

Andra and Tatiana Bucci

WE, LITTLE GIRLS IN AUSCHWITZ

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Chapter 2

The Normality of Horror

Arrival and Selection

Our arrival is mostly noise. It's April 4, 1944. The train stops outside the camp we're being taken to, which we later find out is Birkenau, the giant death factory in the concentration-camp system of Auschwitz. A place where hundreds of thousands of men and women are killed. People are calling out, looking for one another. Not all the families were able to travel together in the same train car, and as soon as they get off the train they start shouting the names of their loved ones. There are cries of fear as well, because dogs are barking and growling, because orders are given in German and almost no one understands them. There's tremendous confusion, in a ghostly scene of chaos.

Andra remembers the so-called *Judenrampe* outside the camp, where the deportees, having gotten off the train, are forced to line up for the selection. At that time, the trains didn't enter the camp directly, as they did later, when the Germans extended the tracks. The line is very long: first the women and children, then the men. Families are split up. And here they separate us from Grandma Rosa and Aunt Sonia, who are lined up where the trucks are and taken away. Forever. Whereas we remain in the other part of the line.

This is the second turning point in our lives. If the first, as we said, is connected to our final destination, Birkenau, now our fate is in the hands of a Nazi official who, with a nod, divides the people who will be interned from those, the majority, who are to be sent immediately to the gas chamber. Although children are generally killed right away, upon arrival, we escape the selection. It's a crucial moment, destined to mark our young lives.

Mamma keeps us close to her. We don't see our cousin Sergio. Maybe he has already been separated from our aunt Gisella, his mother, and put in the men's line, maybe not. We cling to Mamma, and with her we walk down the long street that leads to the *Sauna*, the place where the few deportees who will enter the camp are tattooed and disinfected before being taken to the barracks.

Tati's memory of our arrival is, instead, fragmented: getting off the train and right afterward the *Sauna*. It's an endless trek, a tree-shaded street, a very long way to walk in the dark, in the cold, with the fear of the unknown. Clinging to Mamma, we move slowly, surrounded by a crowd of people.

In the *Sauna* we have to give our personal information and then undress. We're naked, like the grownups. We are two little girls among women, who look all white to us and try to cover themselves with their hands. It's an incredible situation, fear mixed with astonishment and the embarrassment of seeing Mamma naked. She's always with us, she goes ahead of us at every stage, as if to protect us. This had never happened to us before. They make us walk in a line. In a small room the women's heads are shaved. Mamma loses her hair, but we're so terrorized, frozen with fear, that we don't fully realize it. Our hair, instead, they leave. Right afterward they take us all to another room where they disinfect us: we're standing with our feet wet, as if we were in a pool; people are crying because the disinfectant burns in the cuts left by the shaving. It's a true inferno of noises, of smells; you breathe fear in the air. After we're disinfected they take us all into another big room for a shower: here, too, we're all together, here, too, the shame and embarrassment of being naked.

Then we're given clothes that are not ours; they're too big and very light. They'll never protect us from the cold.

This is the moment when we're tattooed. We're pushed into a vast room; at the far end of this crowded space there's a small table, as small as a school desk of long ago. A man and a woman are sitting there. They have a kind of pen nib, like an old-fashioned pen, which they dip in the ink. Mamma is ahead of us, with her head shaved: she's the first of us three to be tattooed, she wants instinctively to protect us again, to find out if it will hurt. Her number is 76482. Then it's our turn. They begin to tattoo us. So many tiny dots. First Andra, her number is 76483; then Tati, her number is 76484. In our

memory as children we don't feel any pain. Small pricks of a needle stuck in our arms, imprinting a number that will be with us our whole life.

Andra learned her number by heart almost immediately, Tati didn't—and when she had to repeat it she always had to read her arm. Only when, in recent years, we began to tell our story did she manage to learn it by heart. It has always been part of her, she says it's as if she'd been born with it.

