

ARMY

OF SHADOWS

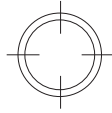


JOSEPH KESSEL

*It has not been my foolish ambition to give a full-scale picture of the Resistance. All I have been able to do has been to lift one corner of the veil and afford a glimpse of the throbbing life and the suffering in the midst of the battle.*

JOSEPH KESSEL.

*London, Kinnerton Studio.*  
September 8, 1943.



**JOSEPH KESSEL**

**ARMY  
OF SHADOWS**

TRANSLATED BY  
**RAINER J. HANSHE**

INTRODUCTION BY  
**STUART KENDALL**



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# INTRODUCTION

## WHEN FACT BECOMES LEGEND

STUART KENDALL

Plato famously proposed banning poets from his ideal Republic. Poetry and the arts in general offer nothing but imitations of the things of the world, he argued, and therefore serve no useful purpose. Worse, poetry might incite the passions and spread fear and delusion among those who can least endure such things. Plato: "If he believes in the reality of the underworld and its terrors, do you think that any man will be fearless of death and in battle will prefer death to defeat and slavery?" Rather, if there are to be tales of death, let the poets praise it, he says, among those who would be warriors.<sup>1</sup> Plato's points are well taken. Real factual or philosophical understanding rarely motivates action. Poetry on the other hand excels at just such an incitement. How then might literary or poetic works best be used to motivate or incite action? What in short might be an effective politics of poetry?

Joseph Kessel's *Army of Shadows* offers a potent example. As a portrait of resistance in France during World War Two, it was written to serve essentially propagandistic purposes, to help, in its way, the Free French win the war. But the book proposes neither a hymn to the gods nor a simple or straightforward celebration of "good men", of the kind that might have appealed to Plato. Rather, the occasionally bewildering space Kessel explores is simultaneously that of moral outrage and moral compromise. Moreover, Kessel presents the book as both factual and, in a curious way, fictional, as a work of literature. The book, in short, embodies many things at once, held often in uneasy balance. Reading it now, almost 75 years after it was written, presents further problems, though also new opportunities for reflection on these themes.

Anglophone literature has no one quite like Joseph Kessel: a writer as well-known for his contributions to the front pages of newspapers as for his novels, whose works were equally successful with critics and readers. The popular success of his writing assured his financial security though he was equally as devoted to spending money as to earning it. Indeed, Kessel, commonly known as Jef, was almost as famous for his appetites as for his artistic achievements. One of his biographers, Yves Courrière, once witnessed him consume twenty-seven scotches in six hours. The man lost vast sums in casinos; smoked opium for years with, among others, his close friend, Jean Cocteau; & passed his nights bouncing between wives



and lovers. A natural raconteur and *bon vivant*, Kessel was a colossus of narrative energy and raw life bursting off the page; his biography seems stitched together from extraordinary events and impossible chance encounters. His books — almost always topical bestsellers of moral and political import — also inspired a few enduring cinematic masterpieces of his century — *Army of Shadows*, certainly, but also *Belle de Jour* — while his dialogue for *Mayerling* (directed by his friend Anatole Litvak) helped launch the career of Charles Boyer and thereby too, Kessel's own career writing for film. But Kessel's very success spoiled him for some critics, who never quite took him seriously, even as he was nominated for and perhaps begrudgingly admitted to the high temple of French *belles lettres*, the prestigious Académie Française in 1962. The previous year he had covered — along with Hannah Arendt & other reporters addressing the conscience of the world — the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem for *France-Soir*. At the center of it all, his writing: some eighty books — novels, stories, biographies, memoirs, and of course short & long-form journalism — bear his name. Kessel's life as a journalist, novelist, traveler, adventurer, and public spectacle bridged many spheres, while being at once symptomatic or representative of many faces of modernity, as a clash of civilizations, media, and mores.

Three cultures came together in Kessel's formation: French, Russian, and Jewish; each tangled in contradiction and tempered by a restlessly cosmopolitan regard for humanity. Jewish in the time of modern, cosmopolitan emancipation;

Russian in the time of Soviet hegemony and the exile of dissent; French in the time — chronicled in *Army of Shadows* — of international conflict & the political collapse of France itself, the epoch wherein France became a contentious idea rather than an actual territory, a moral entity rather than a political one and when even that — faced with the self-inflicted wounds of colonialism — faltered.

The author's father, Chmouel Kessel, was born to Orthodox Jewish parents in Lithuania in 1866. He came to France in 1885 to study medicine, first in Paris, later in Montpellier. As part of the process of assimilation, he changed his name to Samuel. The author's mother, Raïssa, was Russian, from Orenbourg, and passionate about theater, though she too came west to study medicine, first in Geneva, then in Montpellier, where she and Samuel met. They married in Orenbourg in 1895 and emigrated to Argentina in 1896, under the continued sponsorship of Baron Maurice de Hirsch, who previously paid for Samuel's medical studies. Joseph Kessel was born in Argentina on January 31, 1898. The family did not, however, stay in South America for long. The following year they moved, first to Orenbourg and then, discovering that Samuel's French medical certificates were invalid in Russia, back to France by 1901. Nevertheless, within four years, they would return to Russia again, Samuel having at this point completed medical studies recognized there. Though still a child, young Joseph absorbed the world of Russia during these years, its language, music, customs, and superstitions, as well as its modes of work and play. Throughout his life,

Kessel would always return to Russian restaurants and bars with their music and community in exile, as sources of relaxation, places he felt at home.

