

THE BOY IN THE PHOTOGRAPH  
by Agata Tuszynska  
(Tygodnik Powszechny, Cracow, 51-52, 1990)

1. The boy in the photo has thick black hair parted on the left. The boy in the photo has full cheeks and a large, expressive, slightly pouting mouth. The boy in the photo has big, dark eyes. He is looking bravely, straight ahead, his glance not wavering. The boy in the photo is wearing a uniform of the Hitler Youth. The boy in the photo is Jewish.

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2. "At first, I wanted to forget. It was supposed to be my eternal secret. I thought I would take it with me to my grave. For how could I compare myself to them, to the partisans, the victims of the ghetto, the concentration camp inmates, those who hid in horrible conditions? How could I compare their superhuman suffering to mine? Do I even have the right to count myself among those who miraculously survived the Holocaust? Me, who lived through those years in freedom among the murderers of my people? So I decided to keep silent.

"After all, would anyone believe me?

"My story was too terrible for those who lived through the Nazi hell. I carried it around in me like a dormant volcano, a volcano of shame and guilt. But my silence finally began to choke me. I felt it rising in me, destroying me, eating away at me from the inside. I lost my equilibrium. I began to suffer from heart disease and underwent a serious operation. I realized that it was time to free myself from my past."

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3. His name is Salomon Perel. He was born to a Jewish family in Peine, Brunswick, Germany, on April 20, 1925. Shortly thereafter, he was circumcised, in keeping with religious law. His parents had fled to the Weimar Republic from post-revolutionary Russia. His father stemmed from the former territories of central Poland, his mother - from Latvia. He was the youngest of four children, after Isaac, David and Berta. His father, a former clarinetist in the orchestra of the last czar, opened a shoe store on the main street in Peine, Broad Street. They were well-received by the Germans there, by the Jews - not so well. But Solly didn't yet know how to distinguish Jews from non-Jews. That changed somewhat when his father's store window was smashed for the first time. In 1935 the Perel family decided to emigrate to Lodz, Poland. It wasn't easy to adapt to new surroundings, to a new language. At that point, Salomon

again understood how hard it was to be different from everyone else.

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4. "When the school year 1939 ended, I was supposed to start Hebrew school after the vacation. I still remember the song that I sang with my schoolmates to say goodbye: 'In a year, in a day, in a moment... there may not be any of us left.' I didn't know what a terrible truth those words contained. Lodz soon ceased to be a safe haven for Jews. They were harassed, beaten, insulted. Our flight now seemed pointless because the Nazis had reached us even there. My parents decided to at least save the children. 'You didn't come into the world to die. You have to live.' Those were my mother's last words. 'You have to live.'"

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5. Fourteen-year-old Salomon and his brother Isaac, twice as old, boarded a train heading for Warsaw. Their mother had given them army bread and cinnamon dumplings for the trip. They also had lots of umbrellas for eventual economic security. Salomon put on his new bar-mitsve suit. He was freezing in it. The further east they went, the colder it became. They lost each other in the Bialystok area. Salomon almost drowned while crossing the Bug. To the soldier who rescued him he gave his last memento from his bar-mitsve: his fountain pen. Shortly afterward he entered an orphanage in Grodno.

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6. "I missed my home terribly. Everything here was strange, only the soup tasted the same. I started wetting my bed at night again. Soon after, letters from my parents began to arrive from the ghetto. My mother asked if I was praying and if I was eating kosher food. I hadn't told anyone that my parents were religious because I very much wanted to join the Komsomol. I had trouble because of my father's class background, but thanks to my exemplary behavior and good grades, I was finally able to acquire my coveted credentials. That was a real holiday. I remember shouting again and again during the assemblies: 'Religion is the opium of the masses.' I was one of the most fervent devotees of Stalin."

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7. In June they were preparing to go on vacation on the Niemen. But the Germans attacked the Soviet Union. Salomon had already managed to flee three times: to Peine, to Lodz,

and to Grodno... Now he was near Minsk, awaiting the end. On the right side OF the forest stood Jews, who were condemned to death. He thought of his mother. He didn't want to die yet. He buried his papers in the ground with his foot. He tried to read the writing on the button of the soldier who was about to pass sentence: "God is with us." What God, he thought, whose God, he didn't know. The soldier shouted: "Hands up!"

