

Live Cargo

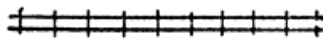
(Abridged)

By Eric D. Goodman

Helen's childhood was so mingled with misery, she hadn't known there was any other kind. Arriving in America did not eliminate the ache, but it tempered past sufferings with new contentment. Over the decades, she'd grown accustomed to her tender husband, their cozy home and quiet neighborhood, their yard and friends to tend. She'd come to know a peaceful life. Now, at seventy-nine, she'd met up with misery again.

The train glided steadily along the iron tracks. She looked out the window and longed to be on the other side. She got up to go to the lounge car.

Walking masked the movement of the train, but when she sat, there was no denying where she was, how it felt, what it reminded her of, what she'd managed for decades to close out and now cursed herself for conjuring. Crammed into the cattle car like slabs of meat, so tight together she could barely breathe, wanting to get off the train but dreading the destination.

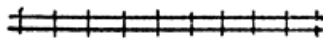


Washington DC was as impressive as she'd remembered it. Years ago, Helen had visited the capitol with her husband, Moshe. Their visit had been twenty years ago; his death had been four.

Now she stood with her memories at the nucleus of freedom, the Capitol building. Up close

or from afar, in daylight or darkness, it was a spectacular sight, this glowing yarmulke of a dome crowning the white building, a beacon of hope and peace.

She visited the National World War II Memorial. When she spotted a pigeon's droppings on one of the pillars, she sighed. She wanted to tell someone about it, to instruct the caretakers to take care of the disgrace. But she found no one to tell. She spat in her handkerchief and worked away the crust. The stain reminded her of blood and flesh crushed on stone.



Happiness was never the norm, even after arriving in America. But it was possible, and it came in brief moments. Still, memory lingered and suffering survived in their daily conversation.

Helen remembered vividly when Moshe had learned about the plans for a National Holocaust Memorial Museum. "It needs to be remembered," he'd said.

Helen hadn't been so sure. "We *can't* forget. Why make ourselves re-live the piercing details?"

"Remembering the bad times prevents their return."

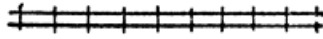
"Remembering the bad times *is* their return."

"It's an obligation." Moshe was determined.

But not as determined as his bad health. Even as he lay dying, he insisted she make the pilgrimage.

Helen didn't want to go, but how could she deny her beloved's dying wish? She was healthy, but not fit to fly, according to her doctor, and certainly not fit to drive the distance from Chicago to DC herself. She'd avoided trains all her adult life, had always been afraid of them like a child fears a monster in the closet. The monster hiding on the train of Helen's memory was real; she had to face

it.



Helen was 13 when the train arrived in camp. Her fear did not stop her from proceeding toward it along with the rest of the skeletal crowd. She'd learned instinctively that you couldn't let fear stop you. If you showed your fear, you got yourself killed. She'd seen the warm blood and bits of skull on the cold cement wall, had watched resistant friends and family shot dead. Fear was a fine alternative to death.

She knew Mama was somewhere in the crowd, but she'd lost her. There wasn't time to cry; bullets kept the mass moving. A man in uniform grabbed Helen by the arm and swung her up into the boxcar like a sack of potatoes.

There were no seats, just untreated wood held together by black metal and bolts. Small, barb-wired openings at the ends of the car let in dull light, but she couldn't get to one of them

There must have been close to a hundred women on the car, but not one of them was her mother. There were other cars.

It had been warm outside, but inside the car an unbearable humidity bore down on them. She was so hot and sweaty, even with her hair cut short by dull German shears.

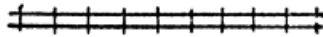
A younger girl begged for water, but there was none to give. An old woman offered her a smooth stone. "Put this on the center of your tongue. It will help."

When Helen could no longer stand, she edged her way through the pudding of sweaty flesh and found a place along the wall to lean on.

"Ouch!" A splinter of wood slid into her arm and broke off. She let it alone so it wouldn't

look bad. Just the thing to earn more than a splinter in her flesh.

She'd become thirsty. She looked for the woman with the stone and found her on her back, soaking in the floor's warm sludge. The woman's eyes were open and did not blink, but the train's motion gave her life. Helen found the stone on the floor next to her, between the fingers of her dead hand. She wiped it on her soiled clothes, and put it in her mouth.



The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum bore down on Helen with its heaviness—blood-red brick, dull cement and granite, glass cased in metal bars. The building throbbed with dread.

The elevator door opened and Helen boarded along with the other visitors. Helen didn't block out the disrespectful jokes and snickers of the younger visitors, or the inappropriate flirting and groping. It helped remind her that she was not really here in this, that it was just a display. But she read anger in the rigid face of the old man across the elevator.

Helen took a deep breath and shuffled through the displays.

These three floors of pain carried her in excruciating detail through the 1930s and 1940s, through the rise of Nazi Germany and the fall of Europe's Jewish citizenry.

Helen dropped her ticket as she watched the clips of medical experiments done on living men, women, and children. She went to sit and rest in a peaceful-looking hall of glass. But inside the hall, devoid of exhibits, she heard the piped voices of survivors telling their horrid stories. She stood and left, only to be faced once again with visual terrors: piles of discarded shoes. Bags of shaven hair. Gates and relics from camps.

Then, the bridge in her path: a wooden box car just like the one she remembered from her

childhood. Rough wood planks, barbed wire on small slits-for-windows. She boarded the car and was drawn to one of the two windows, instinctively seeking an escape. She was shocked by the car's cleanliness; it was devoid of the stench she remembered, cleared of the dead bodies she'd carried with her all these years.

