Light, The

Because it was such a flagrant breach of the regulations at the Hohesmunster Asylum, I was deeply shocked, indeed, for a few long moments, utterly speechless when Sister Anne suddenly appeared in the small orderly's station on Ward 20. At two o'clock in the morning, she should have been asleep - as I very nearly was - and certainly not making unannounced visits to young orderlies on a ward for dangerously demented and criminally insane men, killers, every last one of them - though circumstances varied, of course, from sadistic sex murderers for whom the screams and pleadings of victims, usually, but not always girls, brought unendurable physical arousal and, most often, premature orgasm, to genuine Nazi war criminals like former SS man Fittkau, "the Jew-eater" he called himself proudly, and Keile, the SS doctor who bragged of his "world-famous living autopsies", and finally, to people like poor little Schlund, abandoned by his own mother as she fled from the revenge-hungry Russians with three other children, who thought of himself more as a dog or wolf than a human, and sometimes acted as such right down to the taste for raw meat and a need to chew bones. If these things sound preposterous now half a century from the war, it must be remembered that in those warm summer days when I sat in the orderly's station, most of today's miraculous psychiatric drugs had not been invented, and the few in existence were not readily available at the Hohesmunster which housed 2,600 "lifers", patients deemed beyond even the remotest, let alone reasonable, hope of recovery. Moreover, those days were a mere twenty years from the German surrender and many victims and perpetrators were just then reaching early middle age; indeed, many who could recall those disastrous years were still younger. Thus, to a large extent, Hohesmunster, a charitable hospital run by a group of nuns, was an island where the wreckage, the flotsam and jetsam of Hitler's catastrophic Thousand Year Reich washed up and waited for the slow poison of time to complete the unfinished work of bombs and shells, fire, starvation, disease and injury, wanton unspeakable cruelties, and the spiritual illness of shame and utter despair.

I recall getting up from my chair when I saw Sister Anne, my mouth no doubt flapping silently like a fish drowning in air, but before I could say a word, she said, "Here. I think you should read this." Into my hand she thrust a small bundle of papers, the first, and, as I saw later, each one of them, stamped with the official seal of the Hohesmunster. When I looked up at her, she smiled, and added, "They belong to a patient. But not from this ward. I think you should read them. Then, I will show you something."

"Show me what?" I asked her, still somewhat dazed and more puzzled than ever at seeing this middle-aged nun defying hospital regulations not only by being here but handing me patient records. For a moment I thought perhaps she was sending a come-on, a come-hither signal in the only way she, a nun long out of the world, knew how, to a young, and presumably virile orderly, but she, as if reading the thought from the look in my eyes smiled, and, laying her hand

on my arm as softly as light, shook her head gently, saying," No, it's not what you think. And don't be embarrassed. If I had been you, I would have thought the same thing...."

"But what will I see?" I asked, blushing despite her assurances and she looked at me with a soft, Mona Lisa smile, and whispered, "Ein Wunder. A wonder. And now I must go. I will see you tomorrow. And, " she picked up the papers that I had laid down on my desk and pressed them back into my hands, "don't forget to read these..."

Before I could say a word, she vanished into darkness of Ward 20 - night-lights were deemed a luxury by the nuns; nursing sisters and orderlies had their flashlights - and once again, I was alone, but now, needless to say, wide awake. My first thought was to wonder if Sister Edda, working in the separate nursing sister's station, had noticed this highly unauthorized visit. The nuns, I knew all too well, watched each other like hawks lest the slightest infractions led a sister astray into improprieties. (This, by the way is not necessarily, as vicious as it may sound: a nun's life is hard, and a nun, like all other women, may also have moments of weakness and need and so they watched out for each other.) After a few minutes of hearing no unusual sounds from her station, I decided that she had either not noticed, or wasn't, at least for now and whatever reason, letting on what she knew. Since there was nothing at all I could do on this score, I pushed it aside, reminding myself that Sister Anne was a senior nun, that she worked on this ward among others, and could easily come up with a story explaining her presence, something perhaps about pertinent information or worry about a patient or me, who hadn't been feeling well or...whatever...