By 1908, however, the family was once again in France, this time in Nice, which better suited Samuel's health, damaged years earlier by tuberculosis. When they moved to Paris, in 1913, it was to provide access to the best schools for Kessel and his two younger brothers, Lazare (nicknamed Lola) and Georges. Kessel attended lycée Louis-le-Grand & later the Sorbonne, by which point he was deeply involved in literary and dramatic arts, writing and performing plays with his brother, Lola. In 1915, while still pursuing his license at the Sorbonne, Kessel began writing for *Journal des Débats*, primarily, at first, about Russia & related topics.

World War I accelerated rather than interrupted Kessel's life trajectory. Though a Russian national, he enlisted on the side of the French. With his diploma in hand, he was given a position as an officer in an aviation corps stationed outside of Rheims at the front. As a machine gunner, and while providing information for directing artillery, he discovered a love of flight that would persist throughout his life. Back at the barracks, amid the close community created by the shared dangers and traumas of combat, Kessel also indulged in two other passions that would become persistent and occasionally debilitating, those for drink and gambling. During the closing days of the war, Kessel volunteered to be part of a special, multinational squadron intended to back up the allied White Russian Army in its war in Europe and with the Bolsheviks,

from the rear, via Vladivostok. The mission began with a trip, by land, sea, and air, around the world, from France, across North America, from New York to San Francisco, to Hawai'i, Manila, on to Japan, and ultimately Russia. By chance, the war ended just as the aviators arrived in New York, turning their intended pressing military voyage into a victory tour, showered with the full gratitude — and thus also inevitably debauched revels — in each city they traversed. When Kessel finally reached Siberia, his knowledge of the Russian language led him to be drafted into an operation securing supply train wagons for an army of essentially marauding Cossacks. His eventual trip home took him through ports on the China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea. He smoked opium for the first time in Shanghai and met his first wife, Nadia-Alexandra Polizu-Michsunesti, known as Sandi, on the voyage.

Kessel would return again and again to his experiences during these few turbulent years as fecund sources for novels and stories. But the habits for excess he adopted during this period of almost relentless travel and adventure, as well as drink and drug-fueled excesses, would also continue to characterize his life for years to come. Toward the end of his life, Kessel looked back:

During a long period of my life that lasted almost forty years, I obeyed my instincts & my desires before everything else, in a sometimes excessive, sometimes too excessive way. With gambling, alcohol, with drugs,

it was the same. Life is the same thing. There's no pride or shame in it. I've always accepted the risks.<sup>2</sup>

Or again, as part of the same conversation:

This violent, imperious need to take risks to infringe upon norms, to push myself to the limits of every situation, as if to push back the limits of the impossible; I experienced this need that carried me to live the frenzy of the Russian bars, even to the point of delirium, when very young.<sup>3</sup>

More or less as soon as Kessel returned to France in 1919, the patterns and practices of his life were established. Rather than settle into the life of a university professor, as his parents hoped, Kessel picked up his nascent career as a journalist and writer, beginning where he left off with the *Journal des Débats*, but quickly moving on, publishing journalism, interviews, and stories in an ever widening range of newspapers and other publications as his contacts and reputation grew: *Le Mercure de France*, *La Liberté*, *Le Figaro*, *La Revue de France*, *Revue des deux mondes*, *Le Matin*, and many others. In the early and mid-1920s, alongside other topics and locales, Kessel covered both the Irish Civil War and the mounting unrest in Palestine, as well as continuing to write about Russia in the aftermath of the Revolution. His journalism became the enduring bedrock upon which he grounded his fiction. He saw himself as being part of a literary tradition

in which journalism & literary writing, as he said in an interview, “complete one another, [amp] are tightly linked. This is the line of Conrad, of Kipling, of Stevenson, of Jack London. And in fact, where does journalism begin, or end? How many writers undertake long inquiries before writing a novel? All of Zola is journalism.”<sup>4</sup> Graham Greene, George Orwell, and Ernest Hemingway are examples in Anglophone literature, from Kessel’s own generation, of journalist-writers. But whereas Hemingway, for one, often regarded his journalism as an impediment to his literary career and as profoundly secondary to it, Kessel embraced this aspect of his vocation and pursued it consistently. Throughout his life, Kessel went wherever the stories were; he sought them out in tragedies, revolutions, and wars. In 1956, he published the first three of what would ultimately be seven substantial volumes of his selected journalism under the title *Témoignage parmi les hommes* (Witness Among Men), but his bibliography also includes many other volumes of long-form journalism & biography as well.

Already in the early 1920s, when covering the Irish Civil War, Kessel had a strong sense of the moral purpose of reporting. Clear-headed & carefully observed journalism provides a necessary check on the potential delusions of political fanatics, whether on the left or the right.

If a journalist is investigating passionate & often fanatical partisans, the responsibility of casting doubt on some of their affirmations enters into his job.

Good faith is not in question here, but the instinct for measure and a sense of precision. The effects of anger, of suffering, of passion, of blind support transmitted from father to son, the secular hatreds that feed the blood, ultimately the need, even unconscious, for propaganda, all of those inner forces come together to distort vision, to throw judgment off balance, and thereby to prevent a just appreciation of facts and actions.<sup>5</sup>

Kessel's journalism gave him topics but it also gave him techniques to use in his fiction. His journalistic style is nevertheless unlikely to be even recognizable as journalism to readers, particularly Anglophone readers, today. The author's voice and perspective is too present even as the stories themselves typically offer snapshots *in medias res*, often almost rushing past, close enough to the action to be caught up in it. Whether in Ireland or Israel, Germany, Spain, Syria, Morocco, Hollywood, Kenya, or Afghanistan, or for that matter many other places around the globe, Kessel stays almost impossibly, even myopically close to individual people and their perspectives on the events that engulf and too often overwhelm them. He has an instinct and an ear for a good story, and, once heard, he knows how to tell one too; a feeling for the drama of situation, psychology, and telling detail. His journalism provides the facts from which one might gain a knowing perspective on current events rather than statements of that perspective itself. He doesn't tell his reader what to think, he places his reader in the emotional space of the drama.

