

Mike's Fiction©



A Small Sin in Nuremberg©

Auschwitz, Birkenau Camp, January 1945

Women with vacant eyes and empty stomachs scurried about trapping roaches in the filthy barracks, their quick jerky movements mimicking their prey. The man paid them no heed. His attention was focused on a woman lying on her bed, a pile of old boards. Like himself, she wore a shapeless white shirt and pants with black stripes that looked painted by a child. With her eyes shut, she could be mistaken for the corpse of a sidewalk clown, one that weighed no more than thirty-four kilos. As he knelt and rested the palm of his hand on her forehead, her eyes sprang to life.

“Where am I,” she asked.

“You are in Women’s Barracks, Block 25.” Men were not allowed here, but for Efraim a guard looked the other way.

She stared at the rough-hewn rafters, as if searching for something lost. “Will I be alright, Doctor Weiss?”

Her question echoed in his mind. Always they asked it, despite knowing only a matter of days or weeks would pass before they are gassed. And he understood why they asked: because life—even at its most appalling—remained precious, pled for preservation until the last moment. But for Sarah Rosen of Frankfort, dysentery would be more likely to win the race to claim her.

Efraim forced a smile and patted Sarah’s shoulder. “Everything will work out. You will see. And I have something for you that will help.” He reached into a pocket fastened to his shirt with pins and extracted a white pill. The SS pharmacist, a jittery man addicted to morphine—the same man who supplied chemicals to Doctor Joseph Mengele—gave them to

Efraim. In return, Efraim administered him his shots. They were merely placebos made of paste, but important to the human spirit, because they sustained the belief that someone still cared.

As Efraim stood, finished with what he could do, his arthritic knees protested the cold. Winter had yet to arrive, but the guilt of the living chilled his soul.

One day, the doctor found it impossible to make his rounds. He was one of the Jews conscripted to remove bodies from the gas chambers and load them into wooden carts that were taken to the crematoriums. The task was normally performed by soldiers in order to preserve the poorly kept secret that Jews were herded there only to shower. But each day there were fewer and fewer soldiers, as more and more were consumed by the retreating front lines of the Third Reich.

“Alright, you sorry bastards, into the tunnel you go,” barked the SS guard. For emphasis, he turned to a skeletal boy and kicked him in the behind.

Efraim gulped deep breaths, stockpiling air in his lungs, and shuffled behind the others who scurried into the concrete tunnel. There was always the possibility the air would still be poisoned. As he entered the ovens, rows of crudely disguised gas jets loomed overhead like hungry vultures. He tried to move faster, but a growing tangle of stiffening torsos and limbs impeded his progress, and he found himself closing his eyes to prevent them from lingering. While he knew he had to choose a body, he did not want to see its face. Efraim bent and grasped the ankles of a young female whose arm was draped over her eyes, as if she was annoyed by the light. The angry clusters of cigarette burns that blanketed her breasts made his anger rise like bile. Wisely, he re-channeled the energy into pulling. Though her corpse weighed little more than an empty sack, he was damp with sweat by the time he scuttled to the outside. There, another Jew helped him throw her body atop a pile on the cart. But Efraim’s eye caught a glint of light from an object clutched in her hand. As he pried her fingers away, he collapsed to his knees and shrieked at the sky.

Nuremberg Jail, November 29, 1946

Even amid the cacophony of black boots stomping on stone, the cathedral-like corridor captivated Efraim. Its tangle of catwalks scaled the three tiers of cells like ivy, and it would not have surprised him to see giant spiders dangling from the stalks. The U.S. Army Sergeant, who was new, had to slow the escort to compensate for the doctor’s lopsided gait. With each grinding step, Efraim’s amusement grew at how out of place he must have seemed: a wizened old man in baggy brown tweed, vest, and gold watch fob, who marched clumsily alongside these muscular MPs. The swarms of guards also appeared misplaced, because those who wandered within the dark greasy cells—men with short-cropped hair and dingy gray coveralls—looked harmless as monks. Goering and Ribbentrop were here, charged with crimes against

humanity. Others—Karl Brandt, Oskar Schroeder, Kurt Weber—were here too, guilty of a special sacrilege; they were men of medicine who defiled the Hippocratic Oath. Yet, behind thick wooden doors they still brushed their teeth, picked at their scabs, took their bowel movements, and pretended to be unaware that the good doctor who marched past was an avenging angel.

