ALSO BY LEO W. SCHWARZ

Three Translations
The Jewish Caravan
A Golden Treasury of Jewish Literature
Where Hope Lies
Memoirs of My People
The Root and the Bough

The Redeemers

A SAGA OF THE YEARS

1945-1952

By Leo W. Schwarz

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CHAPTER I

St. Ottilien: Theme for An Overture

SUNDAY, MAY 27, 1945—a rare Bavarian spring day, bright with glowing sunshine and cooled by gentle winds. The roof of St. Ottilien, peeking above the surrounding wall, gleamed in a golden cascade, but within life wore another aspect. Formerly a German lazeret, the monastery of St. Ottilien had been transformed in the past three weeks into a refuge for some four hundred Jews, liberated by the American troops at nearby Schwabenhausen and surrounding camps. On this sunny spring day, however, the routine of healing was interrupted by preparations for an afternoon concert and assembly. Some of the musicians—survivors of the famed ghetto orchestra of Kovno, Lithuania—had already arrived from Bad Toelz and mingled with the patients, greeting old friends with heartfelt embraces. Joyous anticipation momentarily dissolved the gloom and spread a saner outlook. All were loud in praise of their friend, Dr. Zalman Grinberg of Kovno, through whose initiative the hospital had been established, and who now arranged this first gala occasion.

II

Zalman Grinberg, aged thirty-three, a man of medium build with deep-set eyes and mobile features set off by smooth black hair—his head a veritable replica of ancestral portraits graven on ancient Egyptian monuments—was at his desk in the office of the Chief Physician. Though the vicissitudes of the war years had furrowed his very being, his personality remained a bright spark. Reared in a pious, cultured home, where reverence for Hebraic traditions was blended with a love of Zion, he had strong religious feelings and was conscientiously observant. Moreover, as a graduate of the University of Basel, he had acquired a solid background of Western culture as well as a sound medical training. He could express himself forcefully, and the necessity of assuming leadership at this time soon revealed a talent for political organization.

Looking over the notes for his address, it occurred to him that he

was, in effect, a stenographer of destiny. Only four weeks previously he had been a slave at Dachau, faced with the prospect of certain death. Now a free man, a healer of his people, he recalled the fate of millions of his brethren.

His mind wandered back to Kovno—the Sabbath peace of June 21, 1941—and the savage mobs of the days that followed. Scribbling on the backs of prescription blanks, he set down the particulars of his own odyssey from Kovno to Dachau.

The doctor paused. What about his wife? And his son, Immanuel, born in the ghetto and smuggled out in a potato sack into the custody of a friendly Lithuanian? Dared he hope?

The miracle of liberation suffused his being. Automatically he underscored two names among his jottings: Dr. Arnold (German) and Captain Raymond (American). These two were at the center of the swirling events that occupied his mind. Involuntarily he glanced out of the wide window in the direction of Schwabenhausen; then as he turned back to his desk, his pen moved like an electrocardiograph.

"The crowded boxcars, packed with four thousand evacuees from Dachau, stopped opposite a German military train. It was Friday morning, April 27. The SS guards warned us to stay inside, in case of bombing, then took to their heels and scattered in the nearby woods. Soon shells burst all around us. Disregarding orders, the sick and the healthy used their remaining strength to take cover in the woods. I ran along with my brother-in-law, a prayer on our lips, when we stumbled and fell beneath the outstretched branches of a tree. A man of profound faith, my brother-in-law admonished me to run no further.

" 'Every bomb and bullet has a name written on it,' he said. 'If we are to live, we'll be safe beneath this tree.'

"Abruptly the bombing ceased. We were alone . . . Then the agonizing cries of the wounded rose in the distance; once again, that day near Schwabenhausen, we had come within sight of eternity . . .

"Many of you here remember the hours that followed, when the dead were buried and the wounded gathered at the train. Suddenly, I heard the sound of prayer. In one of the boxcars, a group of men were greeting Queen Sabbath:

> Come, my beloved, to meet the Bride,
> Now welcome we the Sabbath tide.

> O wake thee, wake thee, people mine.
> Thy light is come—arise and shine:
> Awake and sing, for all can see
> The glory of the Lord on thee.

"Sabbath eve—Sabbath of Redemption: our tears must have reached the portals of heaven. Word had come that the Americans had taken Landsberg . . .

