

"An Apology for Living"

NORMAN COUSINS

FRANKFURT, GERMANY.
I MET her in Germany and instantly fell in love. She was uncommonly pretty, with dancing brown eyes, a beguiling smile that charmed me right out of my wits, and a disconcerting way of squeezing my hand when I spoke. I knew from the instant I saw her I was hooked.

It happened quite by accident. I entered the room without knocking, for Dr. Lomask had told me it was empty. She was sitting by the window, braiding her long, dark hair. I began a stammering and apologetic retreat, but before I was halfway through the door she had quickly and nimbly crossed the room to my side. She insisted upon my staying, and when I started to explain how sorry I was for having intruded she laughed at my awkwardness. She took me by the hand, squeezing it as she led me across the room, and sat me down facing her. Then she smiled at me again while she resumed her attentions to her coiffure.

Suddenly my collar became over-tight. I determined to mobilize at least some semblance of *savoir-faire*, but it was no use. Before I could even get my squirming finger out of my collar, she was examining me very carefully, her appraising eyes rolling over me like a steamroller on soft asphalt and with comparable effect.

Apparently I had passed muster, for she came over to me, placed herself on my lap, then put one arm around my neck and took my hand in hers.

"My name is Brisca," she said. "What's yours? Are you married? What are you doing here? Can you spend the afternoon with me? Will you have dinner with us tonight?"

All at once! I struggled for air. And again Brisca added to my disintegration by laughing freely at my obvious embarrassment, while tightening her grip around my neck. Right then and there, I knew I was a goner. I knew, too, that whatever our relations might be in future, I would have the subordinate role.

"Can't you speak?" she asked

sternly. "I can speak four languages—English, German, Polish, Russian.

"I learned the languages in three concentration camps during the war," she went on. "Look, this tattoo mark on my arm was my number at Buchenwald. This one on my leg came from Oranienburg. I've got two other tattoo marks. We were moved to different camps."

I gasped. You see, my charming companion with the dancing brown eyes, lovely little Brisca, was a girl of perhaps six or seven, one of several hundred children at the displaced-persons camp in the center of the historic city of Bad Nauheim, in the American zone of Germany. Almost all these children, like Brisca, had known nothing of the world except what they had seen at concentration camps and D.P. centers. Many had miraculously survived the ordeal of birth at Buchenwald or Dachau or other camps. And many of them, like Brisca, had never seen their parents; the gas chambers at Majdanek had claimed most of them.

I spent almost two hours that afternoon with little Brisca as my guide,



—Joint Distribution Committee.

"... soup again for supper, sometimes with a spoonful of meat."

exploring the camp and talking to people who lived there. But I am getting ahead of my story. Perhaps I ought to explain how it was I happened to be in Bad Nauheim in the first place. I was a member of a citizen's committee which had come to Germany at the invitation of General Lucius D. Clay, the American Military Governor. Our job—Arthur Garfield Hays's, Roger Baldwin's, and mine—was to examine and make recommendations relating to German democratization in general and civil liberties in particular. The survey was to cover both American military administration and German civil government.

ONE aspect of the survey involved the centers for displaced persons. As part of my own work, I visited all the D.P. camps in the Frankfurt military post area, there being a dozen military posts in all in the American zone. The camp at Bad Nauheim was my last stop. I had previously visited the camp at Hanau, "home" of some 5,500 Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians who had no particular anxiety to return to their lands while the Soviet was in control; Zeilsheim, a center for almost 3,000 Jewish displaced persons, and Butzbach, a departure camp for about 1,300 D.P.'s of all nationalities lucky enough to gain admission to other countries.

I was especially anxious to see the camp at Bad Nauheim because I had heard somewhere that conditions there were worse than anywhere else in the Frankfurt military post area. Frankly, I had wondered whether the camps I had seen at Hanau, Zeilsheim, and Butzbach might not have been somewhat in the nature of unrepresentative display-case pieces, for I had been pleasantly surprised to find them not "camps" so much as communities. They were not roped off or separated in any way inside the cities of which they were a part but were, rather, neighborhoods in which the residents could circulate and intermingle freely in

the city itself. Once a week or once a month there was a roll-call, but no daily check-in. People were permitted and encouraged to work in the cities, if they were lucky enough to find jobs. The camp supervisory staff and police were either drawn or elected from among the D.P.'s themselves. In Hanau, for example, the head of the camp was elected by popular vote; his job was not nominal but actually the top administrative position. Similarly, the hospital was staffed by D.P. doctors, nurses, and attendants, the schools by D.P. teachers, and so on. All work connected with the upkeep was done by D.P.'s, who received regular salaries.

