

Quill & Scope

Volume 9 *Volume IX*

Article 9

2017

Serial Sympathies

Trevor Plumer
New York Medical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://touro scholar.touro.edu/quill_and_scope



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Plumer, T. (2017). Serial Sympathies. *Quill & Scope*, 9 (1). Retrieved from

This Perspective is brought to you for free and open access by the Students at Touro Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quill & Scope by an authorized editor of Touro Scholar. . For more information, please contact touro.scholar@touro.edu.

Serial Sympathies

Trevor Plumer

To the Reader:

This piece requires an introduction. As a reader, you must be made aware that this is a work of short fiction, first and foremost. But fiction is a vessel for truth, even if it is a short truth. In my story below, you will be asked to consider several serious topics, including wrongful imprisonment, the nature of genocide, and the power of family. Most importantly, I ask you to consider the final stages of life and its significance to the human experience. You may also wish to contemplate your relationship to the dying as a healthcare professional, family member, or fellow inhabitant of our planet. However you read it, please enjoy.

When my father died, twenty-five years after the end of the war, I did not cry because he was gone. It is true; the people at his funeral did see tears as his only daughter gave the eulogy. But, I didn't cry for him. I cried for my mother, and my Uncle Franz, and the six million of our people that the war left in its wake. I knew too much about my father to cry for him. My emotions amounted to a sum greater than grief.

Before the war, and then in the camp, my father was a physician. He brought new life into the world and escorted weathered life to its conclusion. His gentle touch was a soothing presence amidst the suffocating gears of the German extermination machine. As we left our village in the Northern Netherlands for the last time, he told me to follow him, to stay with him, to remain calm. And suddenly instead of being pushed out by the Nazis, and hate, and inconceivable horror, I was being led by my father, and empathy, and with control.

Life in the transit camp was not dissimilar to life at home. Conditions were nothing like the concentration camps of Poland. I went to school, my father worked in the hospital, and my Uncle Franz ran the police force. Yes, we even had our own Jewish police force. Even so, the specter of death always hung around the camp. Every Friday the deportation lists were posted. Every Saturday the trains left with the names on the lists. Every Sunday trains steamed in, full. It was a cycle that beat to an unrelenting rhythm, echoed by the march of soldiers and harmonized by the scurry of their scared and scarred prisoners.

In the beginning, my father and mother insisted that I go to school every day. I was thirteen years old, but since there were only four teachers I was in a class with anybody over the age of ten. The classes were big and loud, and often raucous. Mr. Bronstein, my teacher, would have a difficult time corralling the group that swelled to 40 or 50 students on Mondays.

The newcomers were always the quietest, frozen by the tragedy burned into their eyes. But then there was a thaw. A sense of normality betrayed our instincts. Ignorance and awareness formed a chaotic orbit that pulled us in different directions. Some retreated to bullying, grasping for a lost sense of control. Others gossiped endlessly about the few rumors that trickled down to us. I turned my attention to Mr. Bronstein.

"We should bake him something sweet," my mother would say. I tried to act coy. "We shouldn't use up our sugar ration on a teacher. It's not as if my marks will count for anything." My mother's goal was to distract me from the reality of the camp, even if that meant confusing my newfound interest in school for my teenage feelings towards Mr. Bronstein. "Nonsense, sunshine. Nurse Emelia gives us her sugar ration since she's diabetic. When Daddy brings it home from the hospital today we'll go and bake some cookies for...what was his name?" she said with a smirk. "Mr. Bronstein." I swear my mother would glow in moments like this.

One day, a group of boys in the back of the classroom was being particularly unruly. In fact they were taunting Emmet, a boy from my town. Emmet was the type of boy that attracted this kind of attention: small, different, shy. Mr. Bronstein was facing the chalkboard as he lectured us, but he could hear the teasing. Without turning around, he stopped talking and stopped writing. The wave of silence started at the front and crashed towards the boys in the back, broken finally by Mr. Bronstein's order. "Everybody get up. Push your desks into the corner and arrange your chairs in a circle. If I cannot teach you the importance of this school, then maybe you must hear someone else." Mr. Bronstein spoke with such reserve and collectiveness that instead of forecasting punishment, his orders piqued our curiosity. As we followed his words, he added one more item to the board: Socrates.