As Yves Courrière put it in one among many memorable phrases, in his journalism, Kessel always put “people before politics, portraits before analysis, stories before History.”<sup>6</sup> The pieces endure as deeply moving rushes cut from an abandoned film of his age. Though informative, these pieces still presented only fragments of the world. Kessel would use his literary writings, his stories and novels, to fill out those fragments in the form of character driven narratives.

This too began in the early 1920s, when he distilled his experiences as an aviator at the front into his first great literary success, *L'Équipage* (The Crew, 1923)<sup>7</sup>, and the lessons learned from his coverage of the Irish Civil War into the novella *Mary de Cork* (1925). Gaston Gallimard, the founder of the eponymous publishing house, discovered Kessel's writing the way so many other readers did, in the pages of newspapers & magazines. He wrote to the author in 1922 & began an editorial relationship that would endure — with a break during the German occupation — until Kessel's death fifty-seven years later. With Gallimard as his publisher, the daily press as his platform, & his own irrepressible habits as a *bon vivant*, Kessel quickly developed deep & lasting friendships with the French literary establishment; fellow writers like Jean Cocteau, Raymond Radiguet (until his early death), & Colette were his companions from the early 1920s, though his circle expanded exponentially over the years.

Kessel came of age as a novelist in the 1920s alongside other popular literary writers of travel and adventure, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry & André Malraux perhaps most notably.



He would eventually befriend both of them. In terms of influence, alongside the literary journalists mentioned above, Kessel frequently listed among his inspirations the great Russian novelists, Dostoyevsky & Tolstoy, which he read in Russian, as well as Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, and the works of Malraux; finally Shakespeare, "the immense, the prodigious Shakespeare. He makes me dizzy with humility."<sup>8</sup> All of these influences testify to Kessel's interest in both popular success and serious intent, both of which certainly characterize his work.

The popular success of Kessel's books as well as their themes and settings of dramatic action all but inevitably invited their filmic adaptation. Seventeen films have been based on his works to date. *Belle de Jour* (dir. Louis Buñuel, 1966) and *Army of Shadows* (dir. Jean-Pierre Melville, 1969) are undoubtedly the most enduring, but Kessel's novel *L'Équipage* has been filmed three times. Kessel's own work in film began in 1935 when he started working with Anatole Litvak on the dialogue for the second film version of *L'Équipage*. As a result of that success, he travelled to Hollywood with Litvak in the late 1930s and continued to write for film — & later television — until the 1970s, penning scenarios & dialogue for feature films and narration for the documentaries that grew out of his work as a journalist.

Following his coverage of Russia in the aftermath of the revolution, the Irish Civil War, and the crisis in Palestine, it was all but inevitable that Kessel would chronicle the rise of Nazi Fascism in his journalism as well as treating the

subject in a novel, *La Passante du Sans-Souci* (The Carefree Stroller, 1936), the story of a cabaret singer who falls into a life of drinking, drugs, and prostitution while attempting to support the man that she loves, a publisher placed in a concentration camp by the Nazi regime. He also covered the General Strike in Spain in 1934 and the Spanish Civil War in 1938. At the opposite pole of the political spectrum, since he was steeped in Russian traditional culture and close to the Russian exile community in Paris, it is unsurprising that Kessel did not embrace communism when it was fashionable for many members of his generation to do so. When the *Congrès international des écrivains* assembled in Paris in June 1935, Kessel stood apart. Yves Courrière describes Kessel as “too individualistic”<sup>9</sup> to be caught up in politics at the time, though perhaps more rightly Kessel’s political stance should be understood, like his journalism, as rooted in his feeling for people rather than parties, and ultimately characterized as a politics of friendship. Nevertheless, though in keeping with this interpretation, as some members of the far right in France drifted into anti-Semitism, Kessel broke several close and long-standing friendships, including, most significantly, for him, with publishers, editors, and journalists like Henri Béraud & Horace de Carbuccia, whom he had known and worked with for many years.

In September 1939, when the Second World War began, Kessel, at the age of 41, returned to enlisted service. Given his vocation, his assignment was to continue his work as a journalist in uniform, as a war correspondent for *Paris-Soir*.

Pushing the bounds of his responsibility beyond the limits set by the military authorities, Kessel worked his way to the front line during the phony war and, nine months later, during the actual invasion, he again worked his way to the front, to be among the first to report the locations of the German troops as they swept through Champagne toward the capital. Through his contacts he was one of the only journalists permitted to make his way to Dunkirk during the flotilla that accompanied the catastrophic retreat of the French & British forces.

As France fell to the invading army, Kessel gathered his wife, Katia, and children, his mistress, Germaine, and his aging mother, Raïssa (his father had died of a heart attack in 1931, leaving Kessel as head of the family) to strategize about their future as Jews in occupied France. As a recognized and recognizably famous reporter and novelist who had already painted the Nazis in print with the most unflattering brush, Kessel wasn't likely to be safe in occupied Paris. His brother Georges was living in Hollywood at the time and encouraged Kessel to bring the family across the Atlantic, if not to Hollywood, at least to New York. Raïssa was too old to fear the Germans enough to flee. Kessel's longtime mistress, Germaine, went south, while Kessel & Katia initially fled to Lisbon for a few months, considering their options. Ultimately Katia would return to Paris with the children to look after their home while Kessel, after the armistice, would report for demobilization in Perpignan, in Vichy, and from there go to Marseille to support himself writing for the regional edition

of *Paris-Soir*. His books, like those of other Jews & political commentators, had been banned by the Nazis in September 1940 as part of the Otto list.