THIS did not mean that Hanau or Zeilsheim or Butzbach were what one might call a vacation paradise. "Freedom of movement" would never have enough meaning unless it also meant freedom of exit. Living conditions were heartbreaking. Sometimes six or eight persons had to share a room not larger than an average-sized American kitchen. This had to serve as a combined bedroom, living room, and kitchen. In one room I counted seven "beds" placed so closely together that you would have to climb into them from the ends. The "beds" at Hanau consisted of thin mattresses placed over wooden boards about two feet off the floor. Camp food was so meager and monotonous as to be shocking to an American accustomed to the luxury of leftovers.

It might be said parenthetically, however, that these deplorable living conditions were not peculiar to the camps but reflected in large measure the crisis in food and housing throughout Germany today. The official calorie

rate for both Germans and D.P.'s runs to 2,000 per day, but supplements (food bought on the outside or brought in by D.P.'s themselves—with the full approval of the authorities) add up in many cases to a better all-round diet for D.P.'s than for many Germans.

In any event, what I had seen at Zeilsheim, Hanau, and Butzbach—even giving full weight to the seriousness of the food and housing problem—was a far cry from the picture I had had of a slightly modified version of a concentration camp enclosed by barbed wire and patrolled by armed guards. When I heard, therefore, that the D.P. camp at Bad Nauheim came much closer to fitting the popular conception, I lost no time in making the trip. This time I decided to visit the camp without notifying the military in advance, for I was anxious to avoid any intimation that a semi-official inspection party might arrive, as well as to eliminate any possibility of a guided tour. In fairness to the military, however, it should be said that I was given complete freedom of travel and inspection anywhere in the American zone of Germany. The car placed at my disposal was without restrictions, although I was advised against the feasibility of sightseeing in the Soviet zone.

With an old German road map as a guide, I started out one morning for Bad Nauheim, about forty miles from Frankfurt. It was the longest forty miles I had ever traveled by car in my life, requiring about three and a half hours over some of the bumpiest and narrowest roads I had seen anywhere, not excluding those of my home town in Norwalk, Conn. Many links in the road had been bombed out during the war and had yet to be

repaired. Later I learned to my great despair that I had been using an obsolete road map, for a four-laned concrete Autobahn highway, in perfect repair, ran directly from Frankfurt to within a half mile of Bad Nauheim.

SEEING the city of Bad Nauheim after living in Frankfurt and Berlin was like wandering into a garden in full flower after a lifetime of wasteland. Bad Nauheim is a postcard manufacturer's paradise; like Heidelberg, it was undamaged by the war and derives its beauty from the combination of gorgeous natural setting, steep, cobblestoned streets, and old German architecture. And because Bad Nauheim was unbombed, its people were better housed, healthier, and seemed to be going somewhere in particular when they walked through the streets—unlike Berlin, where people seemed aimless, walking out of memory rather than purpose.

The D.P. camp at Bad Nauheim was located directly in the heart of the city, but, even after asking half a dozen persons for directions, I had difficulty in finding it. The reason, it developed, was simple. The "camp" was no camp at all but a community; in fact, it could hardly be called a community for it was not located in a single area with a single group of buildings, but spread around the center of the city, with houses here and there.

I discovered this fact only after I spotted a synagogue, walked up the steps, and tried the door, which was locked. A neatly-dressed man came over and asked whether I would like to go inside. I said yes and thanked him. He went away to get the key. While he was gone, I examined the building. It couldn't have been more than a year or two old. It had clean, unornamented lines, with just a suggestion of classical Near-Eastern architecture. The doors were freshly painted and the grounds well kept.

When the gentleman returned, he brought with him not only a key but three other men. All four introduced themselves as D.P.'s who were either the community or religious leaders. One of them was a doctor, who acted as my interpreter. We went inside the synagogue, and I could see at once that it would do credit to any American community: it was small but impressive, and there was no mistaking the pride with which one of the men drew back the curtain and showed me the holy scroll.

Dr. Lomask told me that the synagogue was less than three years old and that it was the gift of the American Army.

"Your soldiers—you call them GI's,



To replace wooden, all-purpose boxes at displaced-persons camps, skilled D.P. carpenters fashion more comfortable chairs, tables, and beds. In some of the D.P. centers throughout the American zone in Germany inmates have built their own homes.

no?—they built this church for us. For many of us, the GI's were our first hello to America, and we will never forget them."

In the basement of the synagogue were two meeting rooms. In one of them, prominently tacked on the wall, were large posters over the names of various governments. Dr. Lomask surprised me by saying that many nations competed with each other in inviting the D.P.'s to emigrate to their countries. There were posters from Belgium, The Netherlands, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina.

