am sorry it is a disappointment to you," he said, referring to the letter. It did not surprise the Cardinal that he knew its contents, by guesswork or otherwise. "A matter of time," he murmured in response, preferring loyalty under the circumstances.

"Of course, what else?" the Commandant said, eyeing the letter left open on the desk. "But I trust it brought you some comfort, at least. If it says less than you hoped for, perhaps it was never meant to fulfill expectations." He sighed, in a fully civil way, as one performing an act of condolences. "You know I used to sing in a church choir," he said, as if to extenuate his expression of understanding, and he sat down at the pianoforte and began to play some Bach, "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," so well that even the Cardinal, after a while and against his better judgment ("After all," the Commandant once said to him, "you aggrandized so much of the land of Europe in your appetite for spirit you made the rise of the secular nations a necessity in Europe's struggle against religious tyranny."), was impressed. Noticing the effect he made, the Commandant continued, "I haven't forgotten my training," and he bent over the pianoforte with his ear, appraising the notes as if they were jewels. He admired the Cardinal, and it pleased him to play for him, but when he made his mind up to it, he could resist flattery, though he was haunted by a desire for it, and his chief source of gratification was in the company he kept, even in the company of his prisoners. He was addicted--he described himself this way--to good conversation, "enlightening

conversation," of which he was deprived for the most part, under these circumstances, except for Muhsam, who was loquacious--but unfortunately an anarchist and a socialist and a Jew; while the Cardinal at least was none of these, least of all what the Commandant disliked more than another--an upstart. What the Cardinal's personal background was--he was the son of a bankclerk--was beside the point: he belonged to the class of Cardinals and existed within the rhythm and pattern of Europe while the cult of individualism--anarchism, socialism, bohemianism, "modern" Jewry, Muhsam--were hurling stones against it. If only for reasons of snobbery, the Commandant's sympathies were with lineage and form.

But his respect for the Cardinal's office was alloyed with triumph: the "true" mark of respect. He closed the cover to the pianoforte precipitously, looking at his wristwatch to remind himself of an appointment, and said, "Really! Art is a whore. You know as well as I do anyone can play Bach if he has had enough training."

"What an enemy of our own making," the Cardinal thought after he left. ("Yes," he wrote, "you inquire after my condition, and how can I convey to you that what you call my condition is not anything you can see with your eyes.") He sat at his desk and looked out through the French doors into the garden and the grounds surrounding the fortress, where he often watched the Commandant do his morning exercises amid a flutter of peacocks and wild turkeys.

The land was level for several acres, covered with moss and grass and pathways trailing vines, orchids, phlox, until it fell down a slope where the villagers let their sheep run and the unsuspecting townspeople lived in a concentric circle of houses surrounding their more modest church. The fortress grounds were open to them on holidays and they came in family groups not, of course, suspecting the prisons that lay beneath the solid buildings, and if they saw the Cardinal standing in the French doors, why would they suspect that he was held prisoner here? The Commandant depended upon his never saying so.

It was this idea, long recognized and now ripened with apprehension, that made the Cardinal change his course of action the next morning.

The Commandant came out as usual to take his four-mile jog around the grounds. His servant emerged too, carrying a towel and cologne. Watching him do his exercises, the Cardinal experienced a sequence of insights, begun the night before, which made him pace his room, made him unfit to go on staying there. The Commandant passed his view every four minutes, his body inclined so right as he rounded the trail, the turkeys and peacocks scattering to the side of him. It was the ripeness of this manner, sustained only by its form, needing only to appear upon the scene in one uniform or another, in this setting or a similar one, that was oppressive--the affinities between them--their parallel lines traversing the greenswards of Europe--the beauty of the place--the gardens of camellias--the pools of delight--the mists of morning caught in the weeping willows--was painful to behold--the beloved beauty of the place--the walks--the fountains streaming silver in the sunlight--so valued even by the townspeople who enjoyed it only on special occasions. Who had built this place? What cruel, seducing, lascivious architect had dreamed this prison? "Why should I blame him anymore than myself?" he thought, pacing the floor. "What, after all, is the difference if, in the end, one belongs to a collection of things, becomes a jewel in this setting or another?"

Still, he shrank from doing anything which might seem histrionic, out of character--he hated flamboyance but, how else, under the circumstances, act? There was so little room for maneuvers. He could think of little else to do, though it was not his nature to do it: he removed his robes and folded them on the desk, feeling cheapened by the act it took to become holy. He called the guard in and saw at once the effect his appearance had. Speechless, the guard turned on his heels and ran to tell the Commandant, even interrupting his exercises.

The Cardinal watched them through his window. The Commandant's eyes fluttered in his direction, a heavy-lidded but piercing glance. Of course, he couldn't see through the glass--the sun was reflecting in it. But the Cardinal could see him hesitate, think, with the very muscles of his face, query himself whether this was one of those times to interrupt his exercises. Apparently, yes. The Commandant put his jacket back on--but not with his

customary air of having brought the morning to an agreeable finish. The Cardinal had a twinge, a half regretful, grim pang of victory. It fortified him just enough to withstand the look of repulsion the Commandant gave him when he arrived in his room and looked at him in his underclothes, turned on his heels and said to the guards, "Take him where he wants to go."

