

My Ghosts

G. G. Vandagriff

WHEN I WAS TWENTY and dewy-eyed, I visited Auschwitz. I found ghosts there. The red bricks of the camp were gritty with the black soot which was all that remained of four million people, gassed and burned a few brief years before I was born. Standing in those gas chambers, I felt a vast, gray bleakness. When I saw the ovens and chimneys, the seven tons of human hair shaved from dead Jewesses, and the lampshades made of human skin, the ghosts were thick around me. Then my violated psyche rebelled, trying to distance itself from the evidence of such pure, undiluted evil.

With my ghosts, I returned to my student hotel in once-leveled Warsaw, took to my bed, and entered a fevered delirium which continued for five days. Twisting in sweaty sheets, I found no escape from the torments of my imagination. Unrelieved visions of horror wove themselves around the sight and smell of Auschwitz, and ghosts screamed through my room. I could do nothing for them. At the end of the five days, emotionally and psychically exhausted, I realized that the ghosts were with me forever. I could live sanely in this world only if I understood why a thing such as Auschwitz had been allowed to happen.

It hadn't escaped me that the concentration camp had been carefully preserved, showcased as a grotesque jewel in the crown of Polish Communist propaganda. "This is the inevitable product of capitalism," it warned, "the culmination of decadent Western thought."

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And yet, no one had suffered at the hands of the Communists more than the Poles, Gentiles as well as Jews. Fresh revelations arrived yearly of more mass graves in the countryside—Stalinist atrocities committed for very little reason other than that hungry people are dangerous.

Where did safety lie in such a world? With my ghosts, I traveled back to the USA and Stanford and tried to make some sense of it all. For the next two years, I studied German history, German literature, German music, Russian history, Russian literature, Russian music. I studied Eastern Europe exhaustively—discovering endless minorities with distinct heritages and prejudices. My ghosts multiplied, taking on names, faces, lives, ambitions. I began to know them. And, irony of ironies, they were family. Genealogical research uncovered the astonishing fact that I descended from Prussian Germans intermarried with Polish Lutherans, and Russian Germans who had lived for two hundred years on the banks of the Volga. This wild mixture of thought, this chaos of ideas, existed in my own blood. I was half American, a quarter German/Pole, a quarter German/Russian.

My boyfriend, J.B., worked hard to balance all of this heavy thought with humor, tennis, and words of love. Together, we carved out a fragile niche of calm in a world rocked by assassinations, an escalating war in Vietnam, civil rights marches, anti-war protests, and psychedelic drugs. From that niche, we kept the world at a distance. Even my ghosts were, for the moment, appeased. My studies had housed them in history, a history I couldn't change, one that was over before I was born.

But the weekend we planned to announce our engagement, the world exploded in upon us. J.B., who was graduating, received his draft notice. The year was 1968. He would be going to Vietnam.

It wasn't as though we hadn't thought about the war, it was just that we hadn't thought it had anything to do with *us*. I had no moral problem with Vietnam. To me it was an outgrowth of that other war, the Just War, where we had put down the perpetrators of Auschwitz. We were Americans. We stood for decency, democracy, and an end to despotism. We were the avengers of evil.

J.B. didn't see it quite that way. He had doubts, even then. Not only that, but my sunny optimist had a strong premonition of death. He told me with strange certainty that he would not be coming back. Stunned and unbelieving, I tried to reason with him, but he was obdurate. He broke off our relationship and urged me to get on with my life. Without him. Then, knowing what he knew, he went to Vietnam.

On a dewy summer morning in 1969, I returned from a game of tennis to the news that J.B. had been hit in the head by flying shrap-

nel. At first, the injury had not seemed serious. He had even begun a letter home. Then, inexplicably he had lapsed into a coma.

