

Excerpts from **The Trumpets of Jericho: A Novel** by J. Michael Dolan

Birkenau simmered in the July sun like some hideous brew, a witch's potion of blood, sweat, smoke, and excrement worthy of something the weird sisters might have cooked up in *Macbeth*. No one could remember a summer as brutish as this one. It hadn't rained since May, and with no respite from the heat, it accumulated, grew denser, more concentrated each day, like sediment collecting at the bottom of a pond. People perspired the clock round, midnight, dawn, it didn't matter. The barracks were as suffocating as the airless cells of a dungeon. When the wind did blow, it was a burning, desert wind, or like the acetylene gusts generated by a forest fire.

She didn't have to search out their blockova. The woman sent a Steubendienst to bring Roza to her room, where to the growing consternation of her friends she remained for a while. When finally she emerged, it was with a small bundle in her hands and a big grin on her face.

"What happened?" they cried all at once. "Why on earth are you smiling?"

She had them follow her to a corner of the barracks. "Did any of you know," she said placidly, still smiling, "that there's a commissary for prisoners in this rat's ass of a place, and that the kapos have leave to hand out coupons redeemable at that commissary?"

They could only stare at her blankly.

"I had no idea, either, but guess what I just got for throwing my little tantrum today: not time in the penal squad, not a beating, not even a slap on the wrist, but a coupon worth the equivalent of one German mark. For doing good work. Exceptional work, the blockova said. Maybe I should have gone looking this morning for a second wall to vent my spleen on."

Laughter wasn't a frequent visitor to Frauenlager *B1a* of Birkenau, but it rose now from half a dozen throats, partly from relief, partly at the wacky unpredictability of life.

"So show us," said one of the group. "What does this coupon of yours look like?"

"I don't have it. I gave it back to her as a gift. Which explains what I do have, here in this sack." She opened it to reveal a mess of boiled potatoes in their jackets. "And this," she said, producing a jar of orange marmalade from her shirt. "This she just handed me, on my way out. I didn't even have to ask for it."

Roza paused to let them take in the wonderment of the potatoes.

"Was I right," she said finally, "or was I right? Sucking up to her, I mean. What was I going to buy with a single mark anyway? Certainly not something as valuable as the goodwill of a block elder. I told her she could probably make better use of the coupon than I. She thanked me and smiled—yes, *smiled*, that foul-tempered brute of a Czech—then asked me if there was anything I needed. 'Food, if that's permitted, *Frau Älteste*,' I said. 'A few potatoes would be nice.' So she gave me some. As for the marmalade, who knows? I think my 'generosity' must have caught her off guard."

The women were in awe. "So what are you planning to do with all this, Roza?"

"Why, it's for us, silly, the six of us. The SS may call us pigs, but that doesn't mean we have to act like one." She unscrewed the lid on the little jar of jellied gold. "Anyone hasn't managed to organize a spoon yet, feel free to use mine."

To organize was camp lingo for acquiring something of value, either by barter or theft. The Germans provided nothing, not even spoons for their prisoners' soup. There was a Stubendienst in Block 12 who hand-made them, but she charged two whole rations of bread, a steep price. Roza had given her one ration and a small spool of thread she'd stumbled upon, and considered it well worth it. Scarce were their masters who didn't delight in watching them lap up their dinner like animals.

The next morning after roll call, she was pulled from her work crew and ordered back to the hut. Not especially to her surprise, but most assuredly her unease, her benefactress from the night before was waiting for her.

"I have a cousin assigned to the clothes-sorting warehouse," the woman said. "This morning she told me they were in need of another person. The work is light and indoors. Though you're not Czech, I thought of you. You've got to hurry, though, before the spot is filled. I must have an answer now."

Roza thought for a few seconds. "But what about my friends?" she said. "I can't just—"

"Yes, you can, don't be a fool. Many are the riches that pass through the *Bekleidungskammer*, the Jews like to hide their valuables by sewing them inside their clothing. You can help your friends best from there. All you can do here is watch each other die. I'm going to ask you once more, which is it to be: the warehouse, indoors, folding clothes, or the pick and shovel?"

Though seldom spoken, it was widely known that among those SS detached to the Russian killing fields and death camps of Poland there existed, in addition to the alcoholism, nightmares, and other infirmities deviling them, a curiously high rate of impotence. Möll had first heard veiled complaints of this while working the gas bunkers at Birkenau, and these had got him to thinking. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that the female body as sexual stimulus no longer existed as such for the biological soldier. It had been transformed into something countervailing and ugly, a suppressant rather than a promoter of desire. The rationale for the camp's existence, wholesale extermination, made this inevitable. The Jews spilling out of the cattle cars came with repetition to resemble nothing more than so much meat in transit, walking carcasses processed and consumed, most of them, the first day. To the SS at their posts, the danger inherent in this perception resided in the female form losing its power to titillate and turning cadaverous, into an object of repugnance, the impression reinforced by the sheer number of women that passed before one. Nudity only magnified the effect.

Those deportees who'd been interned for any length of time were even more unappetizing. Once the very flower of youthful femininity, meticulous in appearance and dress, attentive to making the most of what beauty nature had meted them, they'd been reduced after a few months to gaunt, hollow-eyed mockeries of their former selves, their breasts empty pouches, legs swollen and streaked with excrement, heads shaven like convicts, faces pocked with open sores. The smell that washed from them stank of sea rot, of some brackish tidal backwater, a place of mud covered with a carpet of tiny dead crustaceans that crackled underfoot.

