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Arrivals [Creative]



By Joanna Diane Caytas

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“Faster, faster!” – we were rushed hastily through a freezing street at dawn. Forced to march, barely paying attention to the men with loudspeakers, our heads turned in awed silence toward giant stretches of crimson fabric draping the sides of the façade of a dark-red Neo-gothic brick building. The center of each 20-yard bright, blood-like flood was marked with a white circle around a thick, black, overwhelming swastika.

“Run! Faster!” I could not possibly manage to run that fast, stumbling often and slipping on wet cobblestones, pushed and shoved by people staggering around me in a similar dispirited daze. Soldiers with short assault rifles looked on indifferently. “Don’t fall, just don’t fall,” I kept thinking mechanically.

Cold. So very cold. Rain drizzled through gray air on gray coats, gray hats, gray headscarves, gray trousers and skirts. Even the braids of young women somehow appeared gray. Long rows of hunched people in a deep, colorless yard stared apathetically.

A dozen people ahead, an older woman in a faded, tattered beret put her valise on the ground. Just for a moment, to let her hand rest. A man in a gray uniform appeared immediately, shouting while pointing to the fraying suitcase. She lowered her head and lifted her burden again.

The cold was biting to the bone, so much so that no longer feeling my feet was a blessing. We were frozen in time, patrolled by soldiers with German shepherds, meekly standing in our endless orderly rows. It took all our strength to barely maintain this sketchy semblance of order. Spotlights flashing over us, somewhat regularly, intruded to inspect our orderly submission with indifference.

A truck arrived. More men, women, and children poured out of it, jumping and running at first, nudged impatiently along with rifles, but almost immediately forming further rows of grayness. Other yellow Stars of David flashing here and there among the mousy gray, then the congealed cotton that is silence. Time froze again.

A piece of bread in my pocket. I could no longer stop thinking about the piece of bread in my pocket. Was that allowed? Could I just reach and put a bite in my mouth? Would it make uniformed guards yell at me, or worse? Would it cause me to lose the last resemblance of safety in the privacy of anonymity? I thought I could crumble it with my hand and pretend I was just wiping my mouth. Could I? How long were we supposed to stand here, emotionless and void of anything that mattered?

Far ahead, something was happening, soldiers running, an open military landaulet bursting through the gate, stopping with a squeak of tires. A few jumped out of it. Different uniforms, arms quickly raised in their bizarre greeting – is that a woman? – loud commands and rushed exchanges. A chaotic polyphony of different yet precise staccato rhythms, the sound of boots on cobblestones, then more trucks started to arrive. One, two, five...

Is it time?!

Wrocław, Poland, was known until 1945 by its German name of Breslau. The Neo-gothic building now used as a district court served as Gestapo Headquarters during the Third Reich. The victims of the nearby concentration camp KL Gross-Rosen are estimated to have exceeded 40,000, including Jews, Poles, Gypsies, Ukrainians and Russians. The Breslau Gestapo maintained within KL Gross-Rosen its own Corrective Labor Camp.

Wrocław's historic sites became frequent settings for wartime movies and the local population was commonly employed as extras. Sometimes, film producers hired entire high schools, with all students taking days off from classes to participate in the footage of scenes as a part of their educational experience, which eerily resembled time travel. As a native of Wrocław, I became part of one such project at age 15.

The experience of participating in film productions was often overwhelming for our young, impressionable minds. To increase the psychological realism of our inadvertent responses, we were not given information

on the script or told when cameras would be on. During a day on the set, there was only one 15-minute long break for lunch. The continuous intensity of experience contributed to the atmosphere of total immersion in the filmed scenes.

Participation in the filming of these scenes had a particular and deeply personal connotation for me: it portrayed a fate my own paternal family had narrowly escaped.

One snowy night during the winter of 1940, a small boy banged on my family's door. He was the youngest son of a friendly acquaintance – a local, well integrated ethnic German who was appointed to an administrative position by the German Nazi regime occupying Poland. The boy brought an alarming message, "Get out of the house at once, the Gestapo is coming to take you to Auschwitz!" In 1940, nobody thought twice about such warnings; suddenly awakened, within minutes all relatives escaped through a window as they stood, in their underwear, to the rumble of the engines of arriving Gestapo trucks. They all spent much of the rest of the war, more than four years, in hiding before they could somewhat securely arrange false papers for all "underground" members of the family. Miraculously, they all managed to survive. Shortly thereafter, however, both ailing parents passed away and left their children to fend for themselves. At least the Nazi threat was gone. The Communists that followed persecuted the remainder of the family, but their endless interrogations, administrative harassment, penal battalion assignments, and orders barring access to education beyond elementary levels were treated as mere nuisances by comparison to the very real ghost of Auschwitz and barbed wire that had passed them by but for a few lucky minutes.