"A wonder," she said, so, thinking perhaps the wonder was in the papers she gave me, sat down to read them. From a Canadian point of view, the story they told was unimaginable and horrendous; indeed, more than once I have been called a pathological liar for mentioning some of these things. It is a measure of how extreme life and death were in Europe, and especially Eastern Europe in the last year and a half of the war as the German armies fought with all the ferocity of desperation and fear-crazed despair to keep the Russians out of the Fatherland and away from the women and children, and the vengeance-crazed Russians racing to capture Berlin before the Americans and paying the Germans back - with compounded interest - for their wanton and brutal attack on the glorious Soviet Motherland, - - by the standards set in these times, as I started to say, this story was nothing special. It contained all the usual stuff: air attacks on civilian columns fleeing from battles, tanks simply crushing thousands of helplessly milling women and children into the ground until the dust, or the snow, was merely red pulp; massive pillaging, looting, burning, and, of course, more than anything else, rape. If nothing else, the Russians raped their way into Germany on a scale never seen before in recorded history and never - thank God - seen since. The rape of millions of German women from girls of six and - at times, younger - to grandmothers of eighty is, to this today, one of the great unexplored, unresearched tales of

the Second World War. History is slow to acknowledge the agonies of the losers, especially when the losers themselves had inflicted such unspeakable misery on their victims.

However, amidst all this "usual" stuff, however one thing quickly stood out: the behavior of a thirteen year old boy named Heinz Kampinski. His family was normal enough for the times and the place. Heinz's father had been drafted into the Allgemeine SS which by that stage of the war, no longer relied only on heart-and-soul Nazis as volunteers but took every man it could get, in order to fight, like most German soldiers, against Stalin's relentless Red Army. They rarely heard from him, and the mother, like millions of other women in her position, assumed him alive merely for lack of notices to the contrary, though with the disruption of mails, such assumptions were not always valid. An older brother, Friederich died in an air-raid, buried and burned alive in collapsed house because, in a state of hysterical panic, he refused to take his chances in the streets being bombed and strafed one day by a squadron of Red Air Force Yaks. At thirteen, then, Heinz received his promotion to 'man of the house', responsible for a mother and two twin siblings, a sister and brother aged eight.

This in itself was not terribly unusual either; large numbers of thirteen year olds in Eastern Europe had similar promotions, and no small number of these, Heinz not among them, carried rifles, pistols and even submachine guns with which to look after mother and other children. Heinz differed from these other boys in the way he protected his family, a way that both frightened and impressed all who saw it. Heinz offered himself as an easy target.

The first time he did this was during a sudden and unexpected fighter-attack on the ruined remains of their small Pomeranian village. A single Russian Yak tore out of the sky, its machine guns and cannon blazing away at the people, old men and women, mothers and children, and young boys and girls out in the fields trying to scrounge a few last potatoes. Naturally, everyone scattered but with small children to grab and run with, and the elderly who could not move as quickly as needed, the Russian was almost certain to kill and wound many, when suddenly and without warning Heinz ran out on the road by the field jumped up and down and tore off his shirt and waved it to attract the pilot's attention. It worked.

The pilot saw the young boy shaking his fist at the sky and went for the bait. Heinz ran down the road away from the others, stopping at least once, to shake his fist, and the Yak tore after him, firing its machine guns and cannon, kicking up clouds of dust but, as though by a miracle, never hitting the zigzagging boy. His strategy was pathetically obvious, yet the pilot, who was either so enraged by this defiant little figure running and jumping up and down shaking his fists, or, who had no real stomach for slaughtering civilians anyway, came back for a second pass - and missed Heinz again. He stood there and pointing his left index finger up at the sky, stroked it with his right index finger, the German gesture for shame and shameful. Who knows whether or

not the low-flying pilot saw this and understood, but when he swooped down for a third time he missed the running and hopping, Rumpelstelskin-like boy again - and gave up in apparent disgust. He flew off, looking for easier prey, knowing by this time the civilians were far too scattered to be worthwhile targets.

The villagers, who quickly discovered that no one was killed or hurt, were both shocked and impressed by his actions; some of the old men and women called him "Ein kleiner Held, a little hero" but his far more practical and thoroughly frightened mother simply came up and slapped him hard in the face again and again, screaming "So ein dummer Luemmel - such a stupid brat..." with each slap, until at last, two elderly ladies restrained her. And instead of being resentful and angry, Heinz went to his mother and said, "See, mother. I'm not hurt at all. You don't have to worry about me...You see, I have an angel..." On hearing this everyone stopped and looked at him, thinking no doubt, that Heinz Kampinski was mad, driven over the edge by the stress of the last few minutes. "What angel?" somebody asked and, he replied with utter sincerity, "Just when that fighter came in, I saw an angel in front of me, and he said, 'Heinz, run down that road and get his attention. I promise you, no one will die.' So I ran. I did just what he told me - and see, nobody's dead."

