

# THE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-SEVENTH PSALM

(A story)

By

ISTVÁN ÖRKÉNY

We had no stretcher. Maurer and Ligeti carried the patient in their arms and wanted to put him down on the operating-table with all his clothes on; they had to be told not to soil the sterilized sheet. After that they undressed the man, reluctantly.

I saw Laci Haas without his clothes on for the first time. He had been working all through the five months without a pause, and until the appendicitis attack the day before he had never reported sick. When I looked at him I felt as though needles were being jabbed in the back of my head. There was something unfinished, something you might say, moving, in the way his body was built. It was slim and white like a girl's, the chest a little hollow, the belly sunk, and the flesh desiccated like dried fruit. Lumber work demands 5,500 calories a day; it was the heaviest work we had ever done. Where did a child's body like his keep its reserves of energy? I had no idea. I had forgotten to wonder about it.

The big brawny ones melted away like ice in the sun. A lorry driver as strong as an ox for instance, was done and finished before the unloading was over, and of the manual workers (we hadn't too many in our company anyway) only this Maurer had managed to survive, possibly because he was just too stupid to give up the ghost. Only a thin chalk line between his brows and woolly hair seemed to indicate the place where his forehead should have been. Sluggish, indolent, callous. A railway engine could have rolled over him. I had only asked him to come and help with the operation because of his strength.

He lifted the patient like a feather on to the operating-table. I had had so much experience by then that I could tell at a glance how long a man had to go. These Laci Haases, unpromising, made of soft wax, could stand anything. It was all a matter of strength of mind. Death is not outside, it is inside us. It is there we have to keep it in check. Let go of yourself for a second and it starts to grow, to divide like a cell, to swell and even without wanting to, kills you like an embryo bursting its mother to pieces.

When he was laid on the table, he said:

"Take good care how you kill me, Silberman, won't you?"

And he smiled.

„I don't care a damn about you, if that was a little dig at me," I said. "Why the hell didn't you tell some whopping lie when the company was lined up at Jablonovka?"

„I told them straight: a poet."

„Big joke. A poet's good at any damn trade. Couldn't you have told them something else?"

"It makes no difference what I'm good at," he said, "I can't lie."

"Everybody told lies at Jablonovka," I said. "By the way, I did spend a term and a half at the Medical University in Prague."

"We heard that," he said wearily.

"I did a bit of dissecting too," I went on.

"Cut it out," he waved his hand.

"Did I ask to operate on you?" I asked.

"Cut it out," he said. "Give me plenty of ether. I don't care about the rest."

And he closed his eyes.

At Jablonovka the company had been lined up and Harangozó ordered every one in the corn trade to come forward. Four corn dealers stepped out. Harangozó had them taken behind the ramp and beaten to death. That scared us out of our wits. We thought we had got a regular butcher of a commander, but later it turned out he reserved his hatred exclusively for corn dealers and wasn't out to get anybody else. When they asked us our trade or profession, forty-seven of us in sheer fear swore we were doctors, or rather forty-four of us did, because three were real doctors. But they are no longer with us. Harangozó looked us over and said:

"That one with the scar on the throat will be the company's doctor."

At nineteen I had had a thyroidectomy and the scar that had remained proved to be a stroke of luck at Jablonovka. But I had never dreamed that I would ever have to operate on anybody. Corporal Bisztrai of the Medical Corps called me to the tool-shed that morning. The operation was to take place there, and he told me to get a couple of others to help get the place cleaned up.

It was woodland all around. The house was built of wood and a pleasant smell of pine came from the walls, which made your hands sticky with resin if you touched them. The only snag was that the room was originally intended for storing things, so it had no windows. The resourceful Ligeti had taken the headlamps and the batteries from the company's defunct Mercedes. He rigged the light up just like a real operating theatre. We had the sheet sterilized in sodium and boiled the catgut, the syringes and all the other instruments we could lay our hands on in a hurry. I also had a wash-basin with disinfectant put in the room.

"Wash your hands," I said to Ligeti.

"I have," he replied.

"But you touched his clothes. And you too, Maurer!"

"Does it make any difference to him?" Ligeti shrugged his shoulders, looking at Laci Haas, who was lying white, eyes shut in the floodlight, shyly covering up his private parts with his left hand.

