



INTRODUCTION

S. YIZHAR (pen name for Yizhar Smilansky, born 1916) is usually considered to be the major novelist of the war generation of 1948, the first generation of native Israeli writers. He began writing in the politically troubled period at the end of the 30s, and his novels and stories register the shock of coming of age in a time of brutal warfare. His immense stream-of-consciousness novel, *The Days of Ziklag* (1958), a subject of furious debate after its publication, was acclaimed by many younger Israelis as the definitive stocktaking of their generation's relationship to the War of Independence. Yizhar's continually inventive style, utilizing elements of the older literary Hebrew as well as the new colloquial language, together with a good deal of his own neologisms, decisively extended the range of descriptive prose in Hebrew. Yizhar was for many years a member of Knesset, the Israeli parliament, and, a high-school teacher by profession, he has repeatedly addressed himself to questions of education, national values, and the condition of Israeli society.

"*The Prisoner*" was written in November 1948 during the first Israeli-Arab war. It was published in *Molad*, a monthly then sponsored by Mapai, the ruling party, and so it appeared in wartime in what was indirectly a government-supported magazine. That fact is worth noting as an index of the openness of political discussion in

THE PRISONER (1948)
S. YIZHAR



SHEPHERDS AND THEIR FLOCKS were scattered on the rocky hillsides, among the woods of low terebinth and the stretches of wild rose, and even along the swirling contours of valleys foaming with light, with those golden-green sparks of rustling summer grain under which the clodded earth, smelling of ancient soil, ripe and good, crumples to gray flour at a foot's touch; on the plains and in the valleys flocks of sheep were wandering; on the hilltops, dim, human forms, one here and one there, sheltered in the shade of olive trees: it was clear that we could not advance without arousing excitement and destroying the purpose of our patrol.

We sat down on the rocks to rest a bit and to cool our dripping sweat in the sunlight. Everything hummed of summer, like a golden beehive. A whirlpool of gleaming mountain fields, olive hills, and a sky ablaze with an intense silence blinded us for moments and so beguiled our hearts that one longed for a word of redeeming joy. And yet in the midst of the distant fields shepherds were calmly leading their flocks with the tranquil grace of fields and mountains and a kind of easy unconcern—the unconcern of good days when there was yet no evil in the world to forewarn of other evil things to come. In the distance quiet flocks were grazing, flocks from the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A far-off village, wreathed with

olive trees of dull copper, was slumbering in the curves of hills gathered like sheep against the mountains. But designs of a different sort cast their diagonal shadows across the pastoral scene.

For a long time our sergeant had been carefully peering through his fieldglasses, sucking his cigarette, and weaving plans. There was no point in going further, but to return empty-handed was out of the question. One of the shepherds, or at least one of their boys, or maybe several of them, had to be caught. Some action had to be taken, or something be burned. Then we could return with something concrete to point to, something accomplished.

The sergeant, of medium height, had thick brows which met over his deep-sunken eyes; his cap, pushed back on his balding head, exposed a receding forehead and damp, limp wisps of hair to the wind. We followed his gaze. Whatever it was that he saw, we saw a world of green-wool hills, a wasteland of boulders, and far-off olive trees, a world crisscrossed with golden valleys of grain—the kind of world that fills you with peace, while a lust for good, fertile earth urged one to return to back-bending work, to gray dust, to the toil of the burning summer: not to be one of the squad which the sergeant was planning to thrust bravely into the calm of the afternoon.

And, in fact, he was about ready to take action because just then we noticed a shepherd and his flock resting in the leveled grain in the shadow of a young, green oak. Instantly a circle was described in the world: outside the circle, everything else; inside, one man, isolated, to be caught alive. And the hunters were already off. Most of the platoon took cover in the thickets and rocks to the right, while the sergeant and two or three others made an encircling movement down to the left in order to surprise their prey and drive him into the arms of the ambush above. Amid the tender, golden grain we stole like thieves, trampling the bushes which the sheep had cropped so closely, our hobnails harshly kissing the warm, gray, sandy soil. We “took advantage” of the “terrain,” of the “vegetation,” of the protection offered by “natural cover,” and we burst into a gallop toward the man seated on a rock in the shadow of the oak. Panic-stricken, he jumped to his feet, threw down his staff, lurched forward senselessly like a trapped gazelle, and disappeared over the top of the ridge right into the arms of his hunters.