Having inched his mind so far forward to experience this new-found level of unholiness in his doubts, of longing to go back on his own actions, against which he had to summon his resolve not to betray himself, the Cardinal shouted after him, "I am entitled to a prison of my own choice."

The Commandant came on occasion to visit him there, quite obviously to gauge the effects of the new surroundings on the Cardinal. "It doesn't matter," he once said to him, "even if you become a martyr or a saint, it will not matter or change one thing. Everything is too far gone. You know that yourself."

But the Cardinal proved to be as tenacious as the Commandant, and theirs became a battle of wills fought on an invisible principle. "You are probably right," he said, "but even facts change sometimes." Months of this kind of imprisonment had made his face sallow and fleshless, like a deathmask revealing the salient features. Within the confines of his new cell, he performed mass every day and the gypsy and Wyzanski joined him, making symbolic signals across their cells from which past movements had been stripped to the elemental communion, after which the gypsy slid back into his hostility and suspicion of things European, and Wyzanski took up his anticlerical stand. "The Pope will get him out," he said, contemptuous of the Cardinal's prison-life, this not-believable trespass into the political domain.

Besides them, there were some others, all political prisoners of various shades: a Millenarist by the name of Vilhelm, who was equally as tenacious as the communist and the Cardinal. He belonged to a sect without church, without organization, "without hierarchy," he said, lifting his sparsely-bearded chin in the direction of the Cardinal, "only with Jesus"; and with a set of tenets which apparently had sustained them for centuries, confirmed in the Second Coming, enduring a spiritual hunger for it which made everything else

in life dull for them. They lived like the gypsies, disdainful of the schools, the governments, the museums, the institutions, that had been erected on "God's land," which ought not to have anything on it but animal, plant and vegetable life and the minimum constructions for shelter. As if shot out of history, certainly out of its contemporary terms--progress, technology, realpolitik, diplomacy, negotiations--every morning he wrote on the back wall of his cell, "Jesus Saves," and placed his Bible in his lap. Every morning the guards beat him for it and erased it. Sometimes, a guard hesitated before the writing with a superstitious dread. Vilhelm, quick to note this and dreading nothing himself, pounced on the man with an onslaught of evangelism surprising in its imprisoned energy, inspiring panic in the guard that something had been found out in him, something that ought not to have been found out, like plague or disease, had been found out; and he increased Vilhelm's punishment.

Wyzanski, intrigued by Vilhelm, argued on his behalf that he "represented the original intentions of communism." "He is always looking for its religious justification," Muhsam wrote Zensl, and answered him with the touch of hilarity he always felt in the presence of nonsense: "Wyzanski, you should know better. Communism is about workers and workers are about buildings and construction, history in a word, the state, etc. Remember Hegel said, there is no history without the state. Vilhelm's against all that. What he wants is subsistence. Marx never wanted subsistence for the worker. In Vilhelm's state, everybody shares nothing except the spiritual kingdom. In Marx's state, everybody shares everything, and he couldn't care less about the spiritual kingdom. Do you think Jesus could come after Marx?" ("A good piece of nonsense from an intelligent person brings you back to life," he wrote Zensl. "Outside of a cabaret in Berlin, I have the best companions here. The Cardinal is a first-rate fellow and not an antisemite. The communist says he's not an antisemite, but he is. He thinks because he is anticlerical he is not antisemitic and that his religion saves him from going to hell. He thinks he has the best of both worlds. Ha! Ha! Ha! If only I had a cigarette for the proper effect of that laugh--a little smoke rising from the lips gives a man a very clever look.")

"Then what is he imprisoned for?" Wyzanski laughed with his characteristic note of contemptuous challenge.

Vilhelm did not undertake to answer for himself. He revealed nothing except the scheme of his faith, not because he was secretive, but because he had nothing else to reveal. There was no progression to his ideas and he had nothing to embroider. Many found him monotonous and taciturn, as certainly the Commandant did. Some regarded him as a "throwback"--to what they did not say. But most confronted him with disbelief and left him alone, though he said, but meant what he said, what they heard most of their lives in other contexts. Vilhelm's problem was that he never meant anything else.

Muhsam whetted Wyzanski's appetite for combat--it was the Jewish socialist in him that did it. "I'm not a communist," Muhsam said, determined to keep up the differences between himself and Wyzanski, even after a year of imprisonment together for "what's the difference?," as Wyzanski hoarsely laughed at him across the corridor space of their cells.

"You'll find out," Muhsam hoarsely whispered back.

"What did they arrest you for?" Wyzanski continued to laugh challengingly. "hey, tell me that, for being a socialist or a communist?"