"But it is not as good as it seems," Dr. Lomask said. "Most of the countries want only young, strong men without families. This is a nice poster from Belgium, but they want only men who will work in the mines. England is very good. She will take families and the old ones too. Canada and Australia will take families. But they are already taking more than their share and can't take them all. Most of the other countries are looking only for young labor."

"If the people here had complete freedom of choice, with assurance that the nations would accept families and the old ones," I asked, "which country would they pick?"

"Until a little while ago, most of them wanted to go to America. They had heard so much about it, and they were very much moved when the American soldiers built them the synagogue. But America would not take us. Even then we waited. But then we heard that America passes a law to take in many D.P.'s but there is something in the law that says our people cannot go there.

"And now everyone wants to go to Palestine. Each week some more are leaving. Last week eleven left. Next week nine will go. My friend here, Dorach, is going next month. It is the only thing. There is nothing else. It is not that we think we would not make good citizens for America or other places. But can we go where they will not take us? We can bring our families and the old ones to Palestine, and we can work. It will not be easy because there will be many different peoples who came there long before us, and we will have to try to find a place for ourselves. Work. It is the main thing. The men here talk about it all the time. They are afraid they have forgotten their trades. But they will be all right again when they have work to do. That is what they want more than almost anything else.

"We know there will be great trouble in Palestine. After the Arabs, there will be much internal disorder. Many different factions. We are worried about the Stern gang and the



—Illustrations from Joint Distribution Committee.

Only one out of ten Jewish children in Europe survived Nazi extermination. They now total 182,000, of whom 138,000 are provided food and clothing under the Joint Distribution Committee's health program.

Irgun. We shall have to cope with them whatever way we can."

We left the synagogue and began walking over towards some of the houses which had been taken over for D.P.'s. I asked Dr. Lomask to tell me about himself.

HE was Polish and the sole survivor of a family of five. Two of his three children, both of them girls, had died in concentration camps, one of tuberculosis, the other of pneumonia. His wife and young son were exterminated in the gas chambers at Majdanek.

I could see that Dr. Lomask was scrutinizing me closely.

"It is all right," he said. "You can ask it. Everyone else does. You want to know how it is I am living and my family is dead. All of us here in Bad Nauheim have been asked that question so many times that we have—what do you call it?—a guilty conscience for being alive. That is not it exactly. I mean a 'guilt complex'; yes, that is it, we have a guilt complex because we are alive. We almost feel that we have to apologize for living.

"No one knows what he really is until something very terrible happens. You know they are coming for you and your family. You know they are coming to kill you. Then you go out of your mind with terror. You do what you can to save your family. You love your family. There is no question about that. But then somehow you find yourself trying to escape. There is only room for one. And then there is the nightmare of being an animal, of throwing away values that should be more important than life itself. And after it is over, after you

find yourself alive and the others are dead, you have no mind left, you have only a body struggling to stay alive when there is no reason to be alive.

"I know. It happened to me."

He paused, lit his pipe, and puffed very slowly as we walked.

"I can see it in your eyes," he said.

"You don't like what I tell you. You condemn it. You condemn me—us. I ask you please to believe we are not different from other people, no different from you or your friends or anyone you love, and I pray to God that nothing will ever happen to you or to anyone ever again to prove I am right.

"You think self-respect, conscience, pride ought to see one through? You are right—at first. In the first few months of the concentration camp you stand up under the beatings and the kickings—the kickings with the high, hard boots. Even the foul stuff they give you for food doesn't whip you—at first. But day after day it continues. Day after day whittling you down like a piece of wood. And little by little they whittle off your pride and self-respect, till you get to thinking that maybe they are right, maybe you are what they say you are, a stupid animal who must grovel and whine for the favor of being kept alive.

"After a year or two of this, after you see how cheap life can be—cheaper than rats, because at least rats have people to live off and we had nothing—after you see your own children die and other children die, so many of them, you find it hard to know when it happened and how it happened—after all this, you're no longer a person. What is left? I find it hard to remember. I remember only that by that time you live with the primitive

instinct of an animal, getting by from one day to the next, and you do what you have to do, you lie, you cheat, you steal, you bribe, you turn on your friends.

"And when you hear that they are planning to kill you and your family and you know that this is the end of everything, one would suppose you would say, 'Thank God, now it is over,' but you don't. You scheme and whine and crawl on your belly, and you try to get out of it even though you know your family can't. Sometimes I ask myself, 'Who was it that acted like that, so craven and deceitful? Was it me? Was it man as God made him or was it man as man remade him?'"