The last time I saw J.B. was at the Presidio Veterans' Hospital in San Francisco. Curled in a fetal position, his fine physique withered, he looked like a shriveled child. Cradling him in my arms, I whispered, "I still love you, J.B. I will always love you." Tears streamed down his face, tearing at my heart, contorting his features with some private agony. I wondered if he heard me. Pierced by a pain too deep to prolong, I kissed his hands, his feet, his brow, and I left him.

It was three years before J.B. died. By then the war was over, the troops home. I had married. This last casualty of Vietnam was a final statistic. But by then I had a new ghost that roamed restlessly through my dreams, through my writing, through my family. It was not laid to rest by a visit to the black Memorial Wall, nor was it exorcised by therapy. No one could tell me why J.B. had died. There hadn't been an Auschwitz, a Hitler, or a Stalin. There was only a small Asian country torn asunder by the lusts of giants. At home, there was a government who had lied to us; who had kept feeding that lie with the bodies of boys. Now the boys were gone, and they weren't even heroes. No one seemed to understand about Vietnam.

Then one evening last January, while I was stirring spaghetti, my thirteen-year-old son ran to me, eyes shining. "Mom! The liberation of Kuwait has begun!" Blood roared into my head and exploded in the mother of all panic attacks. My ghost and I screamed "No!"

Caught up in the most exhaustive live news coverage in history, my family ate their spaghetti in front of the TV. I tried to eat mine in the dining room but soon gave up. Food didn't matter. The world had gone crazy again. People were going to die and I couldn't stop it.

About this time, my Auschwitz ghosts began to crawl out of the books where I had left them. Squaring off against my Vietnam ghost, they shouted over the explosions in Baghdad. "Remember Hitler?" they cried. "Remember Munich? Remember Poland, 1939? Remember the Battle of Britain?"

"But how do we know?" I agonized. "How do we know which scenario we are playing—1941 or 1967?"

Mercifully, two things soon became clear. George Bush was no Lyndon Johnson, and Norman Schwarzkopf appeared to be Joshua, Ike, and Winston Churchill rolled into one. My Auschwitz ghosts urged me to the TV set. They cheered, they flew the flag, they sported yellow ribbons. My Vietnam ghost was still wary. He watched one person, and that person was Saddam Hussein.

Saddam condemned himself. He could scarcely have done more to justify the war. With every move, he demonstrated his depravity, his

gross megalomania, and the hollowness of his bloody promises. Saddam's own troops kissed their captors' hands.

"We are dealing with basic issues of good and evil here," my Auschwitz ghosts insisted. And it did seem as though this was a different kind of war from J.B.'s. Not only was our enemy clearly an evil man, but gone was the helpless feeling of being enmeshed in a tangle of questionable motives, fuzzy objectives, and political high-handedness. It seemed as though the U.N. resolutions were going to be adhered to. There were daily, almost hourly, press briefings. The coalition was working amazingly well together, and it became evident that the military strategy was carefully conceived and brilliantly executed.

The thing which won us over in the end, however, was the fact that this war was a technical marvel. It was *not* a war of attrition, it was a war that counted the cost of each life. In the years since Vietnam, other people with ghosts similar to mine had not been idle. Soldiers like General Schwarzkopf and politicians like President Bush, equally haunted, had worked to revolutionize the military and its weaponry. Instead of grim body counts of nameless hundreds, we saw individual casualties reported on the nightly news. They were mourned, but not wasted.

J.B. began to hold up his head. J.B. even saluted. Twenty years have gone by, but at last he and all the others whose names scar that deep black Wall have been vindicated in a profound way. Our shame and anger over that earlier war kept us from making the same mistakes. We learned the right lessons from Vietnam. J.B. did not give his life in vain.

Though Desert Storm has brought a separate peace to us, none of my ghosts have left me. They will be ever present and ever vigilant—my own personal congress. In future conflicts, arguing from their own experience, they may once again take different sides. But that is as it should be, for there will be wars and rumors of wars for a long time to come, and I will need the benefit of their wisdom. There is, after all, only one Just War, and it goes on forever: the war between good and evil, the war for peace on earth.