

The Camp and the Station

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*If Almighty God protects us from suffering and from untimely death when we call upon him for help,
what possible reason might we have to disobey his holy commands?*

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men!

I was working in Berlin as a newspaper editor in the early years of National Socialism. When the Nazi Party closed down our *European Weekly News*, claiming our internationalist, humanitarian editorial policy was harmful to the resurgence of the German people, many of us felt the burning need to continue publishing in secret. We were united in the view that there needed to be a voice of reason criticising the authorities for their policies of dividing the people by race, favouring those of pure-blooded Aryan descent and attacking Jewish, Slavic and other racial groups as inferior and fit only for ostracism and violent exploitation.

We managed to keep writing, printing and distributing until 1939, when the Gestapo tracked us down to our secret basement. Those who they caught at the printing press were rounded up and taken to police headquarters, where they were tortured to make them give up the names and addresses of the rest of us. In this way I received a visit at my home at 4 a.m. by a pair of armed Gestapo men, who dragged me out to a waiting truck before I had time even to get properly dressed.

While waiting in the cells my colleague Hans confessed to me that he had been forced to give them my address. He being a bit of an intellectual who had written all our more philosophical editorials, he was unaccustomed to physical abuse and his resistance had been broken after an hour of beatings. He showed me the scars of his interrogation, others joined in with their stories, and sympathy and forgiveness was expressed all round. At that

moment a guard watching us ordered us to stop talking. Hans seemed to go into a trancelike state in which he cried out in a loud voice, quite unlike his usual soft tone, so that all the guards could hear: "The Lord God will not abandon those who are faithful to him. He will take vengeance on those who persecute the innocent!"

Although the guards gave us black looks and threateningly hefted their truncheons in their hands, for some reason none of them dared to punish Hans for his outburst.

After this we were herded into the back of another truck under armed guard and driven a long way through the night. We arrived at Sachsenhausen concentration camp in the morning and were immediately put to work clearing the land of scrub for an extension to the camp facilities. The guards told us that opponents of the Nazi regime, as well as people who had fallen foul of their racial policies, were being rounded up in huge numbers, and we needed to work fast.

One of the wooden buildings which we had helped to throw up had required a special gas-tight inner lining, and we only learned of its significance one day when a group of about fifty members of the German Communist Party – implacable political foes of the Nazis – were led in. After an hour or two we were sent in after them, with orders to bring out what we found there. Every single one – men, women and some children – was a lifeless corpse. Now we understood why the camp crematorium had been made so large, and after we had finished our work the smoky air reeked with the smell of death for the rest of the day.

The incident which I want to relate occurred some six weeks after that. Another batch of prisoners was being led towards the special building, and you can well imagine that its function was by now an open secret among the inmates. We were engaged in making repairs to a nearby building and could clearly see them being ushered at gunpoint towards the one-way door: mostly the elderly, the sick and the very young, people who could not work and were therefore of no value to the camp authorities, many wearing the yellow star roughly pinned to their jackets. The camp Commandant was there, too, together with a group of SS dignitaries in their smart black uniforms, who had arrived to witness this demonstration of the camp's capabilities.

At the entrance, suddenly a young boy turned round to face the guards and shouted, "Lord Jesus Saviour and God, help us and protect us!" At that a number of the other prisoners fell to their knees in a posture of prayer.

The guards were about to send them on their way with their truncheons, when suddenly a shaft of light appeared to one side. It was an overcast day, and the column of

brightness shed a glorious light over the whole scene, so that anyone within sight could only drop their tools in amazement and turn and watch.

It was hard to look directly into that light, but I screwed up my eyes and squinted at it. I saw materialising within it the giant figure of a human being, three times the size of any normal person, with eagle's wings on its shoulders and a spear in its hand. When the guards quailed before this apparition the camp Commandant, more courageous or more foolhardy than his subordinates, seized a semi-automatic rifle from one of them and opened fire. His bullets passed through the angelic target with no effect, and when he realised that his attack was futile he threw down his weapon, turned and ran. Before he had gone five yards the figure had raised its hand to point a finger at him. The gesture was seemingly a casual one, yet the Commandant immediately fell dead on the spot.

At that the guards and the visitors from the SS all put down their guns and fell to their knees.

Then I heard the words, spoken in a deep voice as if through a loudspeaker of enormous power, "This camp is an abomination to God. It must be closed immediately, and all the inmates sent home. Anyone who visits any more harm upon the least of these people will have to answer to Almighty God for their actions!"

The angelic apparition then faded from view, though the column of light where it had been remained for about an hour afterwards before fading in its turn.

You can well imagine the contrition of our former guards, the shame of the SS men and the joy among all the camp inmates as we collected our meagre belongings and prepared to walk to freedom. Many a tear was shed, many a heartfelt plea was uttered for forgiveness for former unthinking brutalities, with fearful offers of compensation and promises of reform. Military uniforms with their Nazi insignia were torn off and trodden into the dirt, until our former tormenters were visually indistinguishable from ourselves.