Why did Kessel return to France? His triple heritage — French, Russian, Jewish — as well as his cosmopolitan love for travel might suggest that he could have easily joined the exodus of intellectuals & others who sought safety — and possibly a new kind of adventure — in New York or another foreign land. In 1952, during a radio interview with Dominique Fabre, Kessel explained:

It was in 1940. As a war correspondent, I followed the retreat, the rout, the exodus on all the roads. And while passing through the countryside of Champagne, of Ile-de-France, of the Loire, and while thinking that those marvelous landscapes were soon going to be stomped by German troops, I cried for whole hours and I understood that France was my true country since I could not imagine that I could cry either for Russia or for Palestine.<sup>10</sup>

He wrote to his brother while still in Lisbon, “I am certain that I would be less unhappy hungry & cold and even afraid, persecuted in France, than comfortably settled in an apartment in New York or a house in Hollywood.”<sup>11</sup>

These statements testify to Kessel’s love for his country without exactly explaining what that country meant to him, what he saw as being at stake in the fall and occupation of France. Kessel’s Russian-Jewish heritage affords another way

to approach this question. Kessel's parents, both Jewish, migrated to France from Russia, each independently, in search of civil freedoms, civil rights they did not possess in Russia. And they found those freedoms in France. Kessel's father had come from an orthodox family & been intended by his mother for the Rabbinate, though his secular interests lead him not only away from religious vocation but also away from his homeland altogether. Kessel's mother had come from an area in southern Russia that had been deeply scarred by a series of increasingly brutal pogroms in the 1880s. Her own ambition had been to pursue a career in the theater, but that ambition had been crushed by Russian race laws and by the anti-Semitism of the theatrical community in Moscow. She too found refuge & freedom in France. Other members of the larger Russian community in exile, some Jewish, many others not, also fled to France from Russia following the Russian Revolution & the bloody civil war that followed it. These migrants too fled persecution and found freedom in France. And yet French society itself was — & remains — far from settled in regard to the presence of Jewish and other minority populations in its midst. Kessel's parents arrived in France just prior to the Dreyfus Affair. In that light it is unsurprising that they might have initially welcomed the opportunity to help found a Jewish community in Argentina or have returned to Russia for several crucial years during Kessel's youth. Those options were effectively the same options Kessel himself contemplated decades later when he considered his own French identity during World War Two.

## PREFACE

*There is no propaganda and there is no fiction in this book. No detail has been forced, and none have been invented. You will find collected here, without formality and sometimes even randomly, only authentic, proven, verified, and thus commonplace facts. The current events of French life.*

*The sources are numerous and trustworthy. For the characters, the situations, the most naked suffering and the simplest courage, there was then a tragic embarrassment of choices. In these conditions the task seemed much easier.*

*Yet, of all the works that I have written in the course of an already long life, there is not one that has demanded of me as many sorrows as this one. And none left me as discontented.*

*I wanted to say so much and I said so little.*

---

*Safety was naturally the first obstacle. Those who want to write about the resistance without romanticism & without ever resorting to the imagination are chained by their civic duties. It is not*

that novels or poetry appear less true than stories bound to reality. I rather believe the contrary. But we live in complete horror, in the midst of bloodshed. I don't feel that I have the right or the strength to supersede the simplicity of the chronicle, the humility of the document.

It was then necessary that in approach everything had to be precise & highly scrupulous. A single false color risked giving a Saint-Sulpician tone to the paintings of the sacred struggle.

Everything needed to be precise &, at the same time, nothing must be recognizable.

Because of the enemy, its informers, its minions, it was necessary to disguise faces, to uproot people and plant them elsewhere, mixing episodes, constraining voices, separating links, concealing the secrets of attack and defense.

One could speak freely then only of the dead (when they had neither family nor friends who were endangered) or of stories that are so familiar in France that they reveal nothing to anyone.

Are the tracks well entangled, effaced? Will no one recognize this or that person? Such is the fear that continually suspended or hindered my hand. And when it had been appeased, when I thought I had taken every required precaution, another anxiety was born. I asked myself then: "Am I still being truthful? Had I found just equivalents when transposing origins, habits, professions, familial relations and feelings?" For an act no longer has the same character, the same value, or the same meaning, if it is accomplished by a rich or a poor person, a bachelor or a father of six, an old man or a young girl.

*And when I believed I had almost succeeded in this substitution, I was seized by a bitter sadness. There was nothing left of this man, of this woman whom I loved, whom I admired, whose life or death I wanted to recount in their name, with their true face. So I tried to at least reproduce the sound of laughter, the quality of a gaze, or the whisper of a voice.*

---

*Such was the first difficulty. Obviously. And so that's to say of a material kind. But the obvious and material inconveniences are never the heaviest to bear. Another torment had pursued me while I was writing these pages. It had nothing to do with safety requirements. It was of a personal nature.*

*Without any false modesty, I had constantly felt my inferiority, my misery as a writer before the profound heart of this book, before the image and the spirit of the great, wonderful mystery that is the French Resistance.*

*Is there a writer who, in trying to paint a landscape, a light, a character or a destiny, has not suffered an assault of despair? Who does not feel unfaithful to the colors of nature, to the essence of light? Above or below the human being? Close to the thread of fate?*

*What, then, when it comes to recounting the story of France, an obscure, secret France, which is new to its friends, its enemies, & new especially to itself?*

*France no longer has bread, wine, fire. But mainly it no longer has any laws. Civil disobedience, individual or organized rebellion,*



*have become duties to the fatherland. The national hero is the clandestine man, the outlaw.*