"The following day, a Wehrmacht soldier gave us three bottles of French cognac and directed us to a supply train stacked with clothing, food and cigarettes—enough for a whole division . . . Then, there was the disappearance of the SS guards . . . retreating lines of supermen . . . our impatience at the eleventh hour . . .

"Strength began to surge within us. A lad accompanied me on a mission to the Mayor of Schwabenhausen to ask for food and shelter, particularly for our sick and wounded. How strange that picturesque Bavarian town seemed to us! How terrifying to walk into the Mayor's office!

" 'The Americans will never enter this town!' the Mayor stormed. 'I'm ordering the Volksturm to put you and your sick aboard a train and ship you out at 2:00 P.M. Raus!'

"Disappointed but undismayed, we tried to induce the stationmaster to hold the train.

" 'Orders are orders. Only the Mayor can revoke them.'

"We turned back once more. As we approached the center of town, a woman on a bicycle flying a Red Cross flag dashed past us shouting, 'There are motorcycles on this road!'

"Hopefully, we re-entered the Mayor's office. The time on the belfry clock read 1:20; only forty minutes left.

" 'You still here?' the Mayor shouted.

"I grasped the edge of his desk for support, as I shot back, 'Herr Burgermeister, how would you like to swing from a tree this time tomorrow? The Americans are coming and all crimes will be punished.'

"Threat flared in his death's-head face. Then the Mayor cracked a smile. 'Gentlemen, please sit down and tell me what you wish.'

"I wrote the rescinding order for the train and an authorization for our people to enter the town and receive assistance. He signed the orders. The slaves of the morning had become the masters of the afternoon.

"The sick and wounded were brought into town on carts and

wheelbarrows, and we improvised a hospital in a large granary. Dr. Arnold, a German Catholic, donated his supply of drugs and medicine. He told me about the lazaret, some eight kilometers outside of Schwabenhausen.

"Despite the danger of cross fire on the road, we decided to call for ambulances. When the Medical Director of the lazaret refused Dr. Arnold's request, I took the phone and pressed him in the name of the Red Cross and the approaching American forces. He refused again, icily, saying that he had no orders from the American Military. Nevertheless, that night we slept peacefully—free men, for the first time."

III

"Sunday, April 29, was full of wonders.

" 'An American vehicle is in sight!'

"A dust-covered half-track came to a stop . . . out jumped a single soldier . . .

"From all sides, figures in soiled and tattered prisoners' garb ran to embrace him. This was no fantasy, but a man of flesh and blood—they kissed him and wept.

"And he, the Angel of Redemption—an American Negro—also wept, as he embraced the people, then took food, chocolate and cigarettes out of his kit and handed them out right and left. Shaking his fist in the direction of the retreating Germans, he seemed to be saying:

" 'Don't be afraid . . .'

"Just then, a squad of combat troops made their appearance, among them a Captain Deutsch of New York.

" 'Our troops must move on,' he said in fluent Yiddish. 'What can I do for you?'

"I had scarcely begun to tell him about our sick, when three ambulances bearing the markings of St. Ottilien Hospital drove up, and the German orderlies asked for the 'representative of the Red Cross.' The captain pointed to me and commanded them to obey my orders.

"We made several trips. Once, we were stopped on the road by American troops. Seeing the condition of our people, they ordered the Germans to line up against the wall and only consented to let them go after I had personally pleaded for them.

"At the hospital, I introduced myself to the Medical Director.

He looked me over from head to foot and began to berate me. I told him quietly that there were still several hundred wounded in Schwabenhausen . . .

"In the morning, the German doctor refused to allow us to bring in more patients. The hospital, he reminded me, fingering his pistol for added emphasis, was still under German authority.

" 'Maybe the Americans aren't coming after all . . .'

"I happened to look out the window that instant and saw an American jeep in the courtyard below. The Medical Director must have seen it, too, for all of a sudden he said, humbly:

" 'Herr Doktor, I am at your service . . .'

"The new arrival, Captain Otto B. Raymond, lost no time. He requested additional ambulances from the U.S. authorities, arrested the local Nazis and placed the German personnel under my supervision. At the same time, he ordered a military funeral with full honors for the first two of our people who had died at the hospital.

"Standing near the open graves, Captain Raymond turned to the Germans, hospital personnel, prisoners of war and monks, who had been commanded to attend.