Of course, a single event of that nature counts for no more than a lucky break, but when, in the early autumn of 1944 - while the front lines were very fluid, and the German armies collapsing albeit slowly, the way beams of steel slowly twist and buckle, fighting to stay up each moment, yet visibly losing the struggle, and the Russian armies advanced with the ponderousness of a steam-roller - Heinz, to the growing dismay and despair of his mother, used this trick on several other occasions, claiming each time that he only did as the angel instructed. To fully appreciate what he did, one must understand the scene.

As the Red Army advanced, millions of German civilians fled west, simply packing whatever belongings they could onto horse-drawn wagons pulled often enough by old men and boys, on wheel-barrows, bicycles, scooters, and if nothing else, carried upon their backs. Some, of course, stayed, thinking that Goebbel's propaganda about the horrors of Russian revenge was merely another lie. Didn't that gang in Berlin always lie? But for once, the gang in Berlin was telling the truth, and most of those left behind, especially in the far eastern German provinces of Silesia, Prussia and Pomerania, ended up dead or transported to Stalin's gulags and were never heard from again. So the highways and country roads and the forest paths were clogged day and night with small columns and clumps of desperate humanity, women, above all, mothers and children, the old and the sick - eventually left behind - crippled war veterans and even a few Russian prisoners of war, fully aware they'd be shot by their own for having surrendered to the victorious Germans in early days of the war. And through and in and around this swirling stream of chaotic humanity, the two armies fought tooth and nail, the Wehrmacht, desperate to save German

civilians, mounting heart-breakingly useless offensives, the Russians holding, or maybe retreating a little, re-grouping, then counter-attacking, each side, sending out, like giant octopi stretching their tentacles, columns of tanks or troops to explore the enemy weak-spots, to strangle small enemy pockets or advance columns and over it all, in the sky, the Luftwaffe and the Red Force fighting for air supremacy and attacking whatever ground targets came into view.

So it was not unusual for a Russian tank, sent out as a probe to test the German defenses, to encounter a small herd of civilians, and, lacking a better target, to open fire usually with its machine guns. When this happened to Heinz's group, as it did on at least three occasions, the thirteen year old, who refused to carry a weapon rushed out in front of the tank, shouting and waving his arms to attract attention, hopping about like Rumpelstelskin, distracting the tank from the others and eventually driving it away because the tank crew became afraid of this unstoppable little demon that might , for all they knew, be carrying on his back one of those small but deadly magnetic mines that could blow the guts out of a tank. It was easier to leave this group of civilians alone. Each time this happened, Heinz always said, " The angel told me to do that. He said I'd be safe."

When it came to tanks and air attacks - there were several of each - the angel's advice was obviously effective, as, indeed, was the angel's advice about where to find food. But however prepared the group was to accept the angel's bestowals, it was totally unprepared to accept his advice to pick up some of the thousands of infants abandoned by desperate mothers whose starving bodies could not keep up the strength to look after their other children and breast-feed an infant as well. The group, his mother clearly the most adamant on this issue, flatly refused, resulting in terrible shouting and screaming matches with Heinz, which he inevitably lost and which caused him to spend more and more time "wanders, somewhere else" in deep discussions - of which others heard only one side - with the angel. On several occasions, after an absence of several hours, during which his mother grew sick with worry, Heinz re-appeared - stark naked. Someone needed the clothes, he said, and that person was really poor - he didn't have an angel, "the way we do". By the time the group got to city of Leipzig, they decided it would be best to leave Heinz, who was clearly mad, in a hospital run by an order of Catholic nuns and eventually, in ways that have no bearing at all to this story, he came to the Hohesmunster in southwestern Germany.

The papers described how down to this day, Heinz could not be released due to his "life-threatening generosity." After a half dozen or so failed attempts to release him he was diagnosed as hopelessly schizophrenic, but pleasantly so and no danger to anyone but himself and that only inadvertently. He simply gave whatever he had away to anyone taking the trouble to ask - and sometimes not even that - which resulted in his being apprehended stark naked each time that he was released, and his little boarding house room full of animals, or worse, strangers, some quite unsavory, vagabonds, petty

criminal types on the run, and those using Heinz for their sexual gratification. Most of the time he simply talked to the angel, which, by the way, he was careful never to call "my" angel, stating that if he did so, the angel, who came quite freely and of his own will and belonged to no one, would refuse all further help and abandon him into the insanity of the world. "I don't want to go crazy, you know, so I need the angel." he said with utter sincerity.

The following day Sister Anne left me a note saying that if I had read the papers, I should come to Ward 12 at midnight. She would be there to take me inside to look at the wonder, which she emphasized again, I must see. When I presented myself at the stated hour, the heavy door to the ward opened quickly and Sister Anne quickly led me inside and down a long aisle of beds to one at the room's far end. "This is him," she whispered, "Now have a look."