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8. "And when I was asked, 'Bist du Jude [Are you Jewish]?' - I knew that I could only give one answer. And I felt as sure of myself, as if the finger of God was touching me. I answered: 'Ich bin Volksdeutsch [I am a colonial German].' The dividing line between life and death was a hair's breadth. I knew what awaited me if they were to discover who I was. And from that fear of death, that at any moment I could be shot, I became sure of myself. I answered that I was German. From that moment on I was no longer the master of my fate. It was as if everything that happened afterwards had been written by someone else - I was only a bystander. They asked me my name. I realized right away that I could not tell them the truth, so I gave them a different one, Josef. I invented it for myself, for him, and went on. Only my birthdate was real, it was not a Jewish trait.

"They dressed me in a uniform... as if they had changed my skin. Until then I had had a sheep's skin, and now I acquired a wolf's skin."

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9. Little Josef Perjell, Volksdeutsch from Grodno, orphan, soon became the favorite of the soldiers of the Twelfth Armored Division of the Wehrmacht. He played the accordion well, learned to sing German songs, to play scat, and to drink beer. Since he knew Russian, he served as a translator and mascot.

At that time he often dreamed that he was being shot. A dream, in which elegant German officers tore him limb from limb and impaled his head while screaming savagely, came later.

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10. "I was afraid of myself and afraid of what was around me. I don't know which terrified me more. I thought I was dreaming. I saw myself in the uniform that was the terror of both Peine and Lodz. I wanted to wake up at last. But that wasn't one of my nightmares. When I grasped that, astonishment was replaced by alertness. Danger was lurking at every moment. But when you are sixteen, everything is

simpler. And although I felt almost incessantly threatened, at the same time I knew that nothing could happen to me, after all. To someone else, yes, but not to me. Everyone was ordered to take off their pants to check whether they were circumcised, but me they believed. A Pole who heard that I was passing myself off as a German and who shouted that I was Jewish, was beaten on the face. How dare he call a German such names? God was at my side. It can't be explained. It was a miracle. A series of miracles."

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11. Soon after his commander, a fervent anti-Semite, got the urge to adopt him. Salomon Perel would henceforth be called Josef von Muenchow and would be heir to a large estate in Pomerania. For the moment, his future mother bombarded him with letters and with packages filled with goodies. He constantly looked for a convenient moment to escape to the Russians. One of those unsuccessful escapades in the direction of the enemy turned out to be an act of exceptional bravery. For his heroism, the boy was rewarded by being sent to a special school for the elite of German youth.

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12. "The boarding school was in Brunswick, right near my home town. I didn't understand why fate was toying with me so cruelly. Peine, Lodz, Grodno, Minsk, the Moscow suburbs, the Leningrad area, Tallinn... and now I was back in my birthplace, but I was no longer little Solly. I was someone else. But who?

"I was well-received at the school, thanks to the recommendation of my commander and the legend of the battle at the front. I was even forgiven for the fact that, not being tall or blond, I could not serve in the S.S. But as a future member of the Hitler Youth, I did get a uniform with a swastika.

"I had to do the Heil Hitler salute non-stop and at a certain moment it began to seem like I was becoming proud of it. I felt strong, like when I heard 'Tannhäuser' at the opera."

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13. One Sunday he went to Peine. In his parents' shop there was a photographer's studio, instead of shoes there were pictures of Wehrmacht officers. On the door of the cafe there was a sign: dogs and Jews not admitted. He sat down right away and ordered a piece of cake.

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14. "I was always very sure of myself. Why was I so sure of myself? Because very quickly I began to believe in this character which I had chosen for myself. In my new character. If I had any doubt as to who was make-believe and who was real, I tried with all my strength to bury Solly, the Jew, in my soul. And as time passed, he was buried deeper and deeper until he was forgotten. And that's how I succeeded in acting the part of Jup. Jup, that's what they called me, and I believed that I was Jup. I wanted the Third Reich to win the war, I screamed, 'Heil Hitler,' I sang that anthem which talks about the happiness of plunging a knife into a Jewish back.

"I heard that song for the first time when we were in the dining room. I didn't know how I could swallow. I almost felt that knife in my back, the knife that they were singing about. I was choking. And yet, the will to live was stronger. I knew that I couldn't let on that something was wrong.

