

HANDOUT

Bystander Scenes From the Memoir *All But My Life*

Scene 1: The Neighbors

A swastika was flying from the house across the street. My God! They seemed prepared. All but us, they knew. A big truck filled with German soldiers was parked across the street. Our neighbors were serving them wine and cakes, and screaming as though drunk with joy, “Heil Hitler! Long live the Fuhrer! We thank thee for our liberation!” I couldn’t understand it. What are those people doing? The same people I had known all my life. They have betrayed us.

I looked out the window and there was Trude, a girl I had known since childhood. She and her grandmother lived rent-free in a two-room apartment in our basement in return for laundry service. Now I saw her carrying flowers from our garden, white roses of which we had been so proud because they bloomed out of season. She handed them to a soldier, breaking her tongue with the unfamiliar German, “Heil Hitler!” I started sobbing, crying, releasing all my emotions and anxieties in that outburst. Artur jumped over to me, put his hand over my mouth. “Are you crazy? Do you want to give us away?”

Scene 2: Arriving at the Slave-Labor Camp

Late in the afternoon, after having covered perhaps two hundred kilometers, the train stopped at a tiny, spotless station. The sign read “Bolkenhain.” We were counted and marched out of the station and through the little town. So this was the homeland of Nazism. People looked at us as though they had not expected us to be human. Children were called into houses. One young blond woman stood at an open window watering flowers in the window box as we passed. She interrupted her task and looked at us wide-eyed. The thought came to me that she had probably never seen a Jew in her life. Brought up under the Nazis, she expected us to be monsters. What a shock it must have been to find us looking very much like herself, some of us quite pretty.

Scene 3: The Death March

Early in the afternoon we crossed the Czechoslovakian frontier. The good Czech people at the first village were waiting to greet us despite the shouting and cursing of the (Nazis). They showered us with food! They threw it into the wagon, they brought sausages for the guards, bread and turnips for us. Could there be so much richness in that poor world!

Excerpts from All But My Life. Used with permission.