They had so much common--even Muhsam confessed it--but rubbed each other the wrong way. "Pity," Muhsam said, "you don't know the difference. What's that got to do with anything? They can imprison me, but I still make the distinctions between good and evil. Anyway, I'm here on about twelve different charges. Think of that! Pacifism, antimilitarism, socialism, anarchism, bohemianism, Judaism, and even for writing poetry about Jesus." He counted the charges off on his fingers with theatrical aplomb.

"I don't blame them for arresting you for that," Wyzanski said. "What does Jesus have to do with you, hey?"

Muhsam lay down on his cot and regarded Wyzanski with overt irony. "Why not?" he said. "A fellow Jew caught in the loom of history. What's Jesus to you?"

Wyzanski's answer shot out of him as if he had

been waiting for someone to ask him that. "A fellow communist like me."

Muhsam whistled and laughed. ("Really, Zensl, a man could do worse than go to his execution with these, ha, ha, ha.") He did not write his laughter out--how could he?--and he erased the line altogether, on second thought (Zensl would not be prepared for it), but he wrote her about his cellmates, "his boon companions in destiny," for her sake he composed a scenario on his "prison cabaret," for her entertainment--and wrote it out in his old style, seizing the energy of it, the electric communion between entertainer and audience that had been a magnetic field between them, so powerful an attraction they had for each other, entertainer and audience, no other audience like them, poets, intelligentsia, members of the Dada movement, bohemians in the Grun Deutschland movement, "Die Konnenden," political cranks all, "the Coming Ones," as they called themselves, bound for the future together. Even the ones who came to heckle him proved the power of his style--legs astride a chair--standing in a pool of light--cigarette in mouth--body cheapened with poverty and poor living--too many prisons--not enough food--words biting holes in the air as decisive as gems--valuable.

"Berlin! Ha! Berlin has everything but human nature."

"Now, Paris, there's a city. Paris lives, Berlin functions."

"Bismarxism! Exactly, I said, the worst of both worlds."

They arrested me for this.

"Come," Wyzanski said, "they arrested you for being Jewish."

"Oh, of course, that, as if that's all I was."

"Your name?"

"Muhsam. You know my name. Muhsam. Means arduous in German."

He was always pleased by this fact. "Makes too much of it," Else Lasker-Schuler said. "He will wind up in front of a firing squad or hanging from a tree," and nicknamed him "wilde Jude," because of his red beard and his poetry, but mainly because of his politics. "Look out for yourself, Muhsam," she warned him, sitting in their cabaret, done up in her gaudy, freaky poverty, a feather in her hair "to symbolize hope." Good friend, she had come to his

rescue before, when he had been imprisoned with Toller and Landauer and Levine, with protest letters and petitions. "Good friend and fellow poet," she warned him. "Now you are free, Muhsam, stay away from politics. What has a poet to do with politics? Stay away, Muhsam. Stop writing satires and write your visions now. A poet can sooner create a world than create a state."

"They're the same," he said, and wrote his essay, "Die Befreiung der Gesellschaft Stat." I never knew how to separate them--the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem--the world--humanity--God--where politics left off and religion began. That's how I see Jesus."

"Whatever else Jesus and Marx have in common," the Cardinal said to Wyzanski, "one believed in God the Father and the other did not, make what you will of the difference."

Muhsam sank his head back on his pillow. "What is the difference now? Calvary is all around us--there is so much political retrogression--I think worse than at any other time. The whole world is now Golgotha. Yes, Muhsam means arduous in German. What's history without passion? I took my name for a symbol."

"German?" they asked me.

"Yes, sir, a thousand years."

"Born?"

"Of course, how else? Like Venus on a cloud?"

My father should live so long.

"His occupation?"

"Pharmacist."

"Put down Jew."

"Right."

"Religion?"

"That doesn't concern you."

"Write Jewish," they said.

"Right, be a Jew at home and a German abroad."

My father should live so long.

He wrote it out satirically, the whole of it, the history of his generation--Der Konnenden--stuffed into cabarets and cells--the anarchists, the socialists, the barefoot soldiers (the others, the practitioners of realpolitick, knew what it was all about--how to fight the enemy--how to prepare for war--how to prepare for peace--how to negotiate terms--they knew) or, if you prefer, he wrote it out in the new style of prophecy--eerily, in which he

foretold how his civilization would be carried to its death in a modern invention of its own making:

Onward, onward without rest  
to the north, east, south, west!  
Seek, soul seek! . . . .  
See your life flash by in pain  
From the window of a midnight train.  
Shriek, soul shriek!

And foretold the style of his death:

An aging corpse  
Hangs from a telegraph pole.  
His dangling legs reached out--to--  
Oh! can it catch them, for pity's sake--  
The outspread branches of an oak tree

("Thank God for the innocent things of nature," he wrote Zensl. "Will they ever vindicate us--or trust us again?") The vision scared him into wilder satire. "Yes, arduous, that is my name, also called wilde Jude by my closer friends, Don Quijote, and romantic anarchist, antimilitarist pacifist (arrested as a conscientious objector the first time), feminist and yes, vegetarian, "a political crank" some said--you know who--those who know the world better than he did, the realpolitikniks ("Now, I ask you, Zensl, what is the difference and how could it be otherwise?") "We bohemians," he wrote for the newspapers fond of articles about that type of life, "play with the accidents of time the better to approach eternity."