Also in the *Sauna* is Aunt Gisella. She, too, is tattooed: 76516. But Sergio isn't there. He must have been in line with the men, after us. Maybe with Uncle Jossi, who was registered with the number 179603 and died in October, 1944. Sergio's number is 179614. He was put in the camp, too, it's not clear why, spared immediate death in the gas chamber. Unfortunately, his fate was just as tragic.

We are often asked why we were interned and not killed immediately with our grandmother and aunt Sonia. Basically death was the fate of almost all the children who arrived at Birkenau. Only a tiny, almost insignificant percentage entered the camp. Even smaller is the number of those who survived. We don't have an unambiguous answer. Some say it's because they thought we were twins, which is plausible, since if you look at pictures of us at the time we really do look alike. (In fact we were assigned to the barrack that housed the children, including twins, whom the Nazis used for their experiments.) But we have no evidence, only hypotheses.

More likely, we and Sergio escaped immediate death in the gas chamber because, as children of mixed marriages, we were not considered "pure" Jews. Almost certainly, we think, it must have been due to our mother's quick-wittedness; during the selection on the ramp she must have insistently emphasized the Catholic branch of our family, declaring, as she had at the Rice Factory, that we were the daughters of a Catholic. There, on the ramp, our fate was sealed. There where, with a look and a simple gesture, the Nazis shifted you from the line of those who were to be sent immediately to the gas chamber to the line made up of the very few who were to be interned (and in the end, obviously, killed as well, like the others). Mamma, who during our imprisonment never lost heart, certainly must have said something to protect us right at that moment. She must have understood that in a few seconds someone would decide whether we would stay alive or be eliminated.

Life in the Camp

When the tattooing is over and we come out of the *Sauna*, we are separated from Mamma. We're wearing clothes that don't belong to us, and shoes that are too big. We walk with a woman, perhaps German, who wears what seems to us a military uniform, a skirt and jacket different from what the prisoners have. Now, again, we have to walk a very long way. Our barrack is near the entrance to the camp, on the exact opposite side from the *Sauna*.

We enter and our immediate impression is that it's huge. It's rectangular in shape, like the ones that can still be seen today at Birkenau. Our memories of the barrack's structure don't always coincide. We find waiting for us a *blockova*, the barrack guard, and we're handed over to her. She's probably Polish; later we learned that in general the *blockovas* were ordinary prisoners assigned to that job. She leads us to our beds, which are near the entrance. One for each of us, in what seems a long row of bunk beds. Our memory of those moments is made up of images and emotions. We don't know what we said to each other the first night. We don't remember sleep or hunger or thirst. The actual photograph that we still have today is of the two of us clutching each other, as if to protect each other. We don't see Sergio. He doesn't enter the barrack with us. At some point he, too, arrives, but we couldn't say when.

Ours was a *Kinderblock*. It wasn't the only one in the camp; we learned later that there were other barracks for children. But we didn't see them; we stayed in our world, Barrack No. 1, where there were children from various places, most of them destined to be victims of experiments.

In our bunks there are no sheets, only an extremely thin mattress and a harsh, rough blanket, like a military blanket, which doesn't protect us from the terrible cold we feel. In the middle of the barrack is a wood stove, with a big pipe, but its effects are nonexistent. With those temperatures, it would have to stay lighted continuously to warm the space. Although Andra is the younger, she's given the top bunk, Tati gets the one below. Here Andra starts having problems with bedwetting. After all, it was an extremely difficult situation, almost intolerable: our first night in the barrack, the first time in our life without Mamma. Andra's bedwetting isn't a problem only for her but also for Tatiana, who is

sleeping underneath her. So the next day we change places and Tati climbs up to the top level of the bunk bed. Andra has the same problem almost every night, starting the first one we spent in the barrack, our new home. She stopped only when, after the liberation, we arrived in England.

The *blockova* has her own bed near the entrance, on the right, in a sort of recess. She doesn't pay much attention to what we do, only the bare minimum. We quickly understand that, from her point of view, we're going to die. In the months of our stay in Birkenau we also discover where she keeps the secret box in which she hides the objects she finds wandering through the camp or steals from the prisoners. She takes it out in front of us, thinking she has nothing to fear from two little girls, and when she opens it necklaces and other pieces of jewelry appear. Maybe valuables that came from Kanada, the place where some of the internees are forced to collect, inspect, and sort the baggage of the new arrivals—both those destined for the gas chamber and the very few entering the camp—who are thus robbed and stripped of everything.