"Go and wash your hands, I told you."

They obeyed, their faces betraying insolence. I had got used to that. At first everybody hated me. Not because of my not being a real doctor and still being the company's doctor, but because I lived and ate with the army guards. In the evenings I listened to the radio in their company. I was exempted from wearing a yellow armband. That was what made them sore. But as time went on they began to realize that I was on their side all the same. There was the time, for instance, when the order came through that from then on those with chilblains had to turn out for work just the same, because the sick roll must never exceed three per cent. But by then I knew about Harangozó's changes of mood and temper. Most of the time I exceeded the three per cent limit; in late December in fact, when the great frosts set in, I managed to exempt twenty-seven men. They saw that I was playing a risky game for them. From then on they hated me a little less.

"What are you doing?" I snapped at Maurer and Ligeti. "There's a clean towel to dry your hands on."

With the same impassive face they dried their hands. Because that impassive, sulky face was there to stay.

They sat on a crate. We were waiting for Bisztrai. Maurer was holding his ham hands away from his body so as not to touch anything, and in the meanwhile he watched my movements. That stare made me jumpy. There was silence. The good smell of pine oozed from the walls, like at home when my father brought the pine tree home for Christmas and hid it in the pantry and the smell seeped through, betraying its presence. Father had always bought the tallest tree that would fit into the room. He had started life all over again four times because his business had always gone bankrupt; perhaps that was one reason why he had wanted me to become a doctor... I took out a Russian cigarette and lit it.

“Are we forbidden to do that too?” Ligeti asked.

“Your hands are already disinfected,” I said. “But you can smoke, Laci.”

He opened his eyes. He sat up. He lit a cigarette. I was a little relieved because it was painful to see him stretched out pale in the white light, motionless.

“Do you want anything?” I asked.

“What could I want?” he asked without interest.

I thought a moment.

“Food is out of the question. Do you want some tea?”

“I don’t want tea.”

“I may be able to get some rum for you.”

“Don’t get me anything, Silberman.”

There was silence again. Nobody spoke. No noise came from outside because the huts of the army staff were covered half way up with dung and on top of that a thick layer of snow had fallen. It made the silence lie on your heart like a weight of lead.

“We could at least talk,” I suggested.

“What shall I talk to you about?” he asked.

“Recite me a poem.”

“I can’t think of a single poem.”

“Do the one you recited at the social evening.”

“It wasn’t by me.”

“Who was it by?”

“Who knows?”

But whenever it came to discussing poetry he always livened up. This time too he soon recovered and started to talk and gesticulate, even forgetting to keep his left hand on his genitals. He had been the great surprise of the social. A voice as strong as the roar of the wind came out of this soft-spoken boy. It swung over the long sheep pen so that even those with gangrene, whom we didn’t dare bring forward for fear Harangozó might see them, could hear it.

We had got up the social on the Regent’s birthday on Harangozó’s order. He had these fits of humanity. He was in constant conflict with himself, but the boys were unable to see it. He had been ordered to produce so many cubic metres of timber for saw-logs, sleepers and telegraph poles, and in the course of it to exterminate the company. But he had quite a bit of idealism, too. He wanted to maintain the illusion that here everything was as if we had been free people – free as far as anyone could be free in war time. As long as everyone did his work he wouldn’t let anyone so much as eye us. He insisted on our singing and enjoying ourselves in the evenings; occasionally he himself came and mixed with us in the sheep pen. When Laci Haas began to recite at the social he broke into tears. He turned aside and went out to keep his emotions from betraying him. The next day I learned from his batman that he had been pacing his room the whole night, clearing his throat. I daresay that was why he had insisted on the appendicitis operation; he hadn’t forgotten Laci Haas reciting those lines.

It wasn’t an ordinary poem. It was the Hundred and Thirty-Seventh Psalm in some old seventeenth century version.

“Recite it, please,” I asked him.

“I can hardly remember it.”

“As much as you can.”

“I don’t feel like it.”

All my prompting was in vain. Then Ligeti, speaking over his shoulder, turned on him:

“Why are you putting on dog?”