What did they understand--his audience? His performances were combats in which he struggled with forces--Europe--history--antisemitism. ("They forgive the Jewish communist and the Jewish socialist nothing," Kafka wrote gently and incisively):

"What is your religion?" the Commandant asked.  
"Humanity."  
"Put down Jew, non-professing."  
"Right you are."

He struggled with the New Germany--the poor--mankind. For laughter.

". . . Ein Jude zog aus Nasareth  
Die Armen glücklich zu machen

Applause! Applause! Applause for this man with the wild beard who lives on cigarette smoke. Yes! Thank you very much. Pass the hat around. Enough for a meal tonight. Jerusalem who stoneth her prophets! And Berlin and Paris. Now, what do you think, mein herr Berliner? Who has driven out more prophets, Jerusalem or you? But for you it will not matter--you will never miss them.

("Now, Zensela, I tell you, my companion, the communist from Poland, wears a crucifix around his neck and when I said to him once, 'I'm surprised you wear that,' it touched him wrong, as if he thought I was deriding the strength of his communist faith. 'What can a Jew understand,' he answered back at once--hoopla! flavoring his idealism with a little contempt--the parsley in the soup.

'Of course,' I whispered through the bars, 'Quite right. Of course! The gulf is very deep, very deep, but not so deep here,' and I pushed some of my poetry through the bars at him. You know the ones. About the Eucharist. 'Here the gulf narrows,' I said to him. 'After all, all prisoners have something in common. I too think of Jesus as my kindred spirit.' And what do you think he did when I said this? He roared at me like a Polish communist imitating a German bulldog, 'Judenschwein!'

'Look out,' I said, 'I'm glad you wear the crucifix, but be careful they don't choke you with it. From me you have nothing to fear. It concentrates my absorption into history. But be careful about the others. Do you know what is the most difficult thing in history?--who knows--maybe it's the original historical problem--to know who your enemy is--for the enemy will not identify himself--he does not come out and say, hey, I am the enemy, and takes his bow on the stage.'

'Shut up, Muhsam,' someone shouted at me. Foolishly, I thought it was one of the other prisoners and ran off at the mouth. Zensl, my love, no one put up with me as you did. But it was a guard and he came and took my pencil and paper away. Yes, he took my pencil and paper away, but I write this with my mind to you. Zensl, be well. Know that whatever you hear of me, it will not be true. For your sake, for the sake of our love, for the sake of the Jew in me, know that I will never take my own life. Do not believe it, if you hear it.")

The prisoners' eyes followed him as the guards

took him from his cell. Their bodies jerked with the manic restlessness that pervades prisoners with no place to go. They whispered to him in voices of deadly irony meant for sympathy: "This is what comes of holding out, Muhsam."

"Don't worry for me," he laughed, "I'm used to prisons." He made a face at them, exaggerating the effects of his missing parts, ears, teeth, rotten gums, broken nose. "I'm no novice. Niederschonenfeld, 1924. Sonnenburg, Brandenburg, Oranienburg. Don't worry for me." His eyes were white in a face of crazy colors, swollen blue lips, swollen purple nose, red scars where his ears had been torn off, red hair and beard dirty with lice, rotted grey gums, fingers blackened, twisted and broken.

("Don't worry for me," he wrote his wife, "you know I've been in prison before. I'm no novice. I shall always get word to you. Thank God for bribery. What would we prisoners do without this corruption? Or history do without prisoners who escape to tell the world? Thank God for errors and mistakes. This is what we wretches will have to cling to in the future. Blessed be the loopholes. Erich Muhsam, leader of the loophole. 'Look at him,' the Commandant said, when they first arrested me. 'Look at him. This is your famous leader of the Munich Ratrepublic, this scarecrow, this Judenschwein, this target in a shooting gallery, this rooster with the red beard.'")

'Yes,' I said to them when they put me against the wall to shoot me, I tore off my eyeguards and said, 'Shoot, I want to see the dogs who shoot me, Muhsam, whose name means arduous in German.'

That is what they do, Zensl. They tell me they will execute me on such and such a day, and they march me out and then they march me in. They think they will frighten me to death with make-believe. They think I will die of pretenses.")

He paused at Vilhelm's cell, his eyes blistered red. "My poor animal," he said, "do you know what they are doing to her?"

Vilhelm did not answer him. Only iron survives. Only the spirit. Only the spirit that is iron.

"Be strong," Wyzanski whispered. "Give them nothing. Nothing!"

The guards tightened their truncheons under Muhsam's armpits and pulled him away. The

Commandant waited in the library for him, a sign of the respect he bore the poet--he had taken the trouble to look at his poetry--which he disliked. Still he knew that Muhsam was a journalist, a writer, one of the haute Juden intelligentsia, and a Berliner, a man who was held in esteem by many, though mostly of his own kind, bohemian rabble, people who think it clever to walk barefoot, to imitate poverty, humility. Such people irritated his fastidious habits--a trait that was a much a part of his thinking as his dressing and which passed into his historical perspective. How could they convince a man with two dozen different dress uniforms and three personal tailors, whom he valued more than his chef! Nudity destroys history.