*Nothing about the order imposed by the enemy and by the Marshal is valid. Nothing counts. Nothing is true any more. One changes home, name, every day. Officials and police officers are helping insurgents. One finds accomplices even in ministries. Prisons, getaways, tortures, bombings, scuffles. One dies & kills as if it's natural.*

*France lives, bleeds, in all its depths. It is toward the shadow that its true and unknown face is turned. In the catacombs of revolt, people create their own light and find their own law.*

*Never has France waged a nobler and more beautiful war than in the basements where it prints its free newspapers, in its nocturnal lands, and in its secret coves where it received its free friends and from where its free children set out, in torture cells where, despite tongs, red-hot pins, & crushed bones, the French died as free men.*

*Everything that one will read herein has been lived by the people of France.*

*My sole wish is to not have rendered their image with too much infidelity.*

# 1

## THE ESCAPE

It was raining. The armored car advanced & slowly descended the slippery road that followed the curves of the hills. Gerbier was alone in the interior of the car with a gendarme. Another gendarme was driving. The one who was guarding Gerbier had the cheeks of a farmer and a rather strong odor.

As the car turned into a side road, the gendarme observed:

— We make a little detour, but I don't think you're in a hurry.

— Truly not, said Gerbier, with a half-smile.

The armored car stopped before an isolated farm.

Gerbier saw, through the barred window, a bit of the sky and a field. He heard the driver get out.

— It won't be long, said the gendarme. My partner is going to get some provisions. You have to manage as you can in these times of misery.

— It's only natural, said Gerbier.

The gendarme gazed at his prisoner and nodded his head. He was a well-dressed man and he had a frank manner, a comely face. What times of misery ... He wasn't the first whom the gendarme was embarrassed to see in handcuffs.

— You won't be too badly off in the camp! said the gendarme. I'm not talking about the food, of course. Before the war the dogs would've gone for want. But aside from that, it's the best concentration camp in France, so they say. It's the German camp.

— I don't catch your drift, said Gerbier.

— During the phony war, we expected, I think, to have many prisoners, the gendarme explained. We had set up a big center for them in the country. Naturally not a single one came. But today, it's put to good use.

— In short, a lucky shot, Gerbier remarked.

— As you say, Monsieur, as you say! exclaimed the gendarme.

The driver returned to his seat. The armored car went off again. The rain continued to fall on the Limousin countryside.

---

Gerbier, his hands free, but standing at attention, was waiting for the camp commandant to address him. The commandant was reading Gerbier's dossier. Sometimes, he would dig the thumb of his left hand into the hollow of his cheek and slowly withdraw it. The fat, soft, and unhealthy flesh kept the white imprint a few seconds & again swelled painfully like an old sponge devoid of elasticity. This movement marked the tempo of the commandant's reflections.

"Always the same thing," he thought. "We don't know who we receive, nor how to treat them."

He sighed at the memory of the pre-war, and the time when he was a prison warden. He only had to be prudent about profits made on food. Nothing else presented any difficulty. The prisoners ranked themselves into known categories and each corresponded to a code of conduct. Now, on the contrary, one could get as big a cut of camp rations (nobody worried), but it was a headache to separate the populace. Some who arrived without judgments or sentences remained indefinitely imprisoned. Others, with terrible records, got out very quickly and regained influence in the department, the regional prefecture, or even at Vichy.

The commandant didn't look at Gerbier. He had given up making opinions based on faces and clothing. He was trying to read between the lines, in the police notes that the gendarmes gave him when they delivered their prisoner.

"Independent character, quick mind; remote and ironic," read the commandant. And he translated: "to subdue." Then: "Distinguished Bridge & Highway Engineer," and, his thumb in his cheek, the commandant said: "to spare."

"Suspected of Gaullist activities" — "to subdue, to subdue." — But then: "Released for lack of evidence" — "influence, influence ... to spare."

The commandant sank his thumb deeper into his adipose flesh. It seemed to Gerbier that the cheek would never return to its normal condition. However, the edema gradually disappeared. Then the commandant declared with a certain solemnity:

— I'll put you in a building that was intended for German officers.

— I am very sensitive to this honor, said Gerbier.

For the first time the commandant directed his heavy & vague gaze — that of a man who eats too much — toward the face of his new prisoner.

The prisoner was smiling, but only half way — his lips were thin and contracted.

“To spare, certainly,” thought the camp commandant, “but to spare with wariness.”

The quartermaster gave Gerbier sabots & a red cloth blouson.

— This was intended, he began, for the prisoners ...

— The Germans, I know, said Gerbier.

He took off his clothes, put on the short blouson. Then, at the doorstep of the shop, he scanned the camp with his eyes. It was a flush, grassy field around which the undulations of the uninhabited terrain came together & separated. Rain was still falling from the low sky. Evening was approaching. The rings of barbed wire and the patrol path that separated them were already harshly lit. But the unequally sized buildings scattered across the field remained dark. Gerbier walked toward one of the smallest of them.

The barrack harbored five red blousons.

The colonel, the pharmacist, and the traveling salesman,

sitting like Turks near the door, were playing dominos with pieces of cardboard on the back of a mess tin. The two other prisoners were in the back talking in low voices.

Armél was stretched out on his straw mattress and wrapped in the sole blanket that was granted to the internees. Legrain had spread his over him, but it didn't keep Armél from shivering. He had still lost a lot of blood during the afternoon. His blond hair was matted with sweat from a fever. His fleshless face bore an expression of a rather confined but inalterable sweetness.

— I assure you, Roger, I assure you that if you could only have faith, you wouldn't be unhappy, because you'd no longer be so rebellious, murmured Armél.

— But I want to be, I want to, said Legrain.

He clenched his thin fists and a sort of hissing emerged from his collapsed chest. He resumed with furor:

— You came here, you were twenty, I was seventeen. We were healthy, we did harm to no one, we only wanted to live. Look at us today. And what's happening all around! That such exists and that there's a God, I cannot understand it.