The Sergeant raised an arm and halted the small entourage as it arrived outside cell thirty-one, then reached for a jumble of keys suspended from a steel ring clipped to his belt. The prisoner, just visible behind a tiny window cut into the door, was sprawled on his bunk. His Aryan face was sharply chiseled, but appealing nonetheless. He showed no trace of gray hair and he appeared fit. As the cell door creaked ajar, Efraim drew a long breath and steeled himself for another session with this monster.

“Good morning, Colonel Weber. Were you able to sleep?”

Weber was already sitting up, wearing a crooked smile. “Quite soundly, Herr Doktor. And I trust the demons of advancing age suspended their torment long enough for you to rest as well.”

Efraim smiled as he stepped into the cell, careful not to break eye contact. When the lock behind him slammed shut like the bolt of a Mauser, he did not flinch. “Odd you should have demons on your mind, Colonel. I doubt they would bother someone who has so completely purged the memories of the atrocities he has committed.”

“Herr Doktor, was it not you who diagnosed my condition? What did you call it?”

“Retrograde amnesia, as you know perfectly well, Colonel—since you are the one who proposed it. I only concurred because it is a possibility, solely because of your head injury.”

Weber’s hand reached up to knead a knot at the back of his skull. The pause allowed Efraim to take a seat on a small bench bolted to the opposite wall where the odor from the toilet was tolerable.

“A fact in your favor, Colonel, is that this amnesia is not so rare. There have been cases documented where years of memories preceding a brain trauma are wiped clean. On the other hand, unlike you, none of those victims had such a compelling reason to pretend they cannot remember. Nor were they doctors, as you, capable of mimicking any number of medical conditions.”

Weber stood, grabbed the steel frame of the empty top bunk, and began a series of deep knee bends. “You are a Jew, Doktor. And Jews are nothing, if not honest in their objectivity. You and your team of doctors have shown me pictures of atrocities at Auschwitz, and you have confronted me with witnesses to my alleged participation. And throughout, have I ever given a single sign that I remember?” He stopped exercising, turned to glare at Efraim. “No, Herr Doktor. I have every confidence you will report what your science tells you, that I

have no memory of anything I did, or what anybody else did, from 1940 until that ignorant Bolshevik almost took my head off with the butt of his rifle.”

Efraim returned the glare. “How interesting that you ascribe honesty only to Jews, when it is a trait common to most of humanity. Then again, Colonel, have you not misplaced your own humanity? Perhaps, like an amputees’ phantom pain, some ethereal specter of guilt causes you to attribute virtue exclusively to your victims.”

Weber sighed and sat down, and began to examine his hands, a mannerism Efraim had observed before; he used it when he could not polish a response equal to Efraim’s articulateness.

But these little victories were meaningless, and Efraim was weary of them. He was relieved to hear the clatter of the cart bringing his equipment. As he waited, he reached into a pocket in his trousers and began to knead his daughter’s shiny silver bracelet in his fingers, remembering as a child how she used to twist and turn it until she captured the sunlight. Elisa was an only child, a surprise actually, born to Efraim and his wife late in life. Like her mother, Hena, she carried herself with such grace, such a minimum of movement, that each gesture amplified her femininity. Elisa was not as lucky as Hena, who succumbed to heart failure on the train to Auschwitz, sparing her the vision of the maw of the main gate, which seemed to swallow the tracks—a harbinger of the vanquished hope beyond.

