

From the Eyes of Art

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I began as a blank canvas but transformed into a collection of meticulously carefree paint strokes. As the product of an Expressionist, I do not look real, but what I represent could not be more authentic. My creator was a young Jewish man, fresh out of the Académie Colarossi, living in a lavish apartment in the heart of Vienna. I was the first work of art he created there, and he continued to make several other masterpieces over the years. From my perch on the wall, I watched him fall in love with a stunning woman, marry her, and welcome a baby boy into this world. The child grew into a bright man, quickly taking after his father's artistic interests. What once was a quiet apartment was now a full, loving home; it was an environment that a piece of art could never encapsulate. However, my rosy view soon grayed as nervous conversations between my creator and his wife arose.

Instead of playing jazz, the radio sputtered out the news about an *Anschluss*. Raucous crowds gathered in the streets, chanting "*Heil Hitler!*" My creator's family was petrified, and I sensed their urgency to escape. Suitcases were strewn across the living room as the mother folded clothes and linens. Even family heirlooms were gathered, and I wondered if they would move me from my trusty spot on the wall. Their preparation to flee was useless, however, as a forceful knock on the door sounded in the middle of the night. Reluctant footsteps followed, and my creator, as delicately as he had painted me, turned the doorknob. Three beastly looking *Schutzstaffel* officers awaited, practically foaming at the mouth. "*Juden?*" they asked, but everyone knew it was not a question. A reluctant nod from the family members ensued, and the officers lurched forward, grabbing them by their collars. The woman screamed while her son shushed her. This scuffle seemed to last for hours until everyone was finally out the door.

No one came back that night, or the next day, and I had a gut-wrenching feeling they were never going to. When the door finally opened, decorated officials walked in, smoking cigars and chuckling. They began rummaging through my family's belongings, snatching jewelry for their wives. One officer spotted me and sauntered over. Inches from the canvas, he growled, "*Entartete kunst.*" Degenerate Art? How am I degenerate? I am not the one who invaded and looted an innocent family's home. With a quick glance over his shoulder, the officer slipped me under his arm. Eventually, he tossed me into a dark room illuminated by a single candle. The SS officer cleared off a space on the wall across from the window, mumbling something about using me to fuel his hatred for the Jews. He said I was ugly and peculiar — a perfect display for how disgusting the Jews were. Despite how terrible his remarks were, they were nothing compared to my dread of what the window would reveal once the sun rose.

Thick smoke billowed into the air, accompanied by the melody of sirens and gunshots. There were miles of brick buildings and wire fences, and moping between them were ghastly figures. They were prisoners, hunched over in pain, hurrying to the courtyard where they stood at attention. Officers circled them like sharks pursuing their prey. One by one, they called out numbers as an official scanned the rows with a checklist in hand. When the prisoners were dismissed, they scurried away as the SS laughed at their pitiful appearance. Why Jews? Surely my creator's family did nothing terrible enough to end up here. How could anyone have so much malice for so many people?

The prisoners continued about their day, children huddled together while adults pushed wheelbarrows and dug pits. If they moved too slowly, they were beaten or shot. The SS officer returned to his office toward sundown, papers in hand and cigar in mouth. He cracked open the window, which released an unfathomable smell. It immediately struck me. The smoke was not

from fires; it was from a crematorium. These abominable officers were murdering and burning the Jews. They filled the wheelbarrows with limp, dead bodies and the pits were just mass graves for when the crematorium was full. I was disgusted and did not want to see any more, but I had no choice.

I watched the skeleton-like prisoners follow the same daily regime in the rain and snow. These frail figures looked so helpless, while the SS could not have looked more satisfied. I prayed none of the prisoners were my creator or his family, well aware they were probably out there somewhere. If they were here, I doubt I would have been able to recognize them. The prisoners were shadows of their original selves. The only part remaining were their souls, and even those were withering away. After roll call one morning, the officers made an unusual announcement. The prisoners were to march to a neighboring camp overnight and anyone unwell enough to make the trip would be left behind to perish. The officer burst through the office door, frantically gathering his belongings and shredding paperwork. He sprinted back out, forgetting about me. At nightfall, the prisoners lined up, many of them in rags for clothes and some with nothing on their feet. I had a feeling many of them would not make it through the night.

The next morning, shouting filled the air like usual, but the voices spoke a foreign language. Soldiers swarmed the courtyard, but instead of harming the remaining prisoners, they were helping them. The camp was liberated. I saw something in the prisoners that I had not seen since I was in my family's possession — hope. They were given food, clothes, and medical attention. The soldiers, with great concern, explored the camp. Some went into the buildings, while others filmed the prisoners. Many wept and gagged on the smell of the crematorium. A few of the foreigners broke into the office, rummaging through the officer's desk. Finding

nothing but scraps, they were pleased to catch sight of me. Before I knew it, they removed me from the wall and placed me into a burlap sack.

I was in disbelief when removed from the bag. Paintings that looked just like me lined an empty room. Hundreds of people shuffled in and out, but they were not like the prisoners. They had clothes, hair, and shoes. They had life left inside of them. Out of the thousands of people who would gaze at me for the following years, none of them were my owners I longed for, until one fateful day. The impenetrable stare of an old man caught my attention. His face lit up, and despite the wrinkles and gray hair, I recognized him as my creator's son. I wanted him to stand there forever, but eventually he left, tears in his eyes. I thought he would never come back like before, but I was mistaken. He returned many times, in fact, telling me what had happened while they were gone. My creator and his wife died in a ghetto, but the son persevered. He worked in the kitchen at a concentration camp, contributing his survival to the extra portions he stole. Once the Nazis were defeated, he traveled back to Vienna and began a career as an artist, just like his father. I saw so much of my creator in his son, and although life would never return to what it was, I was content with this ending. Not only could I see part of my old family, but I could enjoy the new ones who visited me in the museum.