There was something else, their kapo suspected, giving the Special Squad pause, not that any among them would have admitted to it. Each secretly harbored a last desperate shred of hope that the war would end before long, or the Russians bomb the crematoria, or that he'd be one of the lucky few to slip through the cracks somehow, to be overlooked when it came time to pay the pitiless SS piper. In the *Vernichtungslager*, everything was either ass-backward or a corruption of itself. The Ten Commandments were turned on their heads—thou *shalt* kill, thou *shalt* steal, thou *shalt* covet—the Golden Rule nonexistent. Here the weak were at the mercy of the strong—the lame, sick, and feeble treated not with kindness but contempt. Here, nothing was less valuable than the life of a human being; a crust of bread, a pack of cigarettes, a needle and thread were worth more. Women with children and the elderly were the first to die, not the last. Here, people went to the hospital to be killed, not cured.

And so it was with hope. In the extermination camp, hope was neither balm nor beacon, but an enemy. It was hope that led people unresisting from the undressing room to the gas chamber, that made men stand idly by while children were murdered. That prompted people to sink to just about any low for one more day of life, one small but essential step on the road to eventual liberation.

Suddenly a voice, his voice, snapped Roza from her reverie. "You know how beautiful you are when you smile?" Godel said.

Her gasp of surprise melted into a giggle as she turned to face him. "You spoil me, sir. Beautiful? With this hair, these skin and bones? If you need glasses, you know, I could probably organize you a pair."

"No thanks," he laughed, "my eyes are just fine. And you can say what you will: you're the most beautiful woman I've ever known, inside and out."

"So how long, you naughty boy, have you been watching me? Quiet as a mouse, too. Was I really smiling?"

"Not long. And you weren't just smiling, you were glowing, your face as lit up as a Shomeir bonfire. What on earth, love, were you thinking about?"

Roza didn't answer right away. "The future," she said finally, "our future, the near and not so near. In fact, I was just getting to the part when we.... Oh, please tell it to me again, Godel, how it's going to be. I love it when you tell me. You know how I love it."

He turned on his side and held her to him, his cheek pressed to hers. He enjoyed saying the words as much as she did hearing them. "Well, let's see, first it's to Palestine, probably by refugee ship. Nor will we lack for company; hundreds will have scrambled to get aboard. After the war, after Hitler and the camps, who's going to argue with the Zionists then? I'm guessing it'll take us a week or more at sea. We'll get married before we leave and make that our honeymoon."

She closed her eyes and envisioned a ship, a big one, its open deck crowded with people. Every face is turned east, gazing east to the horizon. No one is looking back. There would be no looking back.

"And once we're there, we'll get some land," he said, "I don't know how, but we'll get it. And farm it, grow things. Melons, lettuce—hell, rutabagas, who knows? Maybe even a vineyard. I think I might just fancy owning a vineyard."

Roza, having never seen a vineyard, tried to imagine one.

"And while we're at it," he went on, "we'll grow babies, too, lots of babies. How many little Silvers did you say you wanted to have?"

"Four. I want four, two boys and two girls."

"Four it is then. And we'll name them—I've been giving this some thought lately, Raizele, tell me what you think—we'll name them, each and every one of them, after the dead. I like that idea. I think it'd do both of us good. Maybe the dead won't feel so dead with their names on our lips again."

This was news to her. She raised herself on an elbow, and embracing him with her eyes, cupped his chin in one hand. That he would wish to name their children thus brought a lump to her throat, a swelling in her heart. Not that she needed reminding, but such was the goodness, the moxie of which this man of hers was made. Should she indeed find her life gifted with two daughters one day, the names Faige and Shoshonna would live again.

Leaning forward, she kissed him lightly but lingeringly on the mouth....

As for what was normal and what wasn't, who was to say anymore? Nothing Möll had been engaged in for the past several years could be considered normal, and had only gotten less so over time. With summer having boosted the exterminations to well over a million, the orgy of death in which he was immersed had exposed him to phenomena he doubted many had ever known. He'd marveled at the sights and sounds of a hundred thousand men and women held against their will while ten thousand of them went up in smoke every twenty-four hours. He'd have sworn he heard, as if a faint, faraway wind, the haunting wail of a flock of newly disembodied souls as they fluttered skyward into eternity, calling to each other in their grief and confusion. He'd seen nature herself turned on her head, the sky above the western, crematoria-end of the camp illuminated at night by a pulsating mantle of red, the sun darkened by day with the smoke from his own fire pits. That summer in Birkenau, and for miles around, it had rained more gray, puffy flakes of ash than it had water. Turnips from the camp fields often reached the size of small children, tomatoes from its gardens that of cantaloupes.

Queerest of all perhaps, yet fascinating to behold, was the stubborn Jewish devotion to their lunatic God. Despite making it clear that He'd washed His hands of them, they hadn't abandoned Him, even as they lined up to file into the gas chamber. Again, on they'd come all summer, naked as newborns, skinny, knob-kneed old men nervously stroking their long beards, menopausal women whose breasts rivaled their stout haunches in size, budding adolescents with eyes huge and skittish as a deer's. It never failed that more than a few of them were talking as they walked, not to each other but in a barely audible mumble to that unhearing God in Whom, even here in the crematorium, they continued to profess allegiance. Given the shabby way He'd treated them over the centuries, Möll found this intriguing. The Jew was positively gifted at making excuses for his divinity's disgraceful behavior; seldom was he taken aback by His wrath, nor discouraged by His thirst for the blood of His own children. Instead, he preferred to blame himself for his misfortunes, an arrangement, in view of his infatuation with self-guilt and his God's tyrannical self-righteousness, convenient for both parties.

All the *Hauptscharführer* could do was shake his head at such idiocy. Had their tradition of groveling before their sanctimonious Jehovah blinded the Jews to his brutishness? With the merest flick of a finger, He could have made a rubbish heap of Birkenau. And its five sister *Vernichtungslagers* with it. Yet for the past year and more the transports had continued to roll, the smokestacks to glow a dull red from overuse.