What a laugh! What fun! Our sergeant hadn't recovered before another bright idea struck him, astonishingly bold and shrewd: take

the sheep too! A complete operation! Drunk with satisfaction, he slapped one palm against the other and then rubbed them together as if to say, "This will be the real thing!" Someone else, smacking his lips, said: "Boy, what a stew that will be, I'm telling you . . ." And we willingly turned to the task, roused to a genuine enthusiasm by the flush of victory and the prospect of reward. "Come on! Let's get going!"

But the noise frightened the sheep. Some tossed their heads, some tried to flee, others waited to see what the rest would do. But who knew anything about handling sheep? We were ridiculous and that's just what our sergeant said, and he claimed that *shlemiels* and idiots like us could only mess up a good thing. Raising his voice, he began calling the sheep with a br-r-r and gr-r-r and a ta-ah-ta-ah and all the other noises and signs used by shepherds and their flocks from the beginning of time. He told one of the men to get in front of the sheep and to bleat, while some of us paired off on either side, brandishing our rifles like staffs and striking up a shepherd's tune, and three or more brought up the rear the same way. Thus, with a show of energy and wild laughter, we might overcome our hesitation, and be, in fact, soldiers.

In the confusion we had forgotten that behind a rock on the slope, huddled between two rifle butts and two pairs of spiked boots, sat our prisoner shivering like a rabbit—a man of about forty, with a moustache drooping at the corners of his mouth, a silly nose, slightly gaping lips, and eyes . . . but these were bound with his kaffiyeh so that he couldn't see, although what he might have seen I don't know.

"Stand up," he was told as our sergeant came over to take a good look at his prisoner. "So you thought we wouldn't get a thing?" crowed the men. "We did, and how! With us there's no fooling around! Didn't have to waste a bullet: 'Hands up' . . . he got the idea right away."

"You're terrific," agreed the sergeant. "Just imagine—the shepherd and his flock! What won't they say when we get back! It's really great!" Only then did he look at the prisoner: a little man in a faded, yellow robe, breathing heavily behind the cloth over his eyes, his battered sandals like the flesh of his hooflike feet. On his hunched shoulders sat doom.

"Lift the blindfold, but tie his hands behind him. He'll lead the sheep for us." It was one of those crack commands which the intoxi-

cation of battle always inspired in our sergeant, and a spark of joy passed among us. Good. The men unwound the black cord of the shepherd's kaffiyeh, took his hands and bound them with it good and tight, and then good and tight again for safety's sake, and still again for the third time. Then the blindfold was pushed above the nose of the frightened man: "*Nabi el'anam kudmana!*" he was ordered. "Lead the sheep ahead of us!"

I don't know what our prisoner thought upon seeing daylight again, what he felt in his heart, whether his blood whispered or roared, or what stirred helplessly in him. I don't know—but he immediately began clucking and grunting to his sheep as if nothing at all had happened, dropping from rock to rock through the brush with accustomed ease, the bewildered animals behind him. We followed after with hoarse yells, our rifles slapping our backs as we stampeded along and descended with wanton abandon to the valley.

We were so absorbed that we did not notice the silhouettes of other shepherds on the ridges of the hills, now gathering silently to peer at us from the distance as they rounded up their flocks; nor had we looked at the sun which all this busy hour had slipped lower and lower, getting more golden, until, turning the corner of a steep slope, we were struck by an intense blinding light: the smoky, enflamed disc seemed a mute admonition from space! But, of course, we had no time for all that: the flock! the prisoner! The sheep were bleating and scattering in all directions, while he seemed to shrink within himself, dazed and stupefied, his mind a ruin in which everything behind him was loss and all before him, despair. And as he walked he grew quieter, sadder, and more confused and bewildered.

It's too long to tell in detail how we made our way through valleys and past hills in the peaceful ripeness of summer; how the frightened sheep kept tripping over their own feet; how our prisoner was enveloped by dumbness, the silence of an uprooted plant—his misery so palpable that it flapped about his head in a rhythm of terror, rising and falling with the blindfold (tied to his brow with a brute twist of disdain) so that he was pathetic but also ludicrous and repulsive; how the grain turned more golden in the splendor of the sun; how the sandy paths followed their course between hills and fields with the faithful resignation of beasts of burden.