Two of his tailors were Jewish--of course--for Jewish tailors were the best of the kind--there was a special competence about them. He felt this in how their tape measures drooped around their necks, handled briskly, the ends worn with years of use, the pins held precariously between their lips defying their patterns of speech, a regular barrage of humming and comments in spite of the pins which moved up and down in their moving mouths, kept there as skillfully as a laborer keeps his feet on a catwalk, and the chalkmarker behind their ears as professional looking as an accountant's pencil. His other tailor--a Lutheran--stuck him once and exclaimed with pain on his behalf. Not Rosenbloom and Rosenberg. They moved accurately. A special knowingness in their manner. A special knowingness of things, an historic competence about goods. Which did make you wonder--as the Fuehrer said--one of his milder speculations as far as the Commandant was concerned, for he disliked his speeches--found them hysterical declarations proclaiming the Third Reich as "inheriting" the future. This was a false note in the logic of things; it irritated him.

"Really," he said to a fellow officer, raising an eyebrow with critical distaste, "he has no sense of history."

"Don't you believe him?" the fellow officer asked surprised, very surprised, even querulous, for to disbelieve that was to disbelieve the whole enterprise.

"It's a good slogan," the Commandant said. They came down the steps of a Ministry. He looked up at the sun, as he always did when he emerged from a

building, testing the lint on his glasses, "but after all, a contradiction. One never inherits the future. One can only inherit the past. You can prepare for the future--perhaps--and even then, who can say? But you can't inherit it. Let us go forward, yes--by inheriting the past. Ah, ha!" He was pleased with himself.

They stopped midway down the steps, appropriately against a noble sweep of concrete stairway. "Come," his companion said, relaxing, "do you think the Fuehrer should have said, 'Let us inherit the past?'"

The Commandant was taken aback by a confusion of thought. He wrinkled his brow. Then they burst out laughing together and continued down the steps. "Lucky they don't ask me to make speeches," he said cavalierly.

"Deprive them of needle and thread," he thought, eyeing himself in the three-way mirror, "and they'll come undone." (He meant the Jews, for his respect and contempt for them were mixed in equal proportions.) He took first one posture, then another to see how the suit wrinkled and behaved as he moved this way and that. He had learned that the worst way to test the fit of a suit was to stand like a mannikin in front of a mirror. Therefore, he bent, he stretched, he strode, he moved about and the three tailors moved about with him, pins in mouth, tape measures around their necks. He eyed himself, they eyed him, studying his form in all its postures, actually a format rather than a form, strained to convey lineage. There never was such an extraordinary case of learned lineage. It was as if the maxims of a mother--walk with your head erect--keep your chest high--do not let your shoulders droop--work as well for impressing heads of state as for a finishing school. People succumb to the proper mode oftener than to the Sermon on the Mount.

It surprised the Commandant to discover how universally this was so. The son of an insurance agent, he had no reason to know it and discovered it accidentally. He simply noticed it was so while sitting in a train one afternoon, waiting for it to start. He was gazing absentmindedly through the window of his private carriage, his head on his gloved hand, his military hat cocked over his eye, looking fortuitously moody, like a Renaissance prince

by Michelangelo. Quite an accident, but still the look stuck. Every woman who went by gazed back at him. Several even gazed back as if their heads turned against their wills, as if their eyes were being moved by a magnetic field between themselves and him. He must be impressive!~ He could not escape the conclusion. So many people looked at him. A press photographer went by on the prowl, walked up and down the platform, waiting for a war or a suicide, and finally came into his carriage. The Commandant's career actually began here.

"May I?" the reporter said and took his picture. "I represent the ---. Tell me, Commandant, in a few words--I know the train is about to start--what do you think of the situation in Poland? Do you think there'll be a war? Can you comment on the economy? What's the meaning of the military maneuvers on the border? Is there anything important happening in France? Do you wish to make a statement about your recent promotion? Is it true that you had an organ placed in Oranienburg and will have Bach concerts there?"

The Commandant ruminated, among the many questions which one to address himself to. "Yes," he said, "I am a lover of Bach. His music is good for my nerves--so many irritating things these days."

"Does that mean that you are dismissing Wagner?" the reporter asked, quick to sense a possible dissension.

"Dismissing Wagner?" the Commandant said with a soft irony and an equally soft twinkle in his eye, to dispel the ludicrous interpretation that his personal tastes--anyone's personal tastes--could have anything to do with history--a sign of humility, or geniality. "How can one dismiss Wagner?"

The effect was the opposite of humility: it was grandiose. Several mysteries knocked about in the reporter's head in the form of further questions, but the train began to move. "Thank you very much, mein herr Commandant," he said. "May I take another picture?"