Armél had shut his eyes. His features were as if worn away by an inner fatigue and a growing shadow.

— It's only with God that everything becomes comprehensible, he answered.

Armél and Legrain were among the camp's first internees. And Legrain had no other friend in the world. He wanted to do everything to ensure the recovery of this bloodless and angelic figure. It inspired him with tenderness and mercy,

his sole bonds with men. But there was in him an even stronger feeling — and inflexible — which prevented him from consenting to Armel's murmuring.

— No. I cannot believe in God, he said. It's too convenient for those bastards to pay in the next world. I want to see justice on this earth. I want ...

The movement at the doorway of the barrack stopped Legrain. A new blouson had just entered.

— My name is Philippe Gerbier, said the new arrival.

Colonel Jarret du Plessis, Aubert the pharmacist, and Octave Bonnafous, the traveling salesman, introduced themselves one after the other.

— I don't know, Monsieur, what brings you here, said the colonel.

— I don't know either, said Gerbier half smiling.

— But I want you to know right away why I was interned, continued the colonel. I had declared in a café that Admiral Darlan was a Jack Fool. Yes.

The colonel made a rather emphatic pause and continued strongly:

— Today, I add that Marshal Pétain is another Jack Fool who lets soldiers be bullied by sailors. Yes!

— At least you suffer for an idea, colonel! exclaimed the traveling salesman. But me, for my work, I simply passed by a square where there was a Gaullist demonstration ...

— And me, interrupted Aubert the pharmacist, it's even worse for me.

He abruptly asked Gerbier:

— Do you know what a Malher shell is?

— No, said Gerbier.

— That general ignorance has killed me, replied Aubert. The Malher shell, Monsieur, is a container in the shape of an ogival mold, meant to produce chemical reactions under pressure. I'm an expert chemist, Monsieur. I couldn't help but have a Malher shell, after all. I'd been denounced for possessing shells. I could never make myself heard by the authorities.

— There are no authorities, there are only Jack Fools! Yes, said the colonel, they discontinued my pension.

Gerbier realized that he would hear these stories a hundred times. With extreme politesse he asked where the place was that he was to occupy in the barrack. The colonel, who was functioning as the barrack master, pointed to a free straw mattress in the back. When carrying his suitcase there, Gerbier approached his other companions. He held out his hand to Legrain. He gave his name and said:

— Communist.

— Already? asked Gerbier.

Legrain blushed deep red and replied very quickly:

— I was too young to have my party card, that's right, but it's the same thing. I was arrested with my father and other militants. The others were sent elsewhere. Here, it seems, life was too sweet for them. I asked to go with them, but they wouldn't let me.

— Long ago? Gerbier asked again.

— Immediately after the armistice.

— That makes for close to a year, said Gerbier.



— I'm the oldest in the camp, said Legrain.

— The most longstanding, Gerbier corrected, smiling.

— After me, it's Armel, Legrain said ... The young teacher who's lying down.

— He's sleeping? asked Gerbier.

— No, he's very ill, Legrain murmured. A bad case of dysentery.

— And the infirmary? asked Gerbier.

— There's no room, said Legrain.

At their feet a gentle, exhausted voice spoke.

— To die, anywhere is good enough.

— Why are you here? Gerbier asked, leaning over Armel.

— I swore that I would never be able to teach children hatred of the Jews and the Brits, said the teacher, without strength enough to open his eyes.

Gerbier stood up. He showed no emotion. Only his lips turned a slightly darker color.

Gerbier put his suitcase at the head of the straw mattress assigned to him. The barrack was completely devoid of furniture and accessories, except, in the center, the inevitable latrine bucket for the night.

— That was all that was necessary for the German officers, who never came, said the colonel. But the warden and the guards helped themselves and the rest went from the barracks to the black market.

— Do you play dominos? the pharmacist asked Gerbier.

— No, sorry, he said.

— We can teach you, the traveling salesman proposed.

— Thank you, a thousand times, but I really don't have the least disposition for it, said Gerbier.

— Then you'll excuse us, exclaimed the colonel. There's just enough time for a game, before night falls.

The darkness came. Roll was called. The doors were shut. There was no light in the barrack. Legrain's breathing was wheezy and oppressed. In his corner, the little delirious teacher hardly made a sound. Gerbier thought: "The camp commandant isn't so inept. He stifles me between three idiots & two lost children."

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The next day, when Legrain left the barracks, it was raining. Despite this, and despite the freshness of the April morning air on a field exposed to the winds, Gerbier, naked in his sabots and with a towel around his waist, did his exercises. His body was of a matte color, its consistency dry and hard. His muscles weren't visible, but their united, compact mobility evoked the sensation of a difficult to carve block of stone. Legrain considered those movements with sadness. Merely deep breathing made his lungs whistle like a hollow bladder ... Gerbier shouted between two exercises:

— Already out walking!

— I'm going to the camp power plant, said Legrain. I work there.

Gerbier finished flexing & approached Legrain.

— A good job? he asked him.

A deep red flush came over Legrain's sunken cheeks. It was, at times, the only trace of his great youth. For the rest, the deprivations, confinement, and especially the constant fatigue of a heavy and haunting inner revolt, had aged his face and his demeanor terribly.

— I don't even get a crust of bread for my work, said Legrain. But I love the job and I don't want to lose the touch. And that's all there is to it.

Gerbier's aquiline nose was very slender at the bridge. Because of this, his eyes seemed very close together. When Gerbier looked at someone attentively, as he did at this moment with Legrain, his eternal half-smile became fixed in a severe fold, and it was as if his eyes melted into a single black fire. As Gerbier remained silent, Legrain turned on his sabots. Gerbier said softly:

— Goodbye, comrade.