Our memory of the nine months we spent in the camp is of an apparent normality. Of course, it was a normality that was constructed only in our minds. Two little girls, alone in an unknown place, with adults we'd never seen before. Fear must have been inevitable. But in our memory it was replaced by that sense of normality that children often create to defend themselves in the face of the most terrible events, the unexpected. Andra attributes that sensation to Tatiana's protectiveness toward her. Tatiana was the older, maybe Mamma had told her to take care of her younger sister, or maybe it was instinctive. Probably both. The fact is that the entire time we stuck to each other like a stamp to a postcard.

But fear erupts aggressively when, every so often, an adult wearing a white coat enters the barrack to take away some of us children. At the time we knew nothing about the medical experiments. All we saw was that some children went away and didn't come back. Those who were taken didn't return. That was very clear to us. And our fear became terror.

Our life in the camp was punctuated by an alternation of fear and terror. And yet even in these situations children manage to find the resources to construct an intelligible universe around

themselves. It's what happened to us, when, to combat the fear, we immersed ourselves in the absurd daily life of Birkenau, trying by that means to survive.

Summer and winter are superimposed in our memories. Some episodes are vivid, carved into our minds; others are faded. At night we sleep with our clothes on. We don't remember washing or how we took care of our physiological needs, but surely, like everyone else, we used the toilet, if we want to call it that, available to the prisoners: a hole inside the barrack with a wooden lid.

Cold is a constant sensation, and the thin jackets we wear don't protect us. Food and hunger are vague memories. To eat we're given a watery broth, a sort of tasteless minestrone. Each of us has a bowl and a spoon, which we keep hidden under our pillows or in the pocket of our clothes. And then there's the smell, a constant smell of burning, probably from the chimneys that are almost always in operation. At first we don't realize what's happening to us. Only after a while do we understand that we have to stay there because we're Jewish. We figure it out from what the *blockovas* say, from the way they talk about us.

In the barrack boys and girls are separate. The number of children changes, according to the "needs" of our jailers, that is, by how many are taken to become guinea pigs in experiments, how many are killed or transferred. All of us wear dark, very thin clothing. We don't have a clear memory of the other child prisoners. Their presence and our games are vivid in our minds, just like any episodes, any images. But there are no faces, we can't remember or visualize a single face, a single expression. Apart from Sergio, obviously, and a very few others, but only because we met them again afterward.

Among these is Julius Hamburger, a Slovak who, before coming to Birkenau, had already been in various other camps. Today he lives in Israel. He was a couple of years older than Tatiana. He brought us food, and helped us in whatever ways he could, us and the other smaller children. He must have been a truly clever and generous kid. And then there were the Traubova sisters, Esther and Shana. They were younger than Andra. We were together with these three during the liberation, when, after the Russians arrived, we were taken to the orphanage in Prague. We remember them as our

companions in the barrack because we somehow reconstructed that fact afterward. In the testimony that Julius gave after the liberation, he spoke about the two of us, citing us by name.

During the day we're allowed to play outside, but always near our *Kinderblock*. We play with the other children, girls with girls, boys with boys. For that reason, too, Sergio isn't always with us. He's more often with the boys. In the morning we children feel that in a certain sense we're "masters" of the camp: it seems to us mostly empty, since the majority of the adults are forced to work. We play with nothing, only our imaginations, because we certainly don't have dolls or toys, or other games. We have pebbles in summer, because there's no grass around, just a lot of heavy gray mud. In winter we throw snowballs, but we don't have gloves. And if you make snowballs without gloves, you can't make more than one or two, because your fingers freeze.