We were nearing our base of operations.

Signs of the base, an empty Arab village, became more frequent. Interrupted echoes. An abandoned anthill. The stench of desertion,

the rot of humanity, infested, louse-ridden. The poverty and stupefaction of wretched villagers. The tatters of human existence. A sudden exposure of the limits of their homes, their yards, and of all within. They were revealed in their nakedness, impoverished, shriveled, and stinking. Sudden emptiness. Death by apoplexy. Strangeness, hostility, bereavement. An air of mourning—or was it boredom?—hovered there in the heat of the day. Whichever, it doesn't matter.

On the rim of the village, in those gray, greasy trenches, the other citizen-soldiers of our Home Guard company wandered aimlessly—their food no food, their water no water, their day no day, and their night no night, saying to hell with what we'll do and to hell with what will be, to hell with everything that was once nice and comfortable, to hell with it all! We'll be dirty, we'll grow beards, we'll brag, and our clothes, wet with sweat, will stick to our unwashed bodies, infested with ulcers. We'll shoot stray dogs and let their carcasses stink, we'll sit in the clinging dust, we'll sleep in the filth, and we won't give a damn. It doesn't matter!

Nearing the trenches, we walked with heads high, proud of our loot! We fell smartly into step, almost dancing along. The bleating sheep were milling about in confusion. The prisoner, whose eyes had been covered again, dragged his sandals with clumsy uncertainty as we good-naturedly railed at him. We were happy and satisfied. What an adventure! What a job! Sweaty we were, caked with dust, but soldiers, real men! As for our sergeant, he was beside himself. Imagine our reception, the uproar and berserk laughter that broke loose like a barrel bursting its hoops!

Someone, laughing and sweating profusely, pointing at the unseeing prisoner, approached our sergeant. "Is that the prisoner? Want to finish him off? Let me!"

Our sergeant gulped some water, wiped his sweat and, still grinning, said, "Sit down over there. It's none of your business." The circle which had formed around howled with laughter. The trenches, the troubles, the disorder, no leave, and all that—what were they compared to all this?

One man was taking pictures of the whole scene, and on his next leave he would develop them. And there was one who sneaked up behind the prisoner, waved his fist passionately in the air and then, shaking with laughter, reeled back into the crowd. And there was one who didn't know if this was proper or not, if it was the decent

thing to do, and his eyes darted about seeking the support of an answer, whatever it might be. And there was one who, while talking, grabbed the water jug, raised it high over his head, and swilled the liquid with bared teeth, signaling to his audience with the forefinger of his left hand to wait until the last drop had been drained for the end of his slick story. And there was one wearing an undershirt who, astonished and curious, exposed his rotten teeth: many dentists, a skinny shrew of a wife, sleepless nights, narrow, stuffy room, unemployment, and working for "the party" had aggravated his eternal query of "Nu, what will be?"

And there were some who had steady jobs, some who were on their way up in the world, some who were hopeless cases to begin with, and some who rushed to the movies and all the theaters and read the weekend supplements of two newspapers. And there were some who knew long passages by heart from Horace and the Prophet Isaiah and from Haim Nahman Bialik and even from Shakespeare; some who loved their children and their wives and their slippers and the little gardens at the sides of their houses; some who hated all forms of favoritism, insisted that each man keep his proper place in line, and raised a hue and cry at the slightest suspicion of discrimination; some whose inherent good-nature had been permanently soured by the thought of paying rent and taxes; some who were not at all what they seemed and some who were exactly what they seemed. There they all stood, in a happy circle around the blindfolded prisoner, who at that very moment extended a calloused hand (one never knows if it's dirty, only that it's the hand of a peasant) and said to them: "*Fi, cigara?*" A cigarette?

His rasping voice (as if a wall had begun to speak) at once aroused applause from those with a sense of the ridiculous. Others, outraged by such impudence, raised their fingers admonishingly.