A crowd of young people boarded the car and began tromping back and forth. "Wow!" said one.

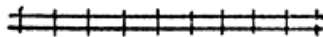
"Is this for real?" asked another.

"This doesn't look so bad," chimed a teenager.

Helen found herself yelling at the boy. "It *was* so bad! You can't imagine how real this is!" Her excitement tapered into a quiet sadness. "It *was* so bad, and worse, even." She slumped into the corner.

"Sorry," the teenager said. They spilled out of the car.

How could they know? How could they understand? Even with all of this to show them, to teach them. These kids hadn't forgotten—they'd never known. Everyone wanted them to *remember the Holocaust*. How could you make a person remember something they never knew to begin with?



The Nazi train seemed to go on and on forever. The heat and humidity had risen; the stench swelled from the waste at their feet. The conditions worsened as they traveled along the iron tracks, unsure of their destination.

At least Mama will be there.

The train stopped abruptly. They heard gunshots, heard bodies falling. For a long time they stood in the car, craving the relief of release but not wanting the doors to open.

God, let me see Mama just one more time.

When the door slid open, soldiers stood there with guns pointed at them. But they were not Nazis, and their weapons lifted at the sight of the passengers.

“You are free,” announced a young soldier, not much older than Helen. He wore a Soviet Army uniform. The Jews in the car spilled out.

Helen went from car to car, looked into every face of the crowd, calling out, “Mama!” But Mama wasn’t there. There was little doubt her mother was back at the labor camp on the ground, her skull crushed against concrete, and that she, like Helen’s father, like Helen’s grandparents, like everyone from both her childhoods, would never be seen again.



In the Holocaust Museum, Helen hunched in the corner of the train car. Someone boarded. She looked up and saw the old man from the elevator. He helped her up.

“These kids don’t know.”

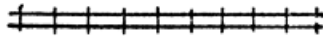
“They *can’t* know,” Helen said. “How could they?”

Helen and the Russian proceeded through the exhibit. Neither was bound to the other, yet they remained within view of one another, as though for comfort.

The three dense layers of the exhibit ended with a large movie screen showing survivors telling their stories. She wanted to take comfort from these stories of survival, but they were too laden with tears. The stories brought to mind her own experience and reminded her that it was *not* unique. There were too many stories like hers. As she retreated to the lobby, literature reminded her that such stories continued in less fortunate places of the world. Her story mattered, yet it was only

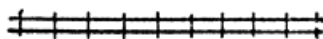
one raped, tortured, charred remnant in a million, waiting to be bulldozed into a pit of indifference and forgotten a generation later.

The Russian exited the exhibit shortly after she did. Spotting her seated on a bench, he nodded to her before leaving the museum. She thought of the Russian soldier who had liberated her from the train all those years ago. She had the urge to thank him, to thank *someone* for her freedom.



As Helen exited the Hall of Remembrance, she came upon a display of old photographs. These were happier pictures, shots of Holocaust survivors in better years, after liberation. It offered the happy ending she needed, reminding her that there were others like her, others who had come through the misery and found joy again. People and couples and groups stood before homes and monuments, in vast fields and lively cities. Captions read *Belarus* and *Ukraine*, *France* and *America*. One photograph caught her eye and wouldn't let go.

She couldn't believe it. She moved closer, squinting with hope. A group of women stood on the coast of the Baltic Sea in Lithuania. There was no mistaking her. Helen's eyes welled, but the photograph remained clear. It was Mama—only older—with a group of women. She must have been ten years older than the last time Helen had seen her. Helen laughed through her tears. Of course she'd have died of old age by now, but still, joy flooded Helen. She imagined the life her mother must have lived. Not joy and happiness exactly, but certainly Mama had tasted contentment again. Mama had survived. She thanked God. Moshe had been right to make her come. On the other side of misery, closure waited.



Headed home on the train, Helen considered how quickly the years had raced by, once freedom had been granted by the Russians and secured in America. She looked outside the lounge's window. Trees and bushes lined the tracks in the foreground, blurring into one mass of green, brown, and red. Queasy, she looked back inside the lounge car.

A man in uniform entered. She'd seen plenty of military men over the years, but the last time she'd seen one on a train was from a time she wished she could forget. Her heart raced ahead of the train's rhythm. The soldier marched her way, armed with a beer. She saw his face clearly, the Nazi who'd shot her grandfather. The uniformed man who'd murdered her grandmother. The soldier who had pushed her into a pile of dead bodies when she cried at the sight of them. The one who'd thrown her on the train like a sack of potatoes. They all had this same face now.

"Hey," the soldier said gently. "You okay?"

Helen looked up at the young man, not much older than she'd been back then. She saw him now. "Thank you," Helen said. "I mean, for your service."

"Oh." The soldier's face grew heavy. "Thanks."

He passed on to a window and peered longingly outside, as though he too yearned for an escape.

The phantoms still haunted her, probably always would. The motion of the train stirred them. But Helen was a survivor. Mama's picture reaffirmed what she already knew: happiness was not the norm, but on the other side of misery, contentment waited.

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Eric D. Goodman writes about trains, wombs, and animals gone wild. He's the author of *Tracks: A Novel in Stories* and *Flightless Goose*, a storybook for children. Learn more about Eric and his writing at www.EricDGoodman.com. He also invites you to connect at www.facebook.com/EricDGoodman.