Death is everywhere around us. And yet, strangely, we're not afraid of it, and we quickly get used to this parallel reality compared to the world. We are always seeing the corpses of adults. Bodies piled in a corner, heaped up in a barrack, transported by other prisoners. But to us it seems ordinary. We play around what Tati calls the "pyramids of corpses": white, skeletal, striking. We both have a vivid memory of them. In the morning, a rectangular wooden cart, with sides, goes from barrack to barrack collecting the dead. A terrible job, if we think back on it now, carried out by two prisoners: one takes the corpse by the arms and the other by the legs, they swing it and then give a sharp heave to hoist it to the top of the pile of bodies. Once, the cart arrived with a dead man covered by a white sheet. Andra asked: "Why the white sheet?" Someone answered: "Because he's a German."

Today these images seem to us insupportable, but at the time they didn't upset us. At a certain point Andra thinks that all this is nothing but the "normal" fate for Jews. Nothing other than the life we have to have. And even Tati convinces herself that this is simply her natural place: being Jewish means living and dying like that in Birkenau. A thought that works its way into our childish minds without other explanations or clarifications.

Wandering around the camp, past the piles of corpses, we see, from a distance, the chimneys of the crematoriums that continuously spit flames and smoke. Always, night and day. We can also see

them from outside our barrack. The smoke shifts with the wind. We know that from there “you go out.” And even the idea of “going out through the chimney” seems normal to us. It doesn’t surprise us. After a while we understand the use of the chimney. Someone must have explained it. Or maybe we heard it from the *blockovas*, or from some older child.

Normally we have no contact with the adults. We don’t talk to anyone. Only with the other children and, minimally, with our *blockova*, mainly when we’re carrying out her orders. Once, Tati encounters a young man who is probably a guard, he seems almost a boy. He’s walking on a street in the camp near our barrack, which the adults call Lagerstrasse. He’s wearing a uniform, or so it seems to her. He comes up to her with a box of cookies in his hand. A square tin box. Tatiana remembers only the box, not eating the cookies. Probably we shared them with Sergio, and maybe with the other children. We can’t explain today the gesture of that man, who he was or why he came to us. The Germans almost never entered the camp. They observed and directed things from the outside. Contact with the prisoners was kept to a minimum.

Near our barrack are barracks that house only women. In one of these the *blockova* loves to punish the prisoners. We can’t say how many times we saw an orderly row of women, on their knees on the gravel in a kind of courtyard, forced to hold two bricks in their raised hands. It’s a terrible scene. The *blockova* inflicts this punishment on the prisoners repeatedly. Few of them wear the striped uniform: they’re dressed in normal clothes that by now are reduced to rags, with old shoes or even barefoot. But we know they’re prisoners. We can wander around them, but we’re forbidden to talk to them or go near them.

This *blockova* who is so cruel behaves with odd compassion toward us. The *blockovas* wear dark clothes, not the striped outfits. And they wear skirts. The one in the women’s barrack is also a little overweight, and her jacket doesn’t fasten properly. Maybe it’s because they have regular meals. Every so often she brings us something different to eat. She’s taken a liking to us. We don’t know the reason, but it’s precisely her care for us that later saved our lives. She also gave us two white angora sweaters. We remember it distinctly because we had never had sweaters like that in Fiume. One day

she calls us over and gives them to us. We aren't surprised: we're struck more by the sweater than by the gesture itself. We don't feel it as a special favor.

By that time we spoke German, the language of the camp, which, like all the other children, we had to learn quickly. That was the language used among us small prisoners: gestures at first, then German (also because there weren't any other Italian children).

Andra remembers being in the hospital. It must have been for just a few days, otherwise, as often happened to those who were sent to the hospital, she wouldn't have come out alive. Maybe because of the aftereffects of chicken pox, which she still had the day of our arrest. Her memory is sometimes clear, other times confused: she's sick and spends her days on a bunk bed. The hospital, basically, is similar to the barrack we live in. They put her on an upper bunk. She spends a lot of time lying on her stomach. On one of those days an incident takes place that's forever stamped in her memory. There's confusion. And noise, a lot of noise, so much that she covers her ears with her hands. A woman is lying on a cot, a few meters away. A man in a white coat goes by, places his hand on Andra's head as if to push it down, under the pillow. He tells her not to look. Isn't that the best way to stimulate a child's innate curiosity? And as soon as he goes away, Andra starts peering through the crack between the boards of the edge of the bunk. The woman lying there is weeping: she's giving birth. There's a lot of blood. Andra is really upset. After a while she understands that a child is being born, or rather has been born. We don't know what happened to the woman or the child.

