

The Internationale

My only encounter with a survivor of Auschwitz was in the General Motors Truck assembly plant at Fremont. I was living in San Jose with a very specific mission within the Leninist sect to which I belonged. To develop “the work” in the auto industry. We were dreaming of radicalizing the United Auto Workers union & therefore really changing the political map. It was interesting and intimidating too. The work itself was so hard at first that for weeks all I could do was train my reflexes and sleep. The idea of being an “organizer” inside that machine seemed ridiculous. But eventually the job got easier to me and I made a few friends. As you can imagine, with the average age on swing shift about 24, there were some lively people there. And a wide cross-section too. There were quite a few proletarian scholars, guys who were putting themselves through college on the decent wages. And a sprinkling of radical-thinking folks who were reflective of the California underground in those heady days of the late Sixties.

There was a janitor near my station on The Line named Julius. He was in his fifties, a slight, dignified fellow with obvious depth. I must have said something left-wing in his presence because he seemed to create occasions where he & I might have a few minutes to talk on a break. He revealed that he had been in Auschwitz for over a year. Sometimes he wanted to tell a little about it. But mostly he wanted to engage me on doctrinal matters, interpretations of Lenin, political insight about Vietnam. A big issue then was nationalism. In Vietnam, was there any basis for South Vietnam as a nation? The Black Panthers had a cell group inside the factory and they provoked thoughts of nationality. Was there a “Black Nation” inside the USA? With rights of self-determination? Julius declared himself an Internationalist. He wasn’t a joiner, he didn’t think any of the left formations were healthy. But he really disagreed with all the nationalist rhetoric of the times. I was inclined to see it his way. We had some very good times furtively talking behind a pile of bumpers by the cafeteria.

His most convincing argument against nationhood wasn’t doctrinal. It was his story of how the Zionists were received in his Displaced Persons camp after the Liberation. I forget where his camp was located, but at some point in late 1945 a committee of Zionists showed up. They were touring the camps recruiting people to go to Palestine. He said the majority feeling in the camp was to the left. There was a deep distrust of political scheming and rhetorical excess...and the Zionist representatives unfortunately hit all those notes. Julius said that he found himself yelling out against them, interrupting the speech. Many others too had this reaction. They felt their minds were being taken for granted, they were being viewed as a raw material for someone’s hot new megalomaniac scheme. He felt desperate to assert independent thought, to disagree. The main feeling in that camp was that the world’s nations were the problem. To create another one, to take the Jews out of the milieu in which they had lived for centuries was almost to have given in to the Nazi cleansing programme. Julius argued that if any theory could be said to have been ‘mandated’ by their experience in Auschwitz, it was that they should go back amongst the peoples and cities they had come from, as seeds of the truth. That there had to be a revolutionary change in the world’s business. National identity and pride was in fact at the root of the War & its crimes. He said that at the end of the meeting, the camp erupted in a singing of The Internationale.

As a young leftist I was shivering with emotion when he told that story; I felt it reified everything I wanted to believe. I felt too that Julius in telling it was carrying out that mission that he saw in 1945. He was not in Palestine, he was there in Fremont of all places, pushing a broom, surviving... & once in a while planting a seed. I quit the Left thirty years ago, and many things I accepted as true at that time have dissolved under scrutiny. But I’m still an internationalist. I still think Julius was right.