The Commandant fidgeted. Photographs were always such a gamble, particularly newspaper pictures, as if the subject were taken "on the run," "mouth open," caught in a stammer. But his picture (he had reason to be forever grateful to the reporter) caught him like a portrait, elbow on the windowsill, head leaning on his gloved hand,

thoughtful and authoritative, the angle of his hat, l'angle juste, as if he had posed for an oil to be hung alongside the oils he now had in his private gallery, robed men who never looked hasty but historical, composed within and without.

This was the Commandant's greatest asset: composure, recognized as such by those around him, so employable to history, so useful to convey legitimacy. In the archives he can still be seen to this effect, a little to the left of the Fuehrer, a foot or two behind him with an air of readiness (like a servant to the gods?) and that air of lineage so employable to the historical moment lending to the group in the picture the claim it made, the indispensable claim, that it had come to inherit the past.

These are the only assets that matter, that can take you anywhere, at any time, in any age--as a knight or a courtier, a duke or a cardinal, one who stands in the background as a consort to rulers. Composure and calm. But they will get you nowhere as a merchant, a trader, a bricklayer or bookseller, a mechanic, an artist or a writer.

But though satisfied with himself, as he had reason to be, it was so easy to dissatisfy him. He was so perfect and so worried. A flaw--a crease--a wrinkle--and his lips tightened critically.

"What is this?" he asked, bending down to examine his cuff. "What do you sew here?" he asked Rosenbloom.

A crease of warning crossed the tailor's forehead. "Your uniform," he said carefully, "mein herr Commandant."

"And if I call you a liar?" he said, as he looked into the mirror at his offending reflection. "These Jews!" he thought. "Yes, a liar!" he said out loud, "for you know very well you are sewing something else."

Rosenbloom paused with the needle in one hand and fingered the thread in his other, like Ariadne. "To be sure, mein Commandant," he said, pulling the offending cuff into place, "I sew history. There, I have straightened it out."

"That's better, yes. It looked foolish before, the way you had it, like a dog's ear flapping loosely," he said irritably, peevishly (a quality only his tailors knew), still critically eyeing himself, his trouser, as if the cuff might change back again to a demeaning

flipflop. "Yes, it seems to have straightened itself out. Well, you are a genius, after all. What shall I do without you?"

Rosenbloom bowed, acknowledging the compliment. "You are too kind. The world is full of tailors. The Chinese have some remarkable ones."

"But not like you Jews."

The Lutheran pinched his eye with envy. "If you like the compliment, you may take it," Rosenbloom whispered to him, bowing out of the room. But there was nothing he could say to console the Lutheran for the slight. Struggle as he might and have faith as he said he did, it was not enough. It did not compensate for the compliment. The Jew always seemed to be ahead.

The Commandant waved them all away and went out to meet Muhsam in his library, a room surprisingly filled with Jewish books--stocked like a pond with carp: Bibles and Talmuds, Commentaries and Responsa, Tractates, Treatises, Medieval philosophers and poets, Mishnas, Gemarras and Kabbalahs. A staff of twenty worked daily, reading them and reported to him whatever of interest took their minds, and from their reports he made reports to the Fuehrer. His library had other material in it too, of course, journals and periodicals of the last fifty or seventy-five years and a valuable collection of pornography. His own preferred reading was newspapers--which he read voraciously (and for relaxation, fashion magazines, a habit he had inherited from his mother).

He chose this room for his interview with Muhsam, for its effect: he wanted him to know he respected his literary talents, even his Jewishness (though not, of course, his anarchism, socialism, bohemianism, individualism, antimilitarism, liberalism, feminism, modernism), and chose a copy of Judah Halevi to hold in his hand, a symbol of his respect, his regrets.

("Zensl, my love! Remember only this. They could not make me take my life. If you hear that I am dead, they killed me. Their sole aim is to make me do their dirty work. There is a distinction they keep in mind, and so do I.")

"A co-religionist of yours," the Commandant said, laying the book conspicuously on his desk.

"A fellow poet."

The Commandant paused with his hand still over

the book, caught in mid flight, not sure if Muhsam intended an impertinence. "Is he not a co-religionist?"

"I only mean to say we have many things in common."

Ah! an evasion: "Yes, but you are forever denying the main point. The Fuehrer has nothing against the Judaic religion."

(Ha, ha, ha!) "Neither do I. My grandfather..."

"Yes, your grandfather! Exactly." To Muhsam's surprise there was pique in the Commandant's voice. "That is why the Jewish people have decayed."

"Well, as for that, surely not without company." ("Wily Jew," the Commandant thought, the thought dancing in his eyes, lightening with irritability.) "All history is decline--a regular mythology of decline." (Muhsam could not resist the look in the Commandant's eye: it compelled him to put his head on the block.) "I tell you what--I would have preferred, I mean me, personally, as a Jew (he paused so slightly, smiled so slightly), "if you will permit me to say so, I would have preferred myself to have been a soldier in Caesar's army than a soldier at any other time."