Mamma also came to see her in the hospital. It's an extraordinary fact, because the infirmary of Birkenau was as different as possible from a normal hospital, with visits and all the rest. But Mamma was like that. As long as she, too, was a prisoner in Auschwitz she never lost sight of us. Even today we don't know how she did it, and yet she managed to find her child in the hospital. She must have bribed the *blockovas*, maybe giving up her bread ration, or maybe offering some objects that Aunt Gisella, forced to work in Kanada, managed to steal. These are only hypotheses. Certainly she had an insane courage, and ran tremendous risks. It wasn't easy to move safely and for no reason through the camp; in fact it really was impossible.

Our situation as little girls left partly free to roam around—as we waited for our fate to be decided by the prison guards or by the criminal doctors who used the children in the barrack as guinea pigs for their inhuman experiments—was completely anomalous for Birkenau. After all, Birkenau was an extermination camp, in which the few interned prisoners—that small percentage of people who, getting off the trains or trucks, were not sent immediately to the gas chamber—were called by the Nazis “corpses on vacation.” They were only manpower, “pieces,” as the Nazis said, or slaves to be used until they wore out before being murdered. Unlike us children, the detainees had no freedom of action, they could move around the camp only on precise orders. The punishments for those who disobeyed were harsh, death the norm. But the strength of our mother’s love for us was greater than the fear of being punished or killed. Mamma was always like that. From the day of our arrest, she never relaxed her vigilance, which had a single objective: to save us children. She was determined to live and have us live. After the war she told us how in prison she would always wash her underpants and attach them to her back to let them dry, because otherwise someone would steal them. She wanted to wash, even in those harsh conditions, at whatever cost. She wanted to remain human. That was her will, her determination.

And that’s why she also managed to come and see us in the children’s barrack. We don’t know how long after our internment she started coming, nor could we say exactly how many times she came, in the period between April and the end of November, when she was transferred. Maybe five times? Maybe more? She would arrive near evening, after the long work day, exhausted. We would meet her for a very short time outside the barrack. We could still recognize her, although she no longer had hair, and was extremely thin and emaciated. In our memory there is also fear: we had trouble accepting her, she was so changed. Fear drove us, in a way, to reject her, made it difficult to let go and hug her, somewhat as when children want to make adults feel guilty. Certainly she must have suffered from it, but she must also have understood that ours wasn’t an ordinary situation. She was too intelligent, our mamma.

Those evening encounters are a precious memory. Thinking back on them today, we feel a sea of emotions tossing inside. She would arrive, hug us, kiss us, and the first thing she did was repeat our

names to us. She said: "Remember, your name is Liliana Bucci." "Remember, your name is Andra Bucci." She did it with a precise purpose, which we understood only later. We didn't have a roll call like the adults, we didn't have to learn our number by heart the way they did. Our names were everything. Mamma wanted to keep us attached to our real life, the one outside the camp. Or maybe she was already thinking of the day of our liberation, of two little girls alone in the middle of Poland. There's no way of knowing. After the war, we never spoke to Mamma about these episodes. Between us was an impenetrable, total silence.

Sergio doesn't appear in these memories, either. There's only Mamma and us. It's possible that he was with Aunt Gisella, who might have come with Mamma to see us. But we can't say with certainty. These are only fleeting impressions. Despite the absurdity of the situation, the suggestions that Mamma gave us had results, so that Tati forgot the family nickname she'd always had and still does, and became Liliana, the name that appeared on documents and that Mamma repeated to her at every encounter.