Legrain wheeled round and faced him with such abruptness that it was as if he had been burned.

— You're ... you're ... a communist, he stammered.

— No, I'm not a communist, said Gerbier.

He let a second pass and added with a smile:

— But that doesn't prevent me from having comrades.

Gerbier tightened his towel around his waist & resumed his exercises. Legrain's red blouson slowly faded out on the rainy field.

In the afternoon, when the sky cleared up a bit, Gerbier made a round of the camp. It took him several hours. The field was immense and entirely occupied by the city of internees. One could see that it had grown in a disorderedly manner, in fits & starts, and as Vichy's orders progressively drained the ever-growing population of captives toward this high stretch of bare ground. In the middle was the original nucleus that from the beginning had been built for German prisoners. Its buildings were decent and solid. The penitentiary administration offices were set up in the best of them. Then wooden, corrugated iron and tarred barracks ranged as far as the eye could see. It resembled the leprous zones that surround great cities. It had taken space, again more space, always more space.

For foreigners. For traffickers. For Freemasons. For Kabyles. For opponents of the Legion. For Jews. For peasant deserters. For gypsies. For former convicts. For political suspects. For those of suspicious intent. For those who embarrassed the government. For those they feared would influence the people. For those who had been denounced without proof. For those who had served their sentences and whom they would not set free. For those whom the judges refused to condemn, to judge, & who were punished for their innocence ...

There were hundreds of men who were taken from their families, from their work, from their cities, from their truths, and herded into camps for an indeterminate period on the simple decision of officials, like wrecks on a muddy beach beyond the range of the sea.

To guard those men whose legions daily increased, they had need of yet other men, who grew ever more numerous. They had been recruited randomly, in haste, from among the dregs of the unemployed, the good-for-nothings, alcoholics, degenerates. For uniforms, they had their wretched clothes, a beret, and an armband. They were very poorly paid. Those outcasts suddenly had power. They showed themselves to be fierce. They made money out of everything: starvation rations were halved, tobacco, soap, toiletries, basic items — they sold everything at outrageous prices. Corruption was the sole thing that had any effect on these guards.

During his walk Gerbier was able to win over two procurers. He also exchanged some words with internees lying in front of their barracks. He had the feeling of approaching a kind of mold, of reddish mushrooms in human form. Those undernourished people, floating & shivering in their blousons, unemployed, unshaven, unwashed, had vacant and empty eyes and limp mouths with no elasticity. Gerbier thought that this complete neglect was natural. Real insurgents, when they were taken, were usually held in deep and silent prisons, or handed over to the Gestapo. Even in this camp there were no doubt a few resolute men who did not yield to deterioration. But it would take time to identify them, in the midst of this immense flock, broken by adversity. Gerbier remembered Legrain, his exhausted but unyielding face, his courageous, emaciated shoulders. Yet it was he who had spent the greatest number of months in the retting trough.

Gerbier walked toward the power station that was located among the central buildings, known in the camp as the German quarter.

As he closed in on it, Gerbier crossed a file of skeletal Kabyles pushing wheelbarrows loaded with garbage cans. They moved very slowly. Their wrists seemed on the verge of breaking. Their heads were too heavy for their emaciated, birdlike necks. One of them stumbled and his wheelbarrow toppled, overturning the garbage can. Peelings, sordid remains, scattered on the ground. Before Gerbier knew what was happening, he saw a kind of mute, rabid horde panic, throw itself on the waste. Then he saw another horde come running. The guards started beating them with their fists, their feet, cudgels, coshes. First they struck to establish order and out of duty. But they quickly took pleasure in it and throttled away as if intoxicated. They aimed at fragile & vulnerable areas — stomachs, kidneys, livers, sex organs. They abandoned their victims only when they had become inanimate.

Gerbier suddenly heard Legrain's muffled & wheezing voice.

— It makes me crazy to think that we went searching for those wretches and took them from their homes in Africa. They were told of France, beautiful France, and of the Marshal, the good grandfather. They were promised ten francs a day; at the construction sites they only got half of that. They asked why. Then they were sent here. They croak like flies. And when they haven't had time to croak, this is what happens ...

Breathless, Legrain coughed a long hollow cough.

— All debts will be paid, said Gerbier.

His half-smile was at this moment one of extreme acuity. Most people felt discomfort when this expression passed over Gerbier's features. But it inspired great confidence in Legrain.

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Toward the middle of May, beautiful weather began to take hold for good. Late spring burst forth all at once in full strength. Thousands of small flowers shot up in the grass of the field. The internees began to take sunbaths. Sharp hipbones, protruding ribs, flaccid skin, arms reduced to the form of bones rested among all the fresh flowers. Gerbier, who roamed the field all day long, constantly collided with this hospital humanity stunned by spring. No one could tell if he felt disgust, pity, or indifference for it. He himself didn't know. But when, at midday, he saw Legrain exposing himself like others to the heat, Gerbier quickly went to him.

— Don't do that, and cover yourself right away, he said.

Since Legrain didn't obey, Gerbier threw a blouson over the young man's pitiful torso.

— I hear you whistling and coughing in your sleep, said Gerbier. You surely have something in your lungs. The sun is very dangerous for you.

Gerbier had never seemed interested in Legrain more than in the pharmacist or the colonel of their barrack.

— You don't look like a doctor, said Legrain with astonishment.

— And I'm not, said Gerbier, but I oversaw the installation of a power line in Savoy. There were tuberculosis institutions there. I used to talk with the doctors.

Legrain's eyes lit up. He exclaimed:

— You're in electricity?

— Like you, said Gerbier cheerfully.