I had been watching Dr. Lomask as he spoke. He was about fifty, of better than average height, but his stoop made him seem shorter and less thin than he actually was. His face was pale and gray, with little contrast against his rapidly graying hair. He had humility without weakness in his manner and carriage, and there was about him an air of great gentility and quiet dignity. He was soft-spoken, and I had the feeling that he spoke slowly and carefully not only because English was not his native tongue but because that was his accustomed way of speaking.

And yet, as I looked at him, I was puzzled and disturbed. I found it difficult to picture him as he had pictured himself. I couldn't reconcile this genteel, self-effacing man with the image that came to mind as he spoke.

"Dr. Lomask," I said with some hesitation, "I know that I have no right to ask this, but what you tell me has moved me so deeply that I am anxious to find out whether you have been able to recover from the shock of those years. Have you been able to recapture your earlier values or ideas about life? Have you been able to unmake, to use your own words, the man that man remade?"

He smiled. "You mean there have been two Dr. Lomasks, and you want to know which one I am now. Maybe neither. Maybe there is a third Dr. Lomask. Maybe the third Dr. Lomask is part of the first and part of the second but mostly part of something new.

"What I mean is that life starts up again, and it is never the same. Even the deepest wounds in the soul have a way of healing over. Little by little, the new problems and new opportunities create a new world, and before very long the ugly things are memories. But mostly it is the things you do. When you have to take care of other people, and you know these people trust you and need you, you start

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The Laugh's on You

RUSSELL MALONEY

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The accompanying article is perhaps the last written by Russell Maloney before his death September 4, 1948. It will be included in a book of essays on writing from The Saturday Review, to be published sometime next spring by Longmans Green.*

SIXTEEN years ago—to spare you the arithmetic, it was the year known by the sinister name of 1932—a young man was lumpishly sitting, one early summer evening, on the porch of a house in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. He was brooding over the fact that, within a very few days, he was to be graduated from Harvard. He would soon need a job. A job? Ridiculous! Even people who were not Harvard graduates were having difficulty getting jobs.

This young man had in his lap a copy of the *Boston Traveler*, folded to the comic page. (Don't skip any of this, it's important.) Also to be found on the comic page was a gossip column conducted by an ornament of Boston journalism named Neal O'Hara. Buried in O'Hara's column that day was an item to the effect that *The New Yorker* magazine sometimes paid contributors for jokes to be illustrated by Peter Arno, Helen Hokinson, James Thurber, and other artists in their stable.

Something stirred within the torpid brain of that young man; that very day, in the local lending library, he had overheard a little scene which seemed to be right up Miss Hokinson's alley—the lady who ran the lending library remarking, as she handed over a hefty volume to one of her clients, "Now, don't take this too literally—

It's symbolic." A feeble enough situation, a mild line. Perfectly true; and yet, in that dreadful summer of 1932, it was worth seven dollars of *The New Yorker's* money when I submitted it.

That casual set of coincidences changed my life. If Neal O'Hara had not happened to hear that *The New Yorker* bought drawing ideas from outsiders, if he had not printed it, if I had not happened to read the item, if I had not that very day happened to overhear something that I thought was funny—any single break in this fragile chain of coincidence could have had but one result. I would have had to go out and work for my living. As it was, I became a professional humorist: specifically, a gag-man. Within a year, I was earning a tidy living selling ideas for cartoonists. I lived at home for a year or so; and if there were any other gag-men in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, at that time, I did not meet them. And yet, thus isolated, I worked out all the time-honored tricks of the professional humorist.

THE first joke I sold was something I had overheard and had spontaneously laughed at. The second, and the hundred-and-second, and the thousand-and-second, were manufactured, and I didn't laugh. Well, that was all right, I suppose; after all, a lawyer doesn't chuckle over his briefs, nor a surgeon at his operating table. Surgeon, lawyer, humorist—they're all doing a job. It isn't the discovery that writing jokes is a job that hurts; it's the discovery that it's nothing *but* a job. To state it a flossier way, all writing involves technique, but humorous writing is all technique.

Further, it's a standardized technique. Any laugh-getting enterprise, from the pawky whimsies of J. M. Barrie to the sub-human antics of Abbott and Costello, is based upon one trick—the building up of an emotion, and the acceptable release of that emotion. I say "that emotion," because I don't know what it is; I suspect that it's plain, old-fashioned hostility. Not hostility against any known enemy, but hostility against the very conditions of modern life. Life today is one subtle frustration after another, and there is nobody to punch in the nose. Consider a traffic jam, for instance; whom do you hate? You are