Even if someone were moved to think about a cigarette, it all ended in a different way—in military style. Two corporals and a sergeant came over from headquarters, took the prisoner, and led him away. Unable to see, he innocently leaned on the arm which the corporal had just as innocently extended in support. He even spoke a few words to guide the prisoner's groping steps. And there was a moment when it seemed as if both of them were laboring together peacefully to overcome the things that hindered their way and helped each other as if they went together, a man and another man, close together—until they had almost reached the house, when the

prisoner repeated: "Fi, cigara?" These few syllables immediately spoiled the whole thing. The corporal withdrew his arm that had been interlocked with the prisoner's, raised his eyebrows angrily and, almost offended, shook himself free. "Did you ever see such a thing?"

It happened so suddenly that the sightless man stumbled and tripped on the front step of the house, lost his balance and, almost falling, plunged headlong into the room. In a desperate effort to right himself, he sent a chair flying and collided with the table. There he stood, helpless, clumsy, overwhelmed by the force of his own violence and the fear of what was to come. His arms dropped to his sides and he stood stupefied, resigned to his fate.

A group of officers, their faces frozen in severe formality, had been ceremoniously seated at the table. But the prisoner's sudden entrance completely upset their quiet preparations, disturbed the atmosphere, confused the sentry at the door, confused the corporals and the sergeant; in short, everything had to be put back together again and grudgingly reorganized from the very beginning.

The officer sitting in the middle was tall and muscular, with stubby hair and a fierce face. On his left sat none other than our sergeant. One could see now that he was quite bald; the hair above his forehead was still dark but what little hair he had at the temples was turning gray. Perspiring freely, a crumpled cigarette in his mouth, he was the hero of the day and only at the beginning of his glorious adventures. Near the wall, conspicuously removed from the others, stood a pale young fellow glancing about through half-lowered lashes like someone quite convinced of a particular truth but curious to see by precisely what means it stands to be revealed.

"What is your name?" The tall officer began his interrogation abruptly but the prisoner, still stunned, paid no attention. The lips of the young fellow leaning against the wall puckered with assurance: this was just what he had expected.

"What is your name?" repeated the tall officer, drawing out the syllables.

"Who? Me?" The prisoner trembled and reached for his blindfold with a faltering hand. Halfway there, he dropped it, as if it had been singed by flame.

"Your name?" the officer asked a third time in a tone that emphasized his patience.

"Hasan," he rasped, bowing his head, frustrated by his blindness.

"Hasan what?"

"Hasan Ahmed," he answered, now on the right course, and his head nodded affirmatively.

"How old?"

"Oh, so-so. Don't know exactly." He twitched his shoulders and slid his palms together uncertainly, wanting to be of help.

"How old?"

"Don't know, sir," he said, moving his thick lips. For some reason he chuckled and his drooping moustache performed a little caper. "Twenty, maybe thirty," he said, eager to cooperate.

"Well, what's going on in your village?" The tall officer spoke with a restraint which, more than it emphasized his calm, betrayed the coming storm—the restraint of an original, cunning deceit, a kind of slow circular descent that is followed by a sudden strike at the jugular, a swoop to the heart.

"In the village they are working, sir." The prisoner sketched a picture of country life, sniffing the trouble that was to come.

"Working, you say? As usual?" The interrogator was moving in like a spider when a trembling thread of the web announces the prey.

"Yes, sir." The fly had edged away from the intricate web.

It was clear he would lie at this point. He had to lie. It was his duty to lie, and we would catch him by his tongue, the dirty dog, and we would show him. And just as we understood that with these tactics he would reveal nothing, so we knew that this time he wouldn't fool us. Not us. It's his turn to talk!

"Who is in your village?" The hawk hovered over its prey.

"Eh?" The prisoner did not follow the question and licked his lips innocently, like an animal.

"Jews? English? French?" The interrogator continued his questions like a teacher setting out to trap a slow pupil.

"No, sir, no Jews, only Arabs," he answered earnestly, with no hint of evasion. Once again, as if the danger were over, he tugged absentmindedly at his blindfold. The interrogator was glancing about the room: take a good look! It's beginning. Just see how an expert does it!