" 'I brought you here,' he began in fluent German, 'not to do you evil as you have done to these people, but to say to you and all Germans: the men we now commit to the soil are perhaps the first happy Jews in all of liberated Europe. For they have been given a peaceful burial, according to the rites of their religion, denied to millions of their kin . . .' "

IV

Grinberg sat at a table at the north end of the garden. A neat pile of papers, covered with his clear handwriting, rose in front of him. The sun sinking toward the horizon still shed warmth on the buildings and the assembled audience. Behind him, the musicians were tuning up; it lacked just a few minutes of 4:30.

More than four hundred men and women, many still Dachau-striped, others in white-and-grey hospital dress, sat on chairs and benches, squatted on garden patches, or gathered around patients who had been brought out of the wards on their beds. Heads bobbed at open windows where those who could not be moved were placed so that they might see and hear.

The doctor had come to know them all. Nearly half were compatriots from the Lithuanian towns of Kovno, Shavel and Vilna; like

himself, they had been rescued from the final German action—the evacuation from Dachau to the Tyrol, ordered by Himmler on April 14 and thwarted by the irruption of Patton's Third and Patch's Seventh Armies. There, on the left, sat Rabbi Samuel Snieg, formerly Chief Chaplain of the Lithuanian Army and scholar of the famous but now extinct Slobodka Theological Seminary; behind him, Benesch Tkatsch, Kovno lawyer; on the left were the familiar faces of leaders of the ghetto, the jurist Dr. Samuel Gringauz, engineer Jacob Olieski, budding journalist Shalit. Others he had come to know in the course of his daily rounds. While scattered at the edge of the crowd stood groups of American, British and French soldiers, in their familiar high boots and melon-like helmets.

"We have met here today to celebrate our liberation," Grinberg was saying, "but it is a day of mourning as well. We are free, but we do not yet understand our freedom, probably because we are still in the shadow of the dead . . ."

He had touched the bewildering first cause of every one of the liberated at St. Ottilien, the sense of responsibility and remorse all survivors were experiencing.

"Let us rise in silence and commemorate our martyrs."

A cantor intoned the traditional prayer, "O God full of mercy who dwellest on high . . ."

Four minutes of trembling silence; then the musicians mounted the newly built platform.

The musical part of the program opened with a rendering of the national anthems of the United States, England, France and the Soviet, followed by lovely melodies from Bizet and Grieg's "Song of Solveig."

Then the first violin and conductor, Abrasha Stupel, led Henye Durmashkin to the front of the platform. Her presence had magic, as she stood in the light of the setting sun, her pale skin flushed, her eyes sparkling. She sang one of the most beloved songs of the Vilna ghetto, "I Long For Home."

The singer touched the folk consciousness in her audience; the audience wept; the musicians stopped playing.

The closing medley, composed of ghetto folksongs and Palestinian melodies, was familiar. The musicians rocked and swayed to the rhythms, as though they were themselves part of their instruments, and the audience responded like a congregation at prayer. Some began to hum; feet involuntarily moved in unison as the tempo quickened to marches and Palestinian horas.

The exhilaration was carried over to the collective singing of the Zionist anthem, Hatikvah, the Song of Hope, which brought the concert to an end.

V

Judged by ordinary standards, the events of that May afternoon at St. Ottilien would hardly appear extraordinary. But to Grinberg, as well as others in the audience, they symbolized a new spirit aborning. A feeling of brotherhood fed by shared sorrow and hope was slowly emerging. The concert was a symbol, an act of faith; a weathervane indicating that the instinct to live was stronger than any anguish or remorse.

Shortly after, this instinct asserted itself in a striking fashion as leaders from surrounding camps called on Grinberg, determined to make their voices heard. They composed a letter to their brethren in the United States, expressing surprise and disappointment that no representative had as yet appeared.

"We have had to help ourselves with our own poor strength," they declared. "Send us as speedily as possible lists of our brethren who have survived . . ." At the same time, Grinberg wrote another long letter, describing the origin of the St. Ottilien Hospital and the medical problems encountered. Through the good offices of a U. S. medical officer, who had been present at the concert, these letters reached their destination.

CHAPTER II

Across the Threshold

"THOSE sixty-one days of April and May," a liberated poet remarked in a reminiscent mood, "were our Genesis. A great chasm opened between the past and the future; though everything at the moment of liberation seemed strange, a hope seethed within