

## The Sins of the Grandfather

This is a fictional story, but is based on a real event.

Willy couldn't sit still in his seat in the station in the little German town he called his home. There were still a few minutes until his train was due and so he paced around the platform like a restless tiger stalking his cage. After what seemed like an eternity, Willy saw the train pulling into the station. He picked up his bags and with a heavy heart, climbed onto the train and found his seat in the standard class.

As the train made its way East, so Willy tried to read the novel he had brought with him. However, he soon found that he couldn't concentrate on more than a few paragraphs at a time and so he gave up and looked listlessly out of the window. The darkening grey sky as the afternoon slanted in from the East and the flat monotonous landscape calmed Willy's nerves, but only at the expense of a deep melancholy feeling. Thankfully at length, he was able to drift into a listless sleep.

In a dream he saw the face of his grandfather, the grandfather he had never known personally, but knew only too well from the commentary of others. Willy's grandfather was standing proudly in his gleaming uniform, with a sly, smug smile on his face, just as in one of the photographs Willy had seen of him, still taunting Willy from beyond the grave. Over time, the face faded into a deep, dark void.

When Willy awoke it was dark but outside of the window he could clearly see the lights of a large city. The train slowed down and shortly platforms appeared, with signs bearing the name of the station. Warsaw. Willy found his way to his hotel and was soon tucked up in bed, drifting in and out of sleep. When he awoke a few hours later in the first light of dawn, he found that one of his pillows was on the floor and the rest of the bedding in utter disarray.

Having spent most of his time at the breakfast table, lethargically playing with his food, Willy gave up, settled the bill and made his way back to the station. There he had to make a phone-call.

"Aleksander I am here. Are you still coming with me?"

"Yes, yes of course. You sound tired."

"I did not sleep well."

"I understand. It is not easy for you. Still you have got this far. I will help you the rest of the way."

"Thanks...I am at the entrance to the station now. The next train is in 40 minutes."

"That is O.K. I will be there in 15 minutes."

Aleksander was as good as his word and soon Willy and Aleksander were on the train south. They sat in silence for a while, before Willy chose to break it.

"Thank you for coming with me. It's not easy. I feel so bad."

"But you shouldn't. It was nothing to do with you. You weren't even born. Your own father was only a child."

"I know. I know. But I still feel responsible for all...."

"Well don't. And you are doing the right thing. Stick in there Willy. It will be O.K."

The conversation drifted into other areas and the journey passed uneventfully. Eventually the destination hove into view and Willy could see a sign for the station. Oswiecim. A ghostly shiver went down his spine.

“Well, here we are Willy”, said Aleksander.

“Yes. Here we are”, Willy replied quietly.

It took them both a while to locate where the buses were that would take them to the camp. Willy’s stomach churned over like a food mixer. When Aleksander offered to share a sandwich with him, he politely said no.

After a short time they found the buses and boarded them. Willy hesitated as he began to climb on board.

“Nearly there Willy, nearly there“, Aleksander whispered.

Willy did not reply, but with a great struggle, he did manage to get on board the bus. The door soon closed, the engine was revved up and then there was to be no turning back. The bus made its way through the grey landscape, which even the sun seemed to have forsaken.



In one of the Education Rooms a small group of Jewish students had been listening intently to a moving talk from Avi Cohen, a Holocaust survivor. He was just finishing a question and answer session, when Willy and Aleksander entered. Avi turned round to greet them.

“Ah, here are our special guests, as I was saying”, Avi said with a slight smile.

“Hello everybody”, said Aleksander. Willy said nothing and looked at the floor.

“Do you want to introduce yourselves?>”, asked Avi.

“Yes, sure”, replied Aleksander. “I am Aleksander and I am the Director of the Polish Institute for Community Relations. And this is.....”

“My name is Willy and I, I am....”, Willy’s voice trailed off.

Willy looked at Aleksander and gently shook his head. He stepped back. It looked as if he just wanted the corner of the room just to swallow him up. Aleksander looked at Avi and the group of students, who by now were puzzled as to who this particular special guest was. After an awkward pause, Aleksander decided he must speak again:

“This is a friend of mine. His name is Willy and his grandfather was the Commandant of this death camp from 1943 until it was liberated by the Soviets in January 1945.”

There was a clearly audible gasp from the students present. Willy stepped forward slowly and stood in front of the students, willing his right leg not to shake so clearly. In a quiet voice, which was almost a whisper, he began to speak:

“Yes, it is true. My name is Willy Hoess and my grandfather was the commandant of this death camp for two years, He oversaw the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews....of gypsies....homosexuals....he was a mass murderer”, Willy’s voice trailed off into a distant place, somewhere where a deep pain smothered everything in its wake.

After a long silence, Willy began to speak again:

"But I am only 47 years old. I was born long after the war. My own father was just a child during the war. He used to play in the small stream, which ran past the camp, while....while...." At that point Willy found he could go on no longer. A small tear broke free from his right eye and slowly made its way down his face. Willy just stood there in front of the students, flanked by Aleksander and Avi.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry..."

One of the students tentatively raised his hand. Avi suggested that he ask a question if he wanted to.

"Why are you sorry? It was not your fault. You were not even alive. And why have you come here?"

"I feel guilty, because I know that I had a mass murderer in my family. It has always been there in my life. For years, I tried to hide it....but I always knew. I have come here because I hope for something, anything to lose this bad feeling inside of me. I am haunted as well, by what happened here, all those years ago."

"That is such a shame", the student said. "It seems like you are a victim of the Holocaust too. Perhaps the last victim."

At that point another tear welled up in Willy's right eye and began its journey south. Avi walked slowly over to Willy and embraced him. Willy returned the embrace and as a rare shaft of sunlight broke through the nearby window, so Aleksander saw a gentle smile cross Willy's face.

Peter Sagar