"Are you married?" He was started on a new, oblique attack. "Any children? Where is your father? How many brothers? Where does your village get its drinking water?" He wove his delicate web painstakingly, and the prisoner struggled to satisfy him; he fumbled

uselessly with his hands and made superfluous, meaningless gestures, bobbing his head and rolling his tongue, getting involved in petty details which threw him into confusion and annoyed his interrogators: some story about two daughters and a son, and how the son, neglected by his sisters, went out of the house and, as a result, fell sick and passed from the world. As he mumbled along, the prisoner innocently scratched his back ribs up and down, first with his thumb and then with a knot of four fingers, stammering as he tried to find the right words—he was unbearable.

There was a pause. The sentry shifted his weight from one foot to the other. From the expression on the face of the young fellow leaning against the wall and from the way our balding sergeant got up from the table, it was suddenly clear—not that the prisoner had nothing more to say, but that nothing would help but a beating.

"Listen here, Hasan," said the interrogator, "are there any Egyptians in your village?" (Now he'll talk! Now it's going to begin. Now he's sure to lie.)

"There are," answered the prisoner, so simply it was disappointing.

"There are," echoed the interrogator resentfully, like a man who has been paid in advance by his debtor. He lit a cigarette, deep in thought, contemplating his next move.

Our sergeant paced back and forth across the room, rearranged his chair, tucked in his shirttails, and with evident dissatisfaction turned his back to us and stared out the window. The young fellow by the wall, looking very wise, was passing his hand downward over his face, pinching his nose at the end of each stroke. You have to know how to handle these situations!

"How many are there?"

"Oh, so-so. Not many." (Now he'll start lying. This is it. Time for a beating.)

"How many?"

"Ten, maybe fifteen, about that."

"Listen, you Hasan, you'd better tell the truth."

"It's the truth, sir, all the truth."

"And don't lie."

"Yes, yes, sir." His hands, outstretched in surprise, dropped to his sides.

"Don't think you can fool around with us," the tall interrogator

burst out. He felt it was the right moment to say this. "How many soldiers are there?"

"Fifteen."

"That's a lie."

The bald sergeant turned to us from the window. His eyes were smiling. He was enjoying that last sweet moment of anticipating all the joy still to come. To prolong it, he lit the cigarette held in the corner of his tightly pressed lips. The other five men in the room regarded one another with the same wide-eyed pleasure. The sentry at the door shifted his weight again.

"I swear, sir, fifteen."

"No more?"

"The truth, no more."

"How do you know there are no more?" The interrogator intended to make clear that he was nobody's fool.

"No more."

"And if there are more?" (How can one answer such a question?)

"No more!"

Suddenly a clumsy kick from too short a distance landed on the man at an awkward angle. The unsuspecting prisoner staggered and collapsed upon the table with a loud exclamation—more of surprise than of pain. The whole scene suggested some kind of unfairly matched game rather than a cross-examination, something unexpected, unnatural.

"Now talk and see that you tell the truth!"

"Sir, I swear by my own eyes, I swear by Allah, fifteen."

The young man by the wall was afraid that so gross a lie might be believed. He held a long stick which he drew through his fingers with the grace of a knight drawing his sword. Then silently, significantly, he placed it on the table.

The barrage of questions continued without a break. The kicks landed like lightning, more naturally and freely, cool, deliberate, increasingly skillful. If at times they seemed unavailing, they nonetheless continued.

Because if you want the truth, beat him! If he lies, beat him! If he tells the truth (don't you believe it!) beat him so he won't lie later on! Beat him in case there is more to come. Beat him because you've got him at your feet! Just as a tree when shaken lets fall its ripest fruit, so a prisoner if you strike him yields his choicest truths.

That's clear. And if someone doesn't agree, let him not argue. He's a defeatist, and you can't make wars with that kind. Have no mercy. Beat him! They have no mercy on you. Besides, a goy is used to blows.

Now they came to the question of machine guns in the village. A crucial point, this. Here you have to lay it on or you won't get anywhere. And if you don't, Jewish blood will be spilled, our own boys' blood, so this point must be completely clear. They questioned him again and again until it became nauseating, and they gained nothing but the certainty that he was lying. Then he was ordered to describe the village's fortifications. And there he got completely confused. He had difficulty with the description, the abstraction, the geometry, the mathematics. He tried to convince his questioners with gestures, freeing his arms from his sleeves and waving them about while he shuffled back and forth. But the cloth over his eyes reduced everything to a blur of confusion. It was clear to everyone in the room that all his talk was nothing but a tissue of lies.