As we left the camp we heard the news that the German army had launched an attack on Poland, but as the tanks rolled forward they discovered that the previous night's artillery barrage had caused no damage to the Polish defences, the shells seemingly having been swallowed up into nothingness. When the troops tried even so to press forward the attack another angel had appeared in the sky and ordered them back to barracks, on pain of incurring the eternal displeasure of Almighty God. In Berlin the Nazi government was clinging to power by a thread, and all were confident that it would be gone within the week.

"But there's one thing I don't understand", said my friend Hans, who was a bit of a

philosopher. "I thought the presence of evil in the world was because God had given humans free will, so how can he be consistent if he then denies the Nazi leadership the free will to murder people in prison camps and launch a war of conquest in the east?"

I thought about it for a while before the answer came to me. I told Hans that yes, indeed God has given us free will. But how is God to deal with a situation in which I want to kill you? If I kill you, I've taken away all your free will in the future, so God's gift of free will is inconsistent with itself. Free will can never be absolute, but can only be maximised by restraining people from taking away other people's free will.

I realised there was also another factor. None of the Nazi leaders needed to kill anybody personally. None of the top political leaders had come to our camp in person to turn on the poison gas, and none of them had been personally present on the Polish frontier. All they had to do was to give the order so that other people would then do the killing for them. But the Sachsenhausen guards had no personal desire to kill any of their prisoners, and the army in the field had no personal quarrel with the Poles. The system of military command was thus forcing the lower ranks to commit actions contrary to what their own free will would have been, had they been left to make the decision for themselves. So all in all, it was not in the least surprising that God should have seen fit to send an angel to intervene at the critical moment just when the killing was about to begin.

Hans nodded slowly, and for a long time we marched in silence down the tree-lined road leading back to our homes in Berlin. The sun was shining at intervals through the clouds after a refreshing light rain, and above the chatter and laughter of other voices in our column of returnees I could hear the occasional lark singing its heart out in the sky above us.

"But what about that first batch of prisoners?", Hans suddenly said. "You know, the Communists, who were the first to go..."

"Into the gas chamber?", I finished the thought for him, and felt as if I had darkened the very sunlight with the horrible words. "Don't you remember? The angel appeared precisely when a boy called on our Lord and Saviour for help! But the Communists are well known as atheists. None of them would have wanted or expected divine help, so of course God abandoned them to their unholy beliefs. You can't expect God to come to the help of people who have consciously rejected him."

"Even if it takes their free will away from them?"

"Perhaps God felt that they'd had enough free will. Whatever they were going to choose, they'd already chosen it."

Hans was still unsatisfied. "Well it seems a bit unfair to me. Surely if God had helped them as dramatically as he helped us, they'd have changed their minds in no time!"

I had to shrug and shake my head. "I don't know. Maybe it takes one person – just one person – to intervene and pray for them? Maybe if you see it about to happen again, you should be that person?"

Hans smiled and promised that if the occasion ever arose, he would be the one to intercede, even for unbelievers.

Not that unbelievers were easy to find in our world. As we walked along, I realised that it all made sense.

I thought of how, way back in history, the army of Crusaders had marched on Jerusalem in the year 1099, intent upon taking the holy city back from its Muslim invaders. As the two armies had faced off for the first time in front of the city walls, a heavenly angel had suddenly appeared in the sky above the battlefield and demanded to know why the European worshippers of the one Almighty God and the Near Eastern worshippers of the same Almighty God were preparing to do battle with one another in the name of Almighty God. Every soldier – and every civilian within the city, too – heard the miraculous voice that thundered over the battlefield in their own language, and every one fell to their knees in prayerful acknowledgement of the power of God. The dispute over Jerusalem was quickly resolved when all involved – Christians, Jews and Muslims – embraced one another as brothers and sisters while the heavenly column of light still burned brightly above them, and swore never to bear arms against one another again. And thus began the peaceful sharing of Jerusalem between the three great branches of monotheist worship which continues, of course, to this day.

Thinking forward to more recent history, the First World Crisis had been resolved when the German army had marched into northern France to confront the combined British and French armies. As they were preparing to fire the first shots, an angel appeared to the German High Command and instructed them to order their army back behind their own frontier if they wanted to avoid extreme divine displeasure. The Kaiser and his generals bowed their heads in submission, and what could have been a terrible war, possibly lasting for years and causing millions of casualties, was avoided by the grace of Almighty God. I have read that there were similar scenes in the war-rooms of London, Paris, Moscow, Vienna, Rome and Istanbul.

As the last German soldier crossed the border homewards, the Kaiser was addressing

a meeting of top generals and politicians, and everyone witnessed the astonishment and joy on their sovereign's face as his left arm, withered from childhood, was suddenly and miraculously healed before their very eyes.

