clogged with wrecked or abandoned vehicles and dying horses. Bicycles fared better, but most political refugees ended up as pedestrians, often walking only at night for safety and dreaming of some angelic rescue.

The final touch was provided by Göring's air force, which distinguished itself by bombing and machine-gunning the gridlocked highways and whatever railroad lines were still operational. In the long run Hitler intended to treat the French leniently; they were Aryans, after all, and he wanted to soften the West by demonstrating German veneration for "culture." But as long as French surrender was uncertain, the proper tactic was to paralyze their transport facilities; and the bored Nazi pilots deserved some amusement as well. The roads, bloated with wrecks and litter, became soaked with blood and tears.

I have found no statistics as to the number of civilians killed or injured in these air raids upon the exodus. The exuberant gunners were usually content to scare the crowds and see them scatter; the "final solution" had not yet been devised, and there are no reports of systematic massacres. It's likely that broken minds were more numerous than bullet wounds. The typical "displaced person" was undernourished, long sleepless, and mentally disoriented by the time the Luftwaffe struck; additional terror sometimes triggered catatonic stupor, sometimes episodes of manic raving. There are no reliable figures on suicide, either, but well-known intellects, like Walter Benjamin, did choose that final asylum. Arthur Koestler attempted it also. Stefan Zweig succumbed. News of their demise infected other Socialists.

Maybe I saved my mother from such a temptation during our flight. I was, after all, the symbolic mission entrusted to her. But my presence may also have had a practical use. A forlorn young woman, however romantic in her desolation, might have elicited little more than a tired shrug from a truck driver or the commander of military convoy. Add a three-year-old boy, perhaps held up to view, and human decency, or an ancient respect for maternity, might have taken hold. The most disciplined driver might have found himself skidding to a halt before even thinking *we cannot let her walk, look, the little one, she can hardly…*

* * *

Scarcity showed the failed nation its bizarre new faces: a grocery store emptied by the troops of everything except the costliest cans of caviar; a hundred cars lined up at a gas pump that could dispense only two liters to each; no vacancies at any hotel; and the floors of every lobby paved with bodies groaning in ten languages. Money was always an advantage, and though my mother had very little, she often got handouts from those who recognized her as an author sympathetic to "the movement."

Most paralyzing was the scarcity of accurate information, the commodity that no money could buy. The radio, that era's oracle, was the mouthpiece of politicians and could not be believed; Maria could not find out how the war was really going, nor where her husband and mother were, nor whether the Spaniards were letting refugees across the border, nor whether ships were still crossing the Atlantic. The crowds were rife with every rumor—a main road blocked by a Gestapo checkpoint, a town bombed by the Luftwaffe, an empty passenger train headed for Marseille that would take everyone for free but that never moved from its siding. Was it true that the trains were already under Nazi control?

Which way to turn? Every fork in the road was a new, fateful decision. Each of the fleeing millions was apt to babble of "facts" heard elsewhere and believed. Yet besides the usual fools there were knowledgeable, vigorous minds; the underground had its own intelligence. But whom to believe? Whom to follow? To make one's way in the buzzing net one had to ask, listen, assess the informant's competence, vigorously inquire, quickly act. For a person like my mother, to take such constant initiatives meant overcoming her own timidity … a hundred times a day. It was a stunning feat.

* * *

I can still hear her murmur to me, confessing, confiding, almost beseeching. I still hear that querulous voice rise and fall, muffled by years in my own flesh, for later, safe in America, she would sit at my bedside when I was four or five and complain gently and incessantly, perhaps of the misdeeds of my father, or of the indignities of poverty, using me as a receptacle for her thoughts, as any of us can use a domestic animal as an ear. Not expecting the creature to respond, we feel, or imagine, its sympathy.

GOTTFRIED HELNWEIN

Disasters of War 35, 2014
Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 78 3/4 x 126 1/2 in

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