"You're a liar," exclaimed the discouraged interrogator. "I can see in your eyes that you're lying," and he raised a menacing fist in front of the prisoner's blindfold.

This got nowhere. It had become boring. Everyone was fed up. The cross-examination blundered along, without enthusiasm, and the kicks fell listlessly. There was sudden surprise when the stick came whistling down on the prisoner's back, a disinterested, routine blow from an obedient hand.

O.K. And now about the guns. The prisoner kept insisting that their barrels were no longer than the distance from his shoulder to his palm. He struck his left palm like a hatchet against his right shoulder and then against his wrist: from here to there. He beat himself incessantly, unstintingly, to remove any trace of doubt. Even then he was uncertain whether he had done enough or must continue, and around his mouth was the expression of a blind man who has lost his way.

The questions petered out. At the door the sentry, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, was looking up at the sky, possibly searching in the glimmering light for something that was not in the dirty, gloomy room. He feared that something terrible was about to take place. It was inevitable! Take the stinking beggar, they would tell him, and get rid of him!

"Well, that's that," said the interrogator, slumping back in his chair, eager to relax now that it was over. He stubbed his cigarette impatiently on the floor.

"I'd better finish him off," volunteered the sergeant, flicking his cigarette through the doorway with a quick snap of his forefinger.

"He's a complete moron," concluded one of the corporals.

"He's only pretending to be," said the other.

"He needs someone who can handle him," said the young man by the wall, curling his lips in a sneer at this offense to truth.

The prisoner, sensing a respite, licked his thick lips, stuck out a thick hand, and said: "Fi, cigara?" Of course nobody paid attention to the fool. After waiting some time, the idiot dropped his hand and remained rooted to the spot, sighing softly to himself: Oh, Lord God.

Well, what now: to the village quarry or perhaps a little more torture to open his mouth? Was there any other way to get rid of him? Or . . . perhaps one could give him a cigarette and send him home. Get out and let's not see you again!

In the end someone telephoned somewhere and spoke to the captain himself, and it was decided to move the prisoner to another camp (at least three of the men in the room wrinkled their noses in disgust at this unfit procedure, so civilian, so equivocal), a place which specialized in interrogating prisoners and meted out to each just what he deserved. The sentry—who had been uneasy throughout the cross-examination without knowing what to do—went to get the dusty jeep and the driver on duty. The young man who came was griping, angry that he had been called out of turn. Not that he objected to leaving: it would be nice to get back to civilization for a while and to see some human faces, but it was the principle, the principle of the thing! Another soldier, charged with an order whose execution had been delayed for lack of transport, took his place alongside the driver. Now he was assigned another duty: accompany the prisoner! (Thus shall they go through the streets of the town: the machine gun in front and the prisoner behind!) He sat and loaded his machine gun. With two jobs, the trip—God forbid!—couldn't be counted as leave!

The prisoner was pushed and shoved like a bundle into the jeep where the only place left for him was the floor. There he was dropped, kneeling like an animal. In front of him were the two soldiers and behind, the sentry whose pocket held the official order,

travel authorization, and other essential papers. The afternoon, begun long ago among mountains, oaks, and sheep, was now drawing to a close. Who could foresee how it would end?

The jeep left the moldering village behind, passed the dry riverbeds, and spurted ahead at great speed through the fields, bouncing on all fours. Distant details of the landscape kept shifting to close view. It was good to sit and watch the fields now bathed in a rosy light trailing small, golden clouds, a light that seemed to envelop everything—all those things which are so important to you and me but mattered not at all to the driver and his comrade in the front seat. They smoked and whistled and sang "On Desert Sands a Brave Man Fell" and "Beautiful Green Eyes" in turn. It was difficult to know what the man who lay on the floor of the jeep was feeling because he was blind, stunned, and silent.

A cloud of dust, billowing up behind the jeep like a train of smoke, caught the rosy light in its outlines. The uneven gullies and shallow furrows of the fields made the racing jeep dance. The fields stretched to infinity, abandoned to the twilight, to something distant and dreamlike.

Suddenly, a strange thought pierces one's mind: *The woman is lost beyond a doubt.* And before there's time to wonder where the thought came from, one understands, with the shock of lightning, that here, right here, a verdict is being sealed which is called by so many different names, among them: fate.