Other trouble spots had given the same lesson. The Japanese invasions of Korea and of parts of China had been bloody enough for a while, reinforcing my theory that God would not intervene directly to save unbelievers from death by armed violence, but would wait to be asked. But somewhere the invaders must have chanced upon an enclave of Christian believers. The prayerful appeal for divine salvation was made, an angel appeared, and the aggressors were halted in their tracks. Once the story was out, it was unstoppable. Chinese, Japanese and Koreans alike converted to worship of the one Almighty God in their billions, and today of course their peaceful and prosperous lives are testament to the power of God and the reverence with which he is held in the daily prayers of almost everybody.

Not every divine manifestation concerned historical moments on such a grand scale. I thought of the first arrival of the RMS *Titanic* in New York harbour in 1912 – the end of a maiden voyage which was only the start of the ship's long and successful career on the North Atlantic in company with her two sisters. All New York was abuzz with the story told by the ship's officers: that at 11:30 p.m. on the clear and cold but moonless night of 14 April an angel had appeared in glory on the bridge and advised the officer of the watch to slow the ship to half speed. He did so, and called the Captain to inform him. As the Captain and the officer of the watch were peering out over the bridge wing to see if there was any obstruction ahead, an unusually bright meteor fell, illuminating the sea to reveal a giant iceberg directly in their path. There was just time to steer around it, but without that angel's intervention the maiden voyage could so easily have ended in tragedy.

Looking back on these and many other instances of God's goodness to mortals – instances of wars avoided, suffering relieved and disasters skirted by a narrow margin – I can only rejoice and proclaim: glory to God in the highest indeed!

So why is it that God's plans for mankind seem to fall so short of our full potential as his collaborators in creation?

My career is over now, so I can speak freely about my experiences in the International Space Station programme. We always envisaged this as only the first step in a long journey, one which would take astronauts to the Moon, then to Mars, then to the other planets in our Solar System, and ultimately to the stars, where other planets surely awaited us. We planned a universal city of mankind with its top in the heavens, so so speak, as a unifying project

that would call upon our best creative talents and provide an enduring symbol to express our yearning for union with God.

When the first crew of the International Space Station died, the programme was of course abandoned. Few have seen the videotape of the event which foretold the deaths of the three men. I have only seen it once, as it was immediately hushed up, but I still remember it clearly.

All seemed to be going well, and the Commander of the station was discussing technical details with Ground Control, when suddenly a beam of light appeared and an angel materialised within that beam. Although the space within the cabin was very cramped, the angel still somehow managed to seem larger than a human being, and its voice more resonant than any voice that such a small space could normally contain.

“You must leave this place”, the angel said, “and return to where you belong, on Earth. This station must be allowed to fall and burn up, and no more stations may ever be launched into space.”

The Commander protested. They were on a three-week mission, and intended to fulfil their plans.

“In that case”, the angel intoned, “you will never see your homes or families again.”

One of the other crewmen demanded to know why, to which the angel gave this very curious response: “Because the Lord has said, behold, humanity is now one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.”

The apparition then vanished. The crew discussed the situation with Ground Control, and the consensus was that they were doing nothing wrong and that, since they were now on the station, they might as well complete their research programme before coming home as planned.

As everybody knows, the crew did complete their mission, and they left the station in their transport craft on the day scheduled. They fired their thrusters to brake out of orbit, and after its fiery descent through the atmosphere their vehicle was seen descending normally under its parachutes. The recovery team opened up the hatch and found the astronauts lying dead in their seats. The board of investigation later blamed a faulty valve that starved them of air while they were still in space.

At first everybody was keen to continue with the programme. During the investigation the original space station had run out of attitude control propellant and had been allowed to

fall back to Earth, but a second station was in production. For some reason, however, it was never launched. The different teams working on the project found it impossible to agree on basic technical matters, almost as if they were speaking different languages, and by the time they came to an agreement the political will had gone out of the programme. Perhaps the key decision-makers were shown the incriminating videotape, but I have no direct evidence of this.

People today say that the space programme was abandoned due to lack of funding, or because it was ultimately seen to lack any justifiable purpose. Both excuses are laughable: the world is rich enough to afford a dozen space programmes, and how can there be a lack of purpose when almost the entire universe is extraterrestrial? No, I know better. It was abandoned because that was the will of Almighty God, on the strange grounds that humanity was to be prevented from doing what it proposed to do, because of the danger that, once started on that course, nothing would be impossible for it.

What is it out there, in the vertiginous spaces or among the numberless worlds beyond Earth, that the creator of the universe wants to prevent his creatures from finding? Is this part of an unspoken bargain? – that we may enjoy a comfortable life safe from violence on Earth, if we will consent to being restricted forever to a single speck of dust in all the vastness of the cosmos? If we reject our creator's admonition to stay quietly at home in favour of feeding our lust for knowledge and for new horizons, do we then have to give up the home comforts which he has lavished on us? If we are to fulfill the creative forces already pulsating in our minds and muscles, our visions of shining new cities on other planets and among the stars, must we then be made to endure horror and suffering in a world in which armies rampage out of control, religions torture and slaughter in the name of peace, and the *Titanic* sinks on her maiden voyage? Is outer space the forbidden apple for our generation, the eating of which brings the intoxicating knowledge of good and evil but also intolerable suffering?

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