When he realized what he was thinking, Efraim yanked his hand from his pocket. He would not allow his proximity to this monster to sully the sacred memories of his family. They were all he had left until the day came when he would join them again.

The International Military Tribunal had enlisted a number of psychiatrists to help evaluate prisoners claiming insanity or amnesia as a defense. Though Efraim was a physician, the chief psychiatrist, Leon Goldensohn, sought him out because of his special value as a camp survivor, and because he demonstrated enormous integrity and heroism at Auschwitz. But it was the evidence that Josef Mengele mutilated, then murdered Elisa that provided Efraim with the motivation to accept the assignment. Mengele, so far, had eluded capture, but he would settle for Weber.

In the entire history of Law, no one has ever escaped trial because of amnesia. Yet, a force as ancient as Law itself—criticism—had weighed in at Nuremberg. The Tribunal has been accused of wielding “Victor’s Justice:” playing fast and loose with the rules of evidence, inventing new categories of Axis crimes, while ignoring Allied offenses, like saturation bombing of entire cities. As it squirmed under the scrutiny of the world, the Tribunal searched for crumbs of compassion to offer as evidence of balance to their critics. Because Kurt Weber’s circumstances lent his claim a modicum of credibility, his case had caught the public eye, and Goldensohn was pressuring Efraim for definitive results, afraid that absent them, the Tribunal would sweep legal precedent into a corner and declare him unfit to try. The pressure could ease if there was more time, but the Doctors’ Trial would commence in only a few weeks.

Efraim's empty stomach rumbled. He was starved for the means to break Weber. Last night, he considered kneeling with his *siddurim* to pray, but knew it would do no good. Auschwitz destroyed his comprehension of a merciful God, reconstituting it to that of a traitor who turned his back on Jews. Lately, however, Efraim had come to half admire this ruthless God, because of the insidious cleverness he demonstrated by choosing not to intervene in the world's barbarism, thereby forcing humanity to rub its nose in the consequences. The fact this vision did not describe a moral God, but an amoral one, did not trouble Efraim, because he was no longer certain of the distinction.

As the cart arrived and the cell door reopened, Weber said, "Movies again, Doktor?"

Efraim shook his head. "I have slide-photos that have just arrived from Auschwitz. In your haste to flee the Russians, it seems your SS colleagues were careless in what they left behind."

Weber's sculpted face revealed nothing as the Sergeant pushed the cart into the cell, then unfurled the portable screen and blocked what meager daylight offered by the barred porthole in the back wall.

"I have not had time to see these photographs myself, Colonel. So, we will discover together what they reveal."

Weber's eyebrows rose like twin flags at dawn. "The great Doktor—unprepared?"

Efraim shrugged as a block of grainy light wobbled on the screen. He picked up the wooden box holding the delicate glass slides, and said, "Thank you, Sergeant. I can operate the projector myself. I will call for you when I am finished."

The Sergeant departed, but not before posting an MP outside. Efraim dropped in a slide and twisted the lens, bringing into focus a frightened, emaciated man, restrained on a gurney by two men in SS uniforms while another administered what appeared to be eye drops. The third man, dressed in a white coat, had carefully groomed dark hair and appeared both arrogant and attractive at once. "Ah, there is your mentor, Colonel. Do you remember his name?"

"I am afraid neither the name nor the face, Herr Doktor."

"What a surprise! Don't you recognize Doctor Mengele, the infamous Angel of Death? This photograph must be part of a record of his experiments with chemicals he hoped would change eye color. I understand he favored Aryan blue. Is that so, Colonel?"

Weber did not respond, but as the image of the next slide appeared, he looked away and snorted.

"Well, well, Colonel. There *you* are, resplendent in SS black. Have I told you I saw you on more than one occasion in the camp? But always in your white coat—pretending to be

a healer.” Efraim snorted himself, then squinted at the screen. “It appears you are quite interested in the Jews being marched through the main gate.” He stepped in front of the projector, slicing into its beam, and for a moment could have been mistaken for the icon of an angry archangel emblazoned on a Christian holy card. He extended an arm, pointed at Weber. “Perhaps you are marking victims for Mengele’s clinic. Did you and he not favor twins? Or, absent that opportunity, perhaps little girls?”