Quick, escape this rotten mess! Join the harmonizing of the other two up front or journey toward a far distance with the deepening twilight. But the circle of that unexpected thought grows larger and larger. This man here at your feet, his life, his well-being, his home, three souls, the whole fabric of life, have somehow found their way into the hollow of your hand, as though you were a little god sitting in the jeep. The abducted man, the stolen sheep, those souls in the mountain village—single, living strands that can be joined or separated or tangled together inextricably—suddenly, you are the master of their fate. You have only to will it, to stop the jeep and let him go, and the verdict will be changed. But wait . . . wait . . .

An inner force stirs in the young man on the back seat of the jeep and cries out: Wait! Free the prisoner!

We'll stop the jeep right here in the gully. We'll let him out, unbind his eyes, face him toward the hills, point straight ahead, and we'll say: Go home, man, it's straight that way. Watch out for that

ridge! There are Jews there. See that they don't get you again. Now he takes to his heels and runs home. He returns home. It's that easy. Just think—the dreadful, oppressive waiting: the fate of a woman (an Arab woman!) and her children; the will-he-or-won't-he-come-back; the what-will-become-of-me-now—all would end well, one could breathe freely again, and the verdict would be a return to life. Come, young man, let's free him.

Why not? Who's preventing you? It's simple, decent, human. Stop the driver. This time no more lofty phrases about humanity, this time it's in your hands. This time it's not someone else's wickedness. This time it's an affair between you and your conscience. Let him go and you'll save him. This time the choice (that terrible and important choice of which we always spoke with awe) is in your two hands. This time you can't escape behind "I'm a soldier" or "It's an order" or "If they catch me, what will they do?" or even behind "What will my comrades say?" You are naked now, facing your duty, and it is only yours.

So stop, driver! Send the man away! No need for reasons. It is his right and your duty. If there is a reason for this war, it must show itself now. Man, man, be a man and send him home. Spit on all this conventional cruelty. Send him away! Turn your back on those screaming slogans that paved the way for such an outrage as this! Free him! Hallelujah! Let the shepherd return to his wife and his home!

There is no other way. Years might pass before he is set free, by some magic, to return to the hills to look for his wife and family; meanwhile, they have become fugitives fleeing misery and disease—mere human dust. Who knows what can happen in this meanwhile, and where? Perhaps, in this meanwhile, someone will decide to get rid of him, to finish him off for some reason—or even for no reason at all.

Why don't you make the driver stop? It's your duty, a duty from which there is no escape. It's so clear that it's hard to wait for you to act. Here you must rise and act. Say a word to the driver. Tell him and his companion that this was the order. Tell them a story, tell them something—or don't even bother. Just let it happen. You are going to face the sentence, that's sure. Let him go!

(How can I? He's not mine. He's not in my hands. It's not true that I'm his master. I'm only a messenger and nothing more. Is it my fault? Am I responsible for the hard hearts of others?)

That's enough. That's a shameful evasion. That's the way every son-of-a-bitch escapes from a fateful decision and hides himself behind "I have no choice," those filthy and shopworn words. Where is your honor? Where is this independence of thought you boast about? Where is freedom, hurrah for freedom, the love of freedom! Free him! And what's more, prepare to be sentenced for this "crime." It's an honor. Where are they now, all your words, your protests, your rebellions about pettiness, about oppression, about the ways to truth and freedom? Today is your day of payment. And you shall pay, my son. It's in your hands.

(I can't. I'm nothing but a messenger. What's more, there's a war, and this man is from the other side. Perhaps he is a victim of the intrigues of his people but, after all, I am forbidden and have not the power to free him. What would happen if we all started to set prisoners free? Who knows, maybe he really knows something important and only puts on that silly face.)

Is that what you really think? Is he a soldier? Did you catch him with a weapon in his hands? Where did you find him? He's not a fighter; he's a miserable, stinking civilian. This capture is a lie—don't blind yourself to that. It's a crime. You've questioned him, haven't you? Now set him free. Nobody can get anything more out of him. And are you willing to suppress the truth for one more detail? The truth is to free him—now!