At first, of course, I saw nothing in the pitch-black and my eyes still needed time to accustom themselves to the dark. Except for some reason they couldn't. I kept seeing a soft but clear light, especially around his head of the sleeping man. "Does he have a night-light?" I asked Sister Anne, and she quickly answered, "Aha, so you see it too!"

"See what?" I asked her, and she said, "The light" and I, still too stupid to understand said, "You mean the night-light?" to which she answered, "There is no night-light...We don't have night-lights here. That light comes from him."

I felt, and probably looked utterly stupid. "What do you mean, from him?" I asked, and she whispered, "Just what I said - from him. Look by his head." I did so again, and saw the light was brighter than it had been a few moments before. She said, "It gets brighter than that. Just wait a few minutes" and, as we watched, indeed, it grew brighter.

Being young and skeptical I said, "I think it's some kind of illusion we're suffering from " to which she responded by handing me a small sheet of paper with writing on it. "Read it, " she said, 'by the light at his head. Don't worry. He never wakes up." I held the paper behind Heinz's head, and indeed, though I trembled slightly, I could read the words, which were the words of some prayer I had never seen. "Remember what it says," she whispered intensely, "and when you read it tonight in your room by ordinary light, you'll see this is no illusion."

"Are you telling me, he glows?" I asked her, and she simply answered, "Yes."

"From what?" I demanded, to which she said simply, "From goodness - and maybe, who knows? holiness. Haven't you ever seen pictures of haloes?" I did not answer her question, but held the paper into the dimmer light that surrounded his sleeping body and, saw that, indeed, here too I could make out some of the words. We stood there, in silence for another minute or so, as the light surrounding his head grew brighter. "The deeper he sleeps, the brighter

it gets..." she said as we stood there watching; then after a few more minutes she suddenly whispered, "We must go" and led me back down the dark aisle, to the heavy door of Ward 12.

"Why did you show me this?" I asked her as I was about to slip out the door. "Do you show this to all the orderlies?" and she simply smiled affectionately and said, "Of course not." "Why me then," I asked and she answered, "Because".

"Because what?" I demanded.

"Because, one day you will know what to do with this story," she said.

"Do what with this story?" I asked her to which she replied, "That I don't know. All I know is that somehow, someday you will find a way to take his light out of this ward and into the world. His light will touch others - through you."

"I'm no Heinz," I told her, "I have no problems with guns..." and she said, "I know. But you are his witness...Now go..." and pushed me, ever so gently, out of the door.

Hohesmunster provided dorms to its young personnel and when I got to my room a few minutes later, I quickly took out the prayer and read it by - what should I call it ? - real light? As you may have already guessed, the words were the same. Call me whatever you like, but the fact remains immovable as a mountain: by some kind of light that shone from a man's head, I had correctly read words I'd never seen before. Later that day, I even had Wolfgang, my room-mate, read the words for me. They were the same. Later I asked one of the orderlies who worked in Ward 12 if it was some kind of exception regarding the use of night-lights. He looked at me as if I were a fool. "Night-lights at Hohesmunster?" he cried out, " But, of course, of course, my good Canadian friend - and Sister Eddaberger will be the next pope!"

Sister Anne and I never discussed Heinz Kampinski again, not for my lack of trying but for her refusal to do so. "When a seed is planted," she told me on one such occasion, "it's best to leave it alone to its own nature and time." Then she tapped my forehead and said, "This doesn't understand because it is young and impatient just like your body but this - " and she tapped my heart, " in you, it is very old... and it understands..."

"A young man with an old heart?" I asked with a smile, and she said, "It is very old, ancient in fact - God does that sometimes for reasons best known to Himself - and your head, your poor head will have to work hard - and long - to catch up. It's a good thing it's so impatient!" and then she laughed softly and changed the subject forever.

Almost thirty years have passed since my days at the Hohesmunster and Heinz Kampinski, if he is alive, would be in his seventies. Naturally, when I

think of him, I cannot help wondering if he still possesses his wondrous night time radiance or whether the world's realistic insanities have conquered his beautiful madness. Sister Anne, of course, is now dead, but I think of her now and again, and smile, for she was, as I'm sure she knew, absolutely right about me. I have never forgotten the light shed by Heinz Kampinski, which shines, soft, but discernibly in everything that I write for it is the light of wonder and mystery and marvel that I try to let through the cracks in the textures of language. And she was right too in guessing that I would pass that strange light into the rest of the world as I have, more clearly than ever, in telling this story.

— Light, The (Used by permission of the curator)