The Commandant felt he was being baited--and by a man who had his head on the block. It did not soothe his nerves at all: the effect was against the logic of things. "Perhaps you think Germans are not as good as Romans?" The patriotic note was sounded to suit a purpose, for the Commandant only wanted Muhsam to curtsey.

("I would like once," he once wrote to Zensl, "to construct a sentence utterly at my command, from which nothing can be extracted but what I allow. To control a single sentence, to send it out into the world and nail it against its forehead.") "In many things better," he said.

"Wily Jew," the Commandant thought again, but not entirely with denigration, more with impatience and irritability, for the thought was a component of the respect he felt for him, the reason, after all, why he chose his company for conversation (along with the Cardinal's) and not someone like Vilhelm--the gypsy was never considered.

Loquaciousness was Muhsam's rotten luck, an obsession with telling the world what was wrong with it. The Commandant walked about his room--the Jewish section of it--twenty shelves or more of

books, from floor to ceiling, esoteric titles that had ceased to mean anything to most--The Sayings of the Fathers, The Attributes of God, The Twelve Expressions of Mercy, and so on. "Really," he said, incredulous at the carelessness of things in his own library, and ran his finger along a rim of dirt. He held it up to Muhsam and said again, "Really!" and dismissed him.

They took him back briefly to his cell and told him to get ready. They did not tell him what for, or how he should prepare himself. He knew what for. Everyone on the floor knew, and their spirits stiffened with resistance. The gypsy inhaled a piercing breath which whistled in his ribs. He looked about with an air of searching, a random movement signifying a state of mind without an object, then he moved away towards the wall of his cell as if he had found what he was looking for--the sense, at least if only that, of moving away: an ineffectual act, for the animal's screams penetrated the walls and the prisoners were seized with a restlessness that drove them berserk, an amorphousness of physical energy as if the biological foundation of life were cut loose from social meaning and usefulness, and became a motion venomously random and nervous. They banged on their bar cells with their tin cups and shouted to drown out the noise.

Wyzanski's anticlericalism bit him like a shark. He turned on the Cardinal. "You! A man of God! Why don't you do something? Why doesn't the Pope do something? Why don't you speak out?"

("I will shout with you," the Cardinal thought), but he merely said, "Sshhh," more or less to comfort.

"What can the Pope do?" Muhsam said. "It would embarrass him to speak out. That is why he keeps quiet."

As if he had skins to shed, Wyzanski came to the defense of the clergy. "You are anti-Christian," he said.

"It is true," the Cardinal said.

"Yes, it would embarrass Europe," Muhsam said, laboring with the difficulty of pulling on his shoes without fingers. "Do you think the Commandant will listen to him, or the Fuehrer? The Pope's silence will be his strength in the future. Many books will be written about it. Better books than embarrassment." He struggled with the second

shoe. "I do not speak of the present pope. My argument is not *ad hominem*. I speak of the class of popes, the genre of popes, although formerly they used to speak out, but now they keep quiet."

"Ha! I always knew it," Wyzanski said, "at bottom, you are against us."

"He is right," the Cardinal said. "He"—and he changed the pronoun out of loyalty, as much to his office as to the historical moment, "Perhaps we no longer have the language."

"Yes," Muhsam said, and pushed his feet the rest of the way into their shoes, "you have no new thing to say to me." He looked down at his feet, the exhaustive job of getting them into shoes without fingers. "I am tired of your hatred. What does it signify, here, after all?" He shuffled out of his cell and the guards brought him to the room where the chimpanzee was kept. They strapped him to a chair around the waist and bound his hands and feet. "Even if you shut your eyes, one said to him, "you will hear her scream."

("Zensela—I have not slept since—maybe I do sleep because I seem to dream—but then I seem not to sleep, only to hear her cries—I have not slept a whole night.") Those were among his last words to her. ("There is too much darkness when I lie down. I cannot sleep. Zensela, my girl, try to be brave—it is a fact that tonight I find the darkness to be too much. I do not wish to crawl out of the cave—there is too much political retrogression everywhere—and no end in sight.")

"It will not do you any good to shut your mind away, the guard said. "You know that she is suffering. You can hear her."

("Yes, I wish to suffer with her. Can you believe this?") His chin dropped on his chest. Tears fell from his eyes, which he would have preferred to be invisible from the notice of the others, but they jerked his head up. Dimly, he heard his fellow prisoners banging on their cell bars, Wyzanski, Vilhelm, the Cardinal. They did their best to drown out the noise, but he heard her screams anyway.

She was skinned alive. Her suffering nerves and the cortical knot of her spine were exposed and she entered the history of the human race slowly, this creature of trees and vines and forest life, whose ancestors had been born in a time when there was no more mercy than at another time, but there was

more justice, when *logos* meant law and law meant the boundary between permissible action and action which cut man off from the sight of God, for from Noah to Jesus man was sinful but redeemable, but from Jesus to now he has become abhorrent.