At that he obediently rose on one elbow, looked round, and threw the loose corner of the sheet over his loins. He didn’t seem to want to recite a poem naked. He spoke very softly,

almost inaudibly.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea,  
we wept, when we remembered Zion.  
We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.  
For there they that carried us away captive required  
of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us  
mirth, saying. Sing us one of the songs of Zion.  
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?  
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning.  
If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to  
the roof of my mouth, if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

He fell silent. He got a cramp, and lay back again, drawing up his leg. I started to sweat. If anything makes me nervous the palm of my hand becomes damp and cold sweat comes out on the small of my back. Ligeti was staring in front of him, biting his nail; Maurer was breathing heavily with his mouth open and his sticky fish-gaze fixed on me. Laci panted slightly for a while yet, then once again the silence was complete and again the smell of pine wood came flooding into the stillness. Through my mouth and nose, through my very pores it penetrated; I felt like crying behind my closed eyelids. I was shaken. I thought of things I had never thought of. What life was like, what it was about and who had conceived it and if it had come about of itself, why did it have to be so full of conflict and self-contradiction, why was it self-suffocating, inscrutable, insoluble... I brushed the thoughts away, but at that moment my father's sallow face as he lay on his sick bed flashed before me. To shut out the image I tried to imagine myself dead. I did not succeed. I was living even in my death. Not very much alive but just enough to know that I was not dead. Then in came Bisztrai.

He had got bandages but no ether. Instead of that he thrust into my hands a bottle of novocaine. He inspected the headlamps, switched them on and off, smiling complacently. Before he left he snarled at me;

"If the shed is not empty by noon, I'll kick you in the belly, Mr. Silberman."

He mistered me. He didn't like anybody to come into the tool-shed. He lived next door in the room to which the shed was attached. He would lie on his campbed day and night, but eight or nine times a day he came out to see if the padlock on the door of the shed was still there.

We boiled the instruments on the big utility stove. I had only once given an injection in my life, six weeks before, to a chap suffering from dysentery. But it hadn't made difference anyway.

"We haven't got any ether," I told Laci. "I'll do it locally."

"What's that?"

"A local anaesthetic."

"Will I be awake?"

I said yes. He asked if he might smoke. I shrugged my shoulders and handed him the whole packet.

"All you'll feel will be one sting," I said.

In civilian life Ligeti was a drugstore shop-assistant. I knew him to be a clever man, but at this moment he was not particularly exerting himself. He moved about with a slowness that was an ironic comment on the futility of his activity. I had to round on him three times before he shoved the scalpel across to me.

"Now throw away the cigarette," I told Laci Haas.

“Lovely smoke rings,” he said grinning, and blew the smoke up into my face.

“If that was intended as sarcasm don’t exert yourself,” I said. “I sat in the library every day till closing time. I wanted to be a good doctor.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“If Hitler hadn’t marched into Prague I’d have become one too.”

“Oh, well,” he said.

“What’s that ‘Oh, well’?” I demanded.

“That’s how we indicate something unsaid in literature.”

“What’s it all about?” I asked.

“Do you know where the appendix is?”

“I bloody well know,” I said.

I think I made the cut beautifully at the right place. To be frank, I felt damp on the forehead and down the neck, but I had stopped trembling now, and the tension I had been living under since the previous day was relaxed. I didn’t know what I was doing but something inside me told me that I was doing it correctly.

“Your peritoneum is like mother-of-pearl,” I said.

“Don’t flatter me, Silberman,” he replied.

Up till then there had been sharp knives in everything he said. That was the first sentence with a milder tone. I knew that this softening was not intended for me; it was merely the onset of nerve paralysis, or what we call operational shock.

There weren’t enough artery forceps, so the wound had to be swabbed frequently. Slowly, very cautiously I began pulling out the small intestines.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“It doesn’t.”

“You’re lying,” I said. “Not even Professor Schleiermacher could do this without pain.”

“What we tell you cannot be a lie.”

“Do you hate me?” I asked.

“Should I love you?”

I did not answer. One does not expect gratitude. Yet I’d walked my feet off before I could cajole them into letting me have the headlamps and allowing me to borrow the instruments from the veterinary clinic. A drop of sweat sprang out from under my hair and rolled down my temple and face. Haas gave a cry of pain.