Weber stretched his back before he answered. “Other evidence you’ve shown me already proves I was at Auschwitz, Doktor. But the fact remains I remember nothing.”

Efraim dropped his arm and his entire body seemed to sag. “Do you know what I do every day when I leave here, Colonel?”

Weber shrugs.

“I bathe. Twice. Yet your stench lingers.” He stiffened. “For someone who is smaller inside than the little finger of a Jew, how is it you stink so?”

Weber sprang from his bunk, launching himself toward Efraim. But the rat-a-tat of the guard’s baton raking the iron bars stopped him, and he stood there, trembling. Finally, he wagged a finger in front of Ephraim’s nose. “It won’t work, Doktor. You cannot provoke me with things I have no knowledge of.”

In the face of Efraim’s unrelenting glare, Weber backed away, sat down on the bunk, and ran his hands through his hair. After a moment, Efraim walked behind the projector and selected a new slide.

“Do you have a family, Herr Doktor?”

Efraim froze, the slide poised in mid-air. “My family is of no concern to you.”

“Children? Surely, you were married.”

Grinding his teeth, Efraim dropped the slide into the aperture. As the picture splashed onto the screen, he gasped and staggered backward.

Weber’s head swiveled from the doctor to the screen. He saw a girl, perhaps twelve, or thirteen, naked, making an ineffective effort at concealing herself. “What is it, Doktor? You act as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

Ephraim’s eyes darted about the cell, landing everywhere except the screen. He staggered forward and collapsed against the rough wood of the cell door, grasping a bar in the window for support.

Weber turned his attention back to the screen and studied the picture. Soon, his mouth mutated into a lupine grin. “Ah,” he said. “This is your daughter—or maybe your

granddaughter.”

Efraim pressed his forehead harder into the bars. “Don’t...Please.”

As he leaped to his feet, Weber said, “Of course, I’d be lying—and let me be clear about that—but what if I told you that Mengele had that girl in the clinic?” He stepped toward Efraim. “That he used certain incentives. That he enjoyed hours of exquisite pleasure. Would you like me to invent the details, Herr Doktor?”

A barely audible mewling dribbled from Ephraim’s lips. Then, in a raspy voice, he said, “No more. Please...I will leave. I will write your report as you wish. Just say no more.”

Weber nodded, but didn’t retreat. Instead, he began to circle his prey, moving close enough for Efraim to smell his fetid breath.

“Yes. You will be the honest Jew and do just that.” He began to giggle like a jackal, suppressed it with his hand, but giggled again. Bending down, he placed his lips by Ephraim’s ear, and whispered, “But just one more lie, Herr Doktor. That girl was too much of a wildcat for Mengele. At the end, he gave her to me.”

Ephraim’s slack frame sprung taut; he released his grip on the bars and whirled around. The maniacal grin on Weber’s face melted in the heat of his fiery eyes.

“How could you know, Colonel? How could you *possibly* know her name?”

“What? I didn’t—”

“Elisa! I heard you whisper, Elisa.”

Weber recoiled. His eyes bulged like ripe olives. He opens his mouth to protest, but it could only form a silent ellipse.

The doctor turned to the barred window. “Guard. Call for the Sergeant.”

Adrenalin rushed from Efraim’s heart in a riptide, and he crumpled onto the bench. The beginnings of an icy wind rustled inside the cavity of his chest. Yes, he knew the scales of justice could only be balanced in Weber’s case if lubricated by a lie. But on Judgment Day Efraim also knew it would cost him reunion with his beloved Hena and Elisa. He clasped his hands and bowed his head, remaining in that position for a long time. Somewhere, he prayed, there must be a merciful god who would descend and deliver him swiftly to his fate.

THE END