(It's so difficult to decide. I don't dare. It's involved with so much that's unpleasant: talk to the driver, persuade his companion, face all the questions, get into a rotten mess, and all because of a good-for-nothing wretch named Hasan, and what's more, I'm not sure it's good to free him before he's been thoroughly questioned.)

Nonsense! Someone with only a fraction of your feelings about truth and freedom would stop right here and send the man home and continue on his way, quickly forgetting the whole thing: short and simple, a man of action. And he wouldn't thank himself for being good! But you, with all your knowledge, arguments, proofs, and dreams, it's clear that you won't do it. You're a noble fellow. You'll meditate, enthuse, regret, reconsider, you'll be submerged in a sea of thoughts: Oh, why didn't I do it? And you'll cast the bitterness of your unfulfilled existence over the whole world: the world is ugly, the world is brutal. So make up your mind, and do it this time. Stand up to the test. Do it!

(I feel sorry for him. It's a shame they picked me for the job. I

would do it if I weren't afraid . . . I don't know of what. If only I were alone with him here. It's bothering me like a desire almost within reach, and I can't begin. When I think that I'll have to explain, get all involved, go to people and argue and prove and start justifying myself, I simply can't. What can I do?)

Listen, man! Can you actually think of weighing these pitiful trifles against another's life? How would you look at this thing if you were the one crouched on the floor of the jeep, if it were your wife waiting at home, and all was destroyed, scattered to the winds like chaff?

The prisoner has already said all he can say, told all he can tell. What more do you want? And even if he has lied a hundred times, who is he and what is he? He is only a miserable nothing, a subdued, shriveled creature, a mask wrapped in a cloth, someone shrunken and stooped like a worthless sack, frightened, dissolving into nothingness, for whom being kicked is second nature (kick him—he's an Arab; it means nothing to him). As for you, his little god, it's your duty to free him, even if he himself laughs at you, even if he (or someone else) sees it as a sign of weakness on your part, even if your friends make fun of you, if they try to restrain you, even if they bring you up for court-martial, for twenty court-martials! It's your duty to break free of this habitual swinishness. Let there be one person who is ready—even at the price of suffering—to get out of this heap of filth which was piling up in the days when we were good citizens and which is now the celebrated, the accepted, the official way of the world, embraced by those bearing the proud title "soldier." And all that was frowned upon is now freely allowed!

Oh, Hasan Ahmed, you with a wife named Halima or Fatima, you with two daughters, you whose sheep have been stolen and who has been brought God-knows-where one clear afternoon, who are you and what is your life, you who can cleanse from our hearts all this filth—may it rot forever in darkness!

Of course you won't free him. That's clear. Beautiful words! It's not even cowardliness—it's worse than that: you are an accomplice to the crime. You. Hiding behind a stinking what-can-I-do-it's-an-order. This time you have the choice, and it's at your disposal. It's a big day. It's a day of rebellion. It's the day when, at last, you have the choice in your hands. And you hold the power to decide. And you can restore life to a man from whom it has been taken. Think it over. You can behave according to the dictates of your heart, of

your love, of your own standard of truth, and—most important of all—of the freedom of man.

Free him! Be a man! Free him!

It's clear that nothing will happen. It was certain that you would evade it, that you would turn away your eyes. It's clear that all is lost. Too bad for you, prisoner, he does not have the strength to act.

And maybe, even yet. You, you right here, it will only take a minute: Driver, stop! Hey, Hasan, get out and go home! Do it! Speak! Stop them! Talk! Right now! This is the moment! You can become at last, you sufferer of many, long, empty days, you can become a man, the kind of man you've always wanted to be.

The glimmering plain was a thin, bright foil. Thousands of acres shone—a magical expanse without riverbeds or hills, ascents or descents, trees or villages. Everything was spread out to form a single, golden matrix, flat and gleaming, strewn with moving pinpoints of light, a single vast field stretching to infinity. And yet behind us (but no one is gazing there) in the misty evening coming over the mountains, there, maybe, there is a different feeling, a gnawing sadness, the sadness of "who-knows?," of shameful impotence, the "who-knows?" that is in the heart of a waiting woman, the "who-knows?" of fate, a single, very personal "who-knows?," and still another "who-knows?" belonging to us all, which will remain here among us, unanswered, long after the sun has set.

Translated by V. C. Rycus