At the end of a long day of filming, the school bus had turned unusually quiet. It was hard to believe that the time travel was over, the demons reduced to their place in a script and that we were going back home, to the safety of our families in contemporary Poland.

I never learned the title of the film in which I had participated. I did not ask, or even care to find out. To me, the brief experience was a very personal transfiguration, walking in the shoes of a fifteen-year old girl that wore braids and a gray beret on her trip to a terrifying and incomprehensible future.

I kept the gray beret. Still wear it to school on cold days.

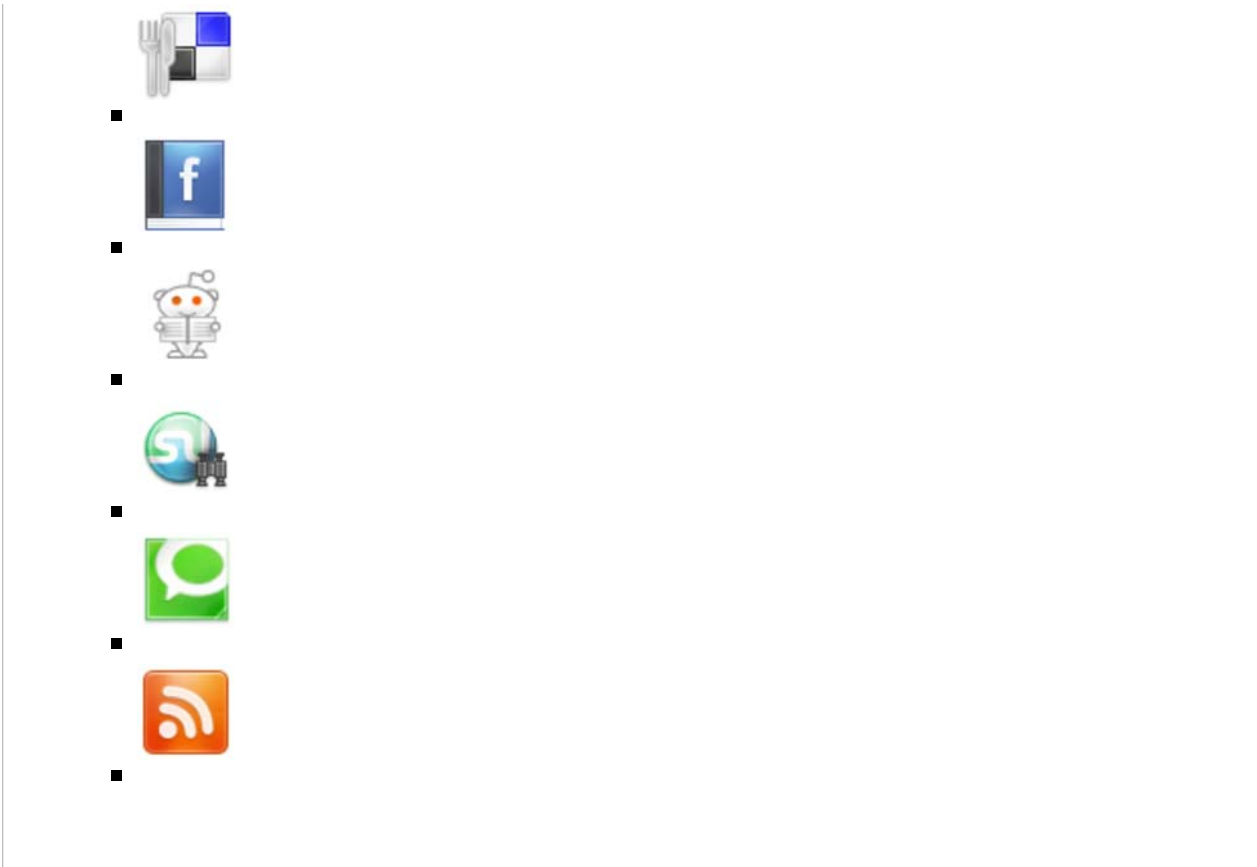
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