"Socrates was one of the greatest teachers of all time, yet he never gave a lecture. In his classroom, everyone was equal, every thought was given its due attention. There was no back of the classroom. Everybody was given an opportunity to talk and defend themselves." There was a twinkle in his eye as he looked over at Emmet, who was now smiling. On Sunday, Emmet was deported. But that day in that circle he was not little, or different, or shy. No one was more engaged in the discussion that day than Emmet as he searched for truth, truth that resonated and survived within each of us. When the news reached the class that Emmet was going to be deported, the bigger boys all stood with him until the last moment, when he was forced onto the train.

The trains ran with a ruthless efficiency that could quite literally not be ignored; we were always assembled for a roll call in front of the station platform. We watched as our friends and relatives were stripped from our arms and led to unfathomable ends. We watched as they were replaced by unfamiliar faces with familiar expressions of trepidation and anguish and loss. In these situations, our

control and humanity were ceded to the commandant of the transit camp, Commander Helmholtz, who, in my youthful eyes, was more machine than man.

My mother's name, Rose Kauffman, appeared on the deportation list one Friday. My father, usually so calm and reassuring, was inconsolable. My Uncle Franz, thinking that he could have some influence as the chief of police, pleaded with Helmholtz. Of course, Helmholtz had no room for mercy. In his eyes, we were only waiting for destiny to run its course.

By Saturday morning, it appeared as if my mother and father had come to terms with the reality of the situation. The routine of the morning roll made the process palatable, almost sterile. In a matter of a few silent moments my mother was loaded onto the freight train, the train was pulling away, and the diminished assembly of inmates was dismissed. I don't remember crying, but after that I was overcome by a perfunctory malaise. I missed days of school. I lived from roll call to roll call, with emptiness in between.

Several weeks later, this new normal was shattered by the beginning of terrible excitement. Someone from my mother's transport had escaped from the concentration camp and joined the resistance. He had been captured again and was being held in the solitary confinement section of our camp until he could be processed and deported. When my father heard about this, he insisted that as a doctor he should be able to attend to the man. His true duty here, however, was as a husband. He needed to find out what happened to his Rose. When he returned from the solitary confinement block, I learned simply that my mother was dead.

The next deportation roll was anything but routine. Helmholtz called out the names on the deportation list. Some people were missing, including Nurse Emelia. There were five in total. Helmholtz immediately had the entire camp searched. All five of the missing were found. All five of the missing were dead.

There was talk of suicide, and sick Nazi pranks, and even a serial killer. Our collective imaginations ricocheted off the fences of the camp. One might have thought that Helmholtz wouldn't have cared one way or another, since deportation was synonymous with death. But he was angry, in the way that one is annoyed when their bus or train is late. He tasked my Uncle Franz with investigating the deaths.

The police swiftly determined that the cause of death was poison, and the gusts of rumor swirled around murder. As the next Saturday approached, urgency to identify the killer escalated. There was worry that the killer would strike again. A worse possibility, in my Uncle Franz's eyes, was that the killer would escape by deportation and elude justice. Suicide would have been understandable to my Uncle, but murder offended his sense of civic duty to his people. When the next list was posted on Friday, however, I became too preoccupied with one name to remember about the killings: Mr. Bronstein.

At first, my mind raced into darkness. I felt completely powerless. All I could think to do was make one last batch of cookies for Mr. Bronstein. With the steady hand of my father, who, with limitless empathy, felt my loss, we used the last of our sugar ration to scrape together passable cookies. When I brought them to Mr. Bronstein, he seemed to be expecting me. We sat only for a short time. He spoke of Emmet, and how proud he was that something profound had resonated in his students.