She who stopped short of being human in the evolutionary scale, never walked the halls of a museum, never listened to a lecture in science about her nature, never wrote exegesis on the Bible, never worried what divinity meant, or if the Gospel and the white man had improved upon the lesser breeds, whom the encyclopedia describes as "educable" and "capable of insight," whose instincts had been created to trust, fell out of the hand of God into the hand of man and became a mass of mutilated flesh in a corner, a tuft of fur left on her back erect with terror—the last sign of her life. The eyes she fixed upon the world were put out with a burning rod, and then she belonged forever to the night of human things.

They took Muhsam back to his cell. His feet shuffled in their untied shoes. ("Zensela, let me say it once, let me betray my instinct for life this once—let me falter once—I will pick myself up again and go on.") He stopped at Vilhelm's cell and peered through the bars at him. Vilhelm's head drooped into his shoulders. He did not look up. Muhsam's eyes drifted to his back wall. "Saves what?" he asked. Vilhelm's head sank lower. "The world," he whispered. And then, if daunted, conceded it only by adding in a low voice, "They shall reap the whirlwind."

He could not hold his tears back. They fell, almost wantonly, as if liberated from a stone that had burst open. "The Jesus I know would have settled for less," he whispered back. His tears broke his resistance. Faster than his guards thought he could still move on his legs—irony and grief gave him such wings—he dropped to his knees and wept, "The hangman's bread is passed to us in this cellar, bless this blood that from the body flows from my poor animal in terror. Can you pray for her soul? Can you pray for her soul? Can you pray for her soul?" He banged his forehead on the floor.

We, in the outside world, when we heard of this event—the torture of an animal—wondered why there was no argument Muhsam—the others—the Cardinal—could have made to prevent it. Had they

all passed then, truly, into a place where neither religion nor poetry availed? It is hard to imagine it--so unyielding a state of things beyond the reach of the civilization we have so carefully built, and trust.

Muhsam struggled to sleep, all night. He wrapped his arms over his head to shut out the light. Not his fingers only, but all his bones felt broken. Wyzanski watched him struggle and wanted to call to him, but the Cardinal signalled to him not to. "What can we do for him that sleep cannot?"

("My heart is broken," he wrote Zensl, "at last. It is over, at least for that.") He searched in his cot for a place to put his body, and turned his face to the wall. Its clammy stone was familiar to him, the touch of his wormy blanket. ("Zensela, place a stone somewhere for her and, if you can, put her name on it. I must try to sleep--an hour or two before the next interrogation.")

"Name?"

"Muhsam--means arduous in German."

"Religion?"

"Non-professing."

"Put down Jew."

"Right you are."

"Religion? Why don't you tell us what your religion is?"

"Yes, I will tell you now. I have kept it a secret all these years. Only now that the animal is dead, I will tell you. Rahamanim bene rahamanim."

"Why don't you speak your native language, Muhsam?"

"That is my native language."

"What is your nationality, Muhsam? You speak like a foreigner."

"Yes, I am a foreigner. I and my religion and nationality and my language. We are foreigners in your world."

But there were no more interrogations. Muhsam was found hanged from a beam on the outside wall of the fortress, near an oak tree that grew there. ("Remember, Zensl, if you hear that I have committed suicide, do not believe. The force of life in me is greater than the force of death. I can withstand anything but them. If you hear that I am dead, they killed me.") He heard in his last moments, when all other explanations were silent and none were about to tell him of the future of the world, he heard the voice of God, as Job heard it:

"Behold, behemoth, which I made with thee, and Leviathan, whose eyes are like the eyelids of the morning. What is man that he should destroy my creatures and contend with me. He has his day, but I have eternity, and I will give you creation forever as a consolation for this moment."

His body was given to Zensl for burial in Berlin-Dahlem on July 16, 1934, and many of his friends--those who were not in hiding--attended the funeral. There are official records about all this (including a memo from the Commandant on his suicide)--but not about the chimpanzee. Wyzanski escaped and told about her. The gypsy was castrated and then killed, or killed first and then castrated. Vilhelm's tongue was torn out by its roots by the Commandant in a fit of rage; and the Cardinal was later released--as Wyzanski knew he would be--but he became an ambiguous figure, acclaimed and then forgotten and, no longer remembered, deprived of the authority of his singular behavior, not sure if he was in the foreground or the background of the Europe he knew. But it was the chimpanzee's fate which caught my attention in reading Muhsam's life--not the others, for their story has been told. Being a lover of Leviathan, had it not been for the fate of this animal which joined Muhsam's fate, I would not have written my story, for politically and socially, philosophically I have little in common with these prisoners, certainly not with Muhsam, nor any desire to emulate Jesus, certainly not his manner of dying. Being a citizen of the world--a townswoman--more like Zensl, needing to be comforted and prepared, I have no politics--at least, no good politics, only loyalties. As a writer, I am not fond of cafe literature, protest literature, of proclamations in the street. I believe in discipline and silence--the silence of anger. Least of all do I believe in applause, or an audience, or even attention. It is dangerous--attention. Angels in the guise of writers should move invisibly and silently---sshhh!