One evening, Andra recalls, Mamma informed us that she wouldn't be coming anymore. The vision of death was such an unvarying element of our world that in the following days, when she didn't show up, we were both convinced that she had died. And it seemed to us completely normal, it didn't surprise us. We took it for granted that the adults in Auschwitz died: we saw so many of them around us.

The Story of Sergio

We have a very clear memory of the day Sergio left Birkenau for Hamburg. It's what most tortures us, an obsession of our life after the war. One day, the *blockova* of the women's barrack, the one who seemed to behave kindly toward the two of us, told us that the next day all of us children would be assembled and would be asked if we wanted to see our mammas. The Germans would take ten boys and ten girls. We must not put ourselves forward, she told us, for any reason; we must refuse the offer. She didn't add any explanation. We assured her that we would obey, maybe partly because

Mamma herself had told us that she wouldn't come to see us anymore, and we already believed that she was dead. Obviously we reported to Sergio what the *blockova* had told us. We told him what would happen and that he shouldn't volunteer, either, for any reason.

The next day, in fact, they assembled us all outside the barrack. It was the end of November, and almost our cousin's birthday. A man arrived; this time he wore a normal uniform rather than a white coat. We don't know who he was. Maybe a camp official or maybe Dr. Kurt Heissmeyer himself, a Nazi doctor known for performing experiments on human guinea pigs. He asked us the question we expected: "Who wants to go and see Mamma?" We remained motionless as statues. But Sergio came forward. Tati remembers that he took a step out of the line, Andra that he raised his hand. Maybe both, it's not important. What matters is that our warnings had been in vain. His desire to see his mamma was too strong. How could you blame him, after all. With that cruel trap the Nazis demonstrated not only their brutality but also their treachery and cunning. For Sergio the call of his mother was irresistible. There were two of us, and we had been used to sticking together ever since we were small. Not Sergio: at the time he was an only child. Not until after the war did our aunt and uncle have another child, our cousin Mario. Sergio's mother was truly everything to him; probably he suffered from her absence more than we did from the absence of our mother.

Right afterward, the SS collected the twenty children who had been so insidiously chosen and led them to the ramp: they were happy, they didn't cry and didn't complain, because they thought they were going to see their mothers. We waved to them with hands raised, we saw them leave. That we remember clearly: all twenty getting into a train car, looking at us from behind a barrier. It was an atrocious trick. Twenty little children carried off under the illusion that they would see their mothers. Inside we knew that we wouldn't see them again. Obviously we weren't certain: it was a sensation, maybe due to the strong bond we had with Sergio, maybe to the environment we were in, where, if a person was taken away, he or she didn't come back. We also remember that from then on our barrack was definitely emptier, because almost no children arrived, as no more transports arrived at Auschwitz. It was the last time we saw Sergio.

It took us a long time to be able to talk about what happened to him, except, naturally, when we returned to Italy, and our aunt and uncle questioned us closely.

But there are other stories within this tragic episode. Lives brutally cut off when the war was ending and the Nazis had by then lost. For example, in our barrack there were two brothers: one, like Sergio, chose to go, the other remained. The latter, a survivor like us, we saw again in Israel long afterward. Every year he goes to Hamburg to honor his brother. There was a boy who had just arrived in the camp and chose to go with the group of twenty, sharing their fate. His parents, too, like our cousin's, after the war had another son, whom we met in Hamburg and who wanted to know what we remembered of his brother.

The story of those unfortunate children, including Sergio, was reconstructed some time after the end of the war. For many years Aunt Gisella and Uncle Eduardo's attempts to discover what happened to him had no result. Of course, their hopes remained alive, especially after we returned home. They wrote to all the humanitarian organizations that in those years were involved in helping refugees and war orphans. A few years ago we received a folder from the International Tracing Service, in Bad Arolsen, regarding Sergio. The ITS is the center for research on deportees set up by the International Red Cross at the end of the war. Requests arrived from all over Europe, mainly from people asking for information about their family members. The officials opened a file for every request received and put all pertinent information in it: correspondence with the families and with other organizations that were helping refugees scattered throughout Europe, the searches that had been undertaken, the results. At the headquarters of the ITS is a so-called "children's room," which contains 300,000 files, among them Sergio's. As the documentation makes clear, there was no shortage of indications over the years that our cousin might have been found, but unfortunately it always turned out that there had been a mistake or it was the wrong person.