— Oh no! I see that you're a master of the trade, said Legrain. But we could talk shop all the same.

Legrain was afraid to appear indiscreet and added:

— From time to time.

— Immediately, if you want, said Gerbier.

— He lay down near Legrain and while chewing blades of grass and flower stems, listened to the young man talk about the electrical station where he worked.

— Would you like me to take you there? Legrain finally asked.

Gerbier saw a rudimentary but solid station run with knowledge and distinction. Gerbier also saw Legrain's assistant. He was an old Austrian engineer, of Jewish origin. He had fled from Vienna to Prague and from Prague to France. He was very timid. He tried to make himself as small as possible. After so many adversities & fears, he seemed satisfied with his fate.

---

The estimation that Gerbier had made of this man allowed him to appreciate the entire magnitude of a scene that unfolded some time later.



A Gestapo car stopped before the entrance to the concentration camp. The gates were lifted. Some guards in berets and with armbands mounted the running boards and the grey car rolled slowly toward the German quarter. When it had come close to the power plant, an S.S. officer stepped out and motioned to the guards to follow him inside the building. It was sunbathing time. Many prisoners approached the car. The uniformed driver was smoking a cigar and blowing smoke through the nostrils of his wide, flat nose. He did not look at the bay of emaciated, half-naked, and silent men. Amid the silence, there was a scream, and another, and again another. Then they merged into a single lamentation, which was very close to the plaint of an animal. The half-naked men started to panic. But the fascination for horror was stronger in them than fear. They waited. The guards dragged a white haired man out of the building. The old engineer was struggling, still shouting. Suddenly he saw the bay of half-naked, silent, and pale men. He began to utter broken words. Only a few phrases were distinguishable: "French soil ... French government ... free zone ... asylum ..."

Gerbier, who at first kept at a distance from the spectators, didn't notice that he was approaching them, crossing the last row, crossing the next, that he was reaching the first, that he was still advancing. A trembling and warm hand landed on his wrist. Gerbier's body suddenly relaxed and his eyes lost their fixed expression.

— Thank you, he said to Legrain.

Gerbier breathed very hard. After that he looked, with a kind of avid hatred, at how the guards threw the old engineer into the car, and how the driver continued to blow smoke rings through his wide nostrils.

— Thank you, Gerbier said again.

He smiled at Legrain with that half-smile, where the eyes had no part.

That evening, in the barrack, Legrain wanted to speak of the incident but Gerbier avoided all conversation. It was the same the following days. Besides, Armel the teacher grew sicker and sicker and Legrain had no other thought but for his friend.

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The young teacher died one night with no more than his usual delirium. Early in the morning some Kabyles took his body away. Legrain went to work. The day passed and he behaved no differently than the day before. When he returned to the barrack, the colonel, the pharmacist, and the traveling salesman stopped playing dominoes and wanted to console him.

— I'm not sad, said Legrain. Armel is better off that way.

Gerbier said nothing to Legrain. He gave him the pack of cigarettes that he had bought from a guard in the afternoon. Legrain smoked three in quick succession, despite his exhausting cough. Night came. Roll call was made. The doors shut. The colonel, the traveling salesman, and the pharmacist went to sleep one after another. Legrain seemed peaceful. Gerbier fell asleep in turn.

He was awakened by a familiar noise. Legrain coughing. Gerbier could not yet manage to go back to sleep. He listened more attentively. And he understood — Legrain was forcing himself to cough to stifle the sputtering of his sobs. Gerbier searched for Legrain's hand & said to him in a very low voice:

— I'm here, old man.

Not a sound is made, nothing more is heard for several seconds from the place where Legrain's straw mattress was. "He's fighting for his dignity," thought Gerbier. He had guessed rightly. But Legrain was a child all the same. Gerbier suddenly felt a weightless body and small bony shoulders contract against him. He heard a barely audible groan.

— I have no one in the world ... Armel has left me. He is perhaps with his good God now. He believed so strongly. But me, I cannot see him there ... I don't believe it, Monsieur Gerbier ... I beg your pardon ... but I can't continue. I've no one in the world. Talk to me from time to time, Monsieur Gerbier, will you?

Gerbier then whispered into Legrain's ear:

— We never let down a comrade of ours in the resistance.

Legrain had become silent.

— The resistance. You hear? Gerbier said again. You sleep with that word in your head. It's the most beautiful, in this time, in the whole French language. You can't know of it. It was made while they were destroying you here. Sleep, I promise to tell you about it.

Gerbier accompanied Legrain to his job. They walked slowly and Gerbier was speaking:

— You understand, they've come in their tanks, with their empty eyes. They thought that their tank treads were made to trace the new law of peoples. Since they had manufactured many tanks, they had the assurance of having been born to write this law. They have a horror of freedom, of thinking. Their true war aim is the death of the thinking man, of the free man. They want to exterminate everyone who doesn't have empty eyes. In France they had found people who had the same interests and those people have gone into their service. And they put you here to rot, you who had not yet even begun to live. They caused the death of young Armel. You saw them hand over the poor guy who believed in the right of asylum. At the same time they announced that the conqueror was magnanimous. A foul old man tried to suborn the country. "Be wise, be acquiescent," he taught. "Forget that you have been proud, joyous, and free. Obey and smile at the victor. It will allow you to get by peacefully." The people who surrounded the old man were calculating that France was gullible and that it was soft. It is the country of measure and of balance. "France is so civilized, so weakened, they thought, it has lost the meaning of underground warfare and of secret death. If she accepts it, she will fall asleep. And in her sleep, we will put her eyes out." And they thought again: "We do not fear extremists. They have no connections. They have no weapons. And we have all the German divisions to defend us." While they were rejoicing then, the resistance was born.



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