The next morning at roll call, I immediately noticed that Mr. Bronstein wasn't there. After all the names were recited, there were ten total missing. Then ten total dead, and the same Helmholtzian anger. My Uncle Franz was given an ultimatum, find the killer by next Friday or be deported.

The next week passed too quickly for my Uncle Franz to find the serial killer. That Saturday only one person was missing from roll call, Uncle Franz. It didn't take long for the guards to find his body. He was poisoned. When the news settled in, the community mourned its leader like a hero fallen in combat. Somehow, my father and I managed to survive the war by eluding the deportation list until liberation. I had lost my mother and uncle and friends and neighbors, but was surprised when I learned that some of my relatives had survived. I moved to America with them and tried to rebuild my life. My father remained in Europe, and took a position at a small hospital in the Belgian countryside.

I visited my father several years before he passed away. I had always thought that the depth of our shared experiences left little to be said. We ate silently. We sat together listening to the forest animals. We played card games. But on this visit it struck me that we never reflected. We never mourned. We never had more to say than "pass the salt," or "do you hear the owl hooting," or "gin." When I mentioned my revelation, he didn't respond right away. I felt a deeper silence. A silence of contemplation. A silence that Mr. Bronstein had used to control the class before giving Emmet the forum for his eternal voice.

"My daughter, there is something that I must share. I was the serial killer." I laughed. My father did not. "I have carried the voices of the dead for so long. It is my burden, but I do not regret what I did." Suddenly I felt the seething of an uncommon anger reserved for the worst moments of betrayal. "But...how? Why? Nurse Emelia...Mr. Bronstein...Uncle Franz!" The scope was almost too much to bear. My words were gone, but my father wasn't finished.

"I never told you how your mother died. When I met with the resistance fighter, he told me..." He paused for a lingering moment. "I shouldn't have gone. No one should have to hear about such a fate of a loved one. At that moment I was overcome with a fury than I have not experienced before or since. I was frustrated with our helplessness, vulnerable to the fate of a cruel design. I could no longer be a witness. The Nazi's stole our humanity by whitewashing our extermination. It has become a statistic.

"I have seen many people die as a doctor. These



people want their story to be told, and their end to be poetic. I vowed to give the same respect to the people in our camp so that they would not suffer the same anonymized execution as your mother.

"That is the why, but you also asked me how. You deserve these answers. I never killed anyone that didn't want to die. I sat with them and explained everything that I am telling you now. Interestingly, no one ever refused, or even questioned, my offer. It almost seemed a matter of course.

"Nurse Emelia had diabetes, and certainly wouldn't have survived the train ride to the concentration camp without insulin. Her death was my first and the simplest: one sugar cookie that she had never before been able to enjoy.

"Mr. Bronstein. I think that he rests easily, knowing that his favorite student provided him with his mortal escape. Yes, my sunshine, you gave him the poison. I slipped it into the cookies that you gave him on his last day. When you told me about his lesson on Socrates, I knew that there was only one poison that would give him the end that he deserved: hemlock. The same poison that was used for Socrates' execution. Since you were my accomplice, you share in honoring his life.

"When I heard that your Uncle, my brother, would be taken if he didn't catch the killer, I went to him. I wanted to turn myself in. I couldn't bear the responsibility. But he instead insisted that I help poison him. His only request was to stage the suicide as if he had been close to catching the killer. So I filled a syringe with morphine and stabbed it into his neck. He smiled, and was gone."

I didn't know whether to feel proud or disgusted. Relieved that my friends and family had accepted their deaths or horrified that my father was their vehicle. When my father finished, I left. I didn't see him again before he passed.

I didn't cry for my father at his funeral. I cried for the lives that met their end on their own terms. Nurse Emelia. Mr. Bronstein. Uncle Franz. I cried for the lives that had not. Rose. Mom. Mothers, fathers, children. Over all of these graves, however, was the gentle touch of my father. The touch that I had always known and, somehow, was not changed in spite of what I knew. Somehow, I was proud.

-End-