I ought to have found the appendix by then. On Laci’s belly, above the cut, lay the sterilized sheet. I put the bowels on it in apple-pie order. But now my hand stopped.

“Who do you think I’m siding with?” I spoke with irritation, because I was again seized by that internal trembling. “Who’s holding the baby for you? Who’s hiding the chaps with gangrene? How many times have I put you on the sick list, Ligeti? And you, Maurer? Go on, answer me!”

Ligeti was grinning. Maurer was breathing heavily down my neck. I could feel the hot steam of his breath. I could have killed him.

“Is what I’m doing betrayal? And what you’re doing not?”

“It is not,” Laci said.

“Not even your reciting at the social?”

“We can do anything,” he said.

“Why can you do anything?”

“Because we’re going to die anyway,” Laci said.

The room was overheated. Everything on me was drenched through, my neck, shirt, hand. I mopped my forehead with my arm.

“Don’t be glad too soon,” I said. “You’re not going to die. I’ll find your appendix in a

moment.”

“Congratulations!”

“I’d already read all the fourth year text-books in my first year.”

“It’s a pity, all that cramming wasted,” he said.

“I didn’t think about how much I’d earn,” I said. “I wanted to be a country doctor.”

“Cut out the talk,” he said. “Operate.”

Now and again he gave cries of pain, although I took care, because I knew that if I didn’t, they would be right. The minutes dragged on, very slowly. Maurer still gaped at me with those paralytic eyes of his.

The bowels were already lying in a big heap placed on top of each other.

“You haven’t found it?” Laci asked.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said, “I’ll find it.”

“Don’t make it a question of prestige.”

“Do you want to get better or not?”

“Idiot,” he said and closed his eyes.

The trembling had completely taken possession of me.

Schleiermacher had lectured to the fourth year; I had never got as far as that. But his famous sayings were known to everybody at the university. This one, for instance:

“Gentlemen, the appendix does not float about like the kidney. The appendix is always in its right place, you only have to find it.” I didn’t. I had to call Ligeti to help hold the bowels together, when Laci’s head slid to one side.

“Finished,” Ligeti said.

He turned on his heels and was about to leave everything; he only returned to his place when I shouted after him. The pulse was regular but weak, weaker than it should have been. I had no camphor. I had no caffeine. I told Maurer to prop up the patient’s head and throw water on his face.

He let the forceps slip. It was torture to see how he picked up the jug from the ground; it seemed as if this was the first time he’d taken anything in his hands. Then he poured a little water into a tin cup, looking at me every now and then in the meantime, which only made his snail’s pace still slower.

“Quick!” I shouted at him.

He started to move with the cup in his hand but no faster than before. He crossed the room as though his feet were entangled in sea-weed. He bent over Laci. He looked into his face. He looked at him, then at me, at him, at me again. If he’d looked at me once more I’d have gone mad.

“Don’t stare like that, you miserable fool!” I shouted. “You’ll kill him if you waste time like that!”

He stood there stock still. A dim-witted wretch like him needs time before the voice reaches his brain. He stared at me, turned, went over to the jug dragging his feet, and poured the water back into it. He placed the cup back in its place on the shelf, in exactly the same place he had taken it from, going through these actions like a trained gorilla. Then he came over to me.

“Put the bowels back,” he said.

“What are you saying?”

“Put the bowels back and sew the cut together.”

“You beast,” I said. “What do you know about it? You dim-witted, stupid bastard, you crack-brained monkey! You idiot!”

His face didn’t as much as move a muscle. The insults had not penetrated his ear-drums.

“Sew him up,” he repeated with the same impassive voice, and lifted his hairy-backed

hand.

I backed away. He came after me. A prehistoric mammal, a beast rearing on its hind legs, a Neanderthal male. He had been standing there behind my back while I had been working and felt his hot breath down my neck.

The stove began to pour out heat. The sweat trickled down my neck. The pine-wood smell from the warm walls was so strong it seemed as if the wood had come into the room. I sewed the cut together. My father had wanted me to be a doctor. He had said: "Not only because a doctor can make a livelihood wherever his fate takes him, but also because the work of a doctor is noble and honourable. He serves the good of mankind."