Not until the early eighties did we learn his fate, thanks to Günther Schwarberg, a German we came to respect and admire, and his wife, Barbara Hüsing. These two journalists stumbled on the tragic story of the twenty children murdered after serving as human guinea pigs for the atrocious pseudoscientific experiments of Dr. Kurt Heissmeyer, the Nazi medical officer who tortured Sergio and

the others. Piece by piece, with great patience and perseverance, they managed to put together the whole story.

After the war, Heissmeyer had gone back to practicing as a doctor. Eventually, he was arrested and, in 1966, went on trial. He was given a life sentence and died a year later in prison. At the trial the truth about the fate of the twenty children in Hamburg came out. During the arguments, perhaps thinking that he would give scientific validity to his brutal activities, Heissmeyer himself quoted the clinical records of the children who were brought from Birkenau to Hamburg in late November, 1944, and tortured. Twenty innocent children who, after the experience of Auschwitz, were forced to undergo, first, injections of tuberculosis bacilli and then the removal of lymph nodes from their armpits (there are even photographs, taken by the Nazis to document the experiment, in which Sergio and his companions, heads shaved and bare-chested, have their right arms raised to show the incision in their armpits). At the end of the experiment all twenty of these little guinea pigs were murdered, by hanging, during the night between April 20th and 21st, 1945, in the basement of the Bullenhuser Damm school, in Hamburg.

The story of Sergio and the nineteen other victims was told in Schwarberg's *The Murders at Bullenhuser Damm: The SS Doctor and the Children* (1979; published in English in 1984). The story has not been forgotten, because Gunther and Barbara, along with other friends and colleagues, created a foundation, the Vereinigung Kinder vom Bullenhuser Damm (Children's Association of Bullenhuser Damm), dedicated to preserving the memory of that tragedy and to making it known.

The work of reconstruction done by Schwarberg and Hüsing is a story within the story, in which the will to see justice done clashed with the omissions and repressions of some in Germany in the postwar era.

Schwarberg died in 2008. Today in the school in Hamburg where the children were massacred there is a memorial honoring Sergio and his unfortunate companions. In the mid-nineties, in the same neighborhood, twenty streets were renamed for the victims. In the beautiful cemetery in Hamburg, in

the section dedicated to Italian victims of the Second World War, there is a stone to Sergio's memory, placed in 1995.

Uncle Eduardo died in 1978, before he could know the truth of his son's fate. This was in part because Sergio's name wasn't reported clearly in the documentation, and it took Schwarberg and Hüsing a long time to identify him. Aunt Gisella, on the other hand, who survived Auschwitz and died in 1988, could know the truth but never accepted it. She was asked to come to Hamburg, to testify at the trial of some of the criminals who had participated in the murder of her child. Mira Tatiana, Andra's daughter, who spoke German, went with her on that journey, which took place in 1983 or 1984. But our aunt was unable to testify. She refused, because she could in no way accept the truth about her son. She couldn't accept it. And who would have been able to, after all? She always told herself, with conviction, that Sergio was still alive: a child so lovely, she said to comfort herself, couldn't help being welcomed and cared for by someone in some corner of the world.

Our Liberation

Then comes the day of our liberation. It's January 27, 1945. Here, too, our memory fades. Andra has a clear image of Russian trucks moving along the main street of the camp, of vehicles going back and forth. We understand that something unusual is happening because the soldiers wear uniforms we don't recognize. And because they're smiling. Yes, smiling. Then a type of jeep stops in front of us. A soldier is sitting on the hood. He wears a beret with a red star. Andra remembers him vividly. He has a small wooden board on his knees, on which he's cutting a piece of salami. He looks at us, offers it to us. A spontaneous, natural gesture, unthinkable in Birkenau. It's the two of us, our small prison companions, and this Russian soldier who offers us some salami. That for us is the liberation.