"I wanted to live. By no means did I reflect then what people would think of me fifty years later. Obviously, people think and say different things. That I was a potential traitor, that I renounced my identity... And I only wanted to stay alive."

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15. He wanted to live because life is sacred. He wanted to live because that was his mother's wish. He wanted to survive and if it was necessary to eat pork, he ate pork. He isn't ashamed of that and isn't sure whether, in a battle for your own skin, one can observe the limits of good taste.

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16. "The first thing I always did in a new place was check out the bathroom, to see whether it was possible to wash and use the toilet safely. Being circumcised was the only trace of my Jewish nationality. Only that reminded me who I was. It reminded me ceaselessly, even when I was trying hardest to forget."

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17. At first he still had a good bar of soap from the front, soap that lathered abundantly and covered a dangerous place. But later he had to use RIP soap, which didn't lather at all and which he bad-mouthed together with his mates: "damned Jewish soap!" For RIP meant "Reinjudenpaste [pure Jewish soap]."

Many years later, he saw an Israeli man on television who wanted to perform a symbolic funeral for a bar of soap like that because it contained the fat of his fellow Jews.

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18. "It was terribly difficult and dangerous to be Jewish, but not to be it was impossible. I hid this one tell-tale sign as best I could. I even tried to perform an operation on the circumcised part of my genitals. I tied it up with wool borrowed from my German girl friends. But my attempts were in vain. I was constantly preoccupied with this. I suffered much and finally I gave up."

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19. Jup diligently studies Mein Kampf, as well as The Myth of the Twentieth Century by the chief Nazi theoretician, Alfred Rosenberg. He is schooled in racial theory: "It is true that Jews resemble humans from the biological point of view, since they have a nose, a mouth, eyes, and other body parts, as well as something like a brain. But from a moral and intellectual point of view, they are like animals permeated by harmful miasmas. The immorality of the Jews is spreading. No one should wonder why the German nation considers them to be the embodiment of the devil on earth."

With a bayonet, Jup fills a mannequin with a yellow star of David with holes. He gets an excellent grade for his answer on the subject of the necessity of exterminating the Jews.

Salomon wakes up early, dripping with sweat, out of fear that he has talked in his sleep. On the window pane he draws a star of David with his finger. He writes a letter to God in the Harz Mountains, on the same cliff where Goethe created Faust. "I can't do it anymore. Please let the day of freedom come quickly. Amen."

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20. "Who was I then? I was simultaneously - in one soul, in one body - two personalities, two contrasts that could not be greater. In one body a Jew and a Nazi. What could be more contradictory? It was like fire and water. I learned to live like that. It was a kind of special technique that I used. I would compare it to the pendulum of a clock. A pendulum constantly swings left and right. In my case, the further the pendulum kept to the right, the more it stayed in Jup's world, the more I was Jup. I didn't just act the part of Jup, I was Jup. I took pleasure in the victories of the Reich, I wrote patriotic poems on the death of a late buddy: 'I promise you that we will continue to fight for the victory of our beloved Fatherland.' No one forced me to do this, I wrote it because it was my inner desire. Jup's inner desire.

"But I remember the moment when the pendulum, without any warning, moved over to the left. I thought then: 'God,

what am I doing? Where am I? Why am I shouting "Heil Hitler" when I am Jewish?' I lost my internal equilibrium. And then I looked for the nearest bathroom so that I could have a good cry. I cried for a long time, and it helped. But as the tears began to dry up, as I walked out of the bathroom, the pendulum moved over to the other side. I could now again sing those songs and scream 'Heil Hitler' and listen raptly to the reports of the victories of the German army at the front. That's how it was..."

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21. In December, 1943, all the soldiers went home for the holidays. He decided to go to Lodz. He hadn't seen any Jews for a long time, other than grotesque pictures in class. Now he stood as if hypnotized. They moved about the streets very slowly, as if in a dream, as if the life had vanished from inside them.

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22. "I didn't know what had happened to my parents. I stood behind the barbed wire of the ghetto, on the Aryan side, a boy in a Hitler Youth uniform. And suddenly an old woman started to approach me, a Jewish woman, wrapped in thick kerchiefs. I don't know, maybe it was because I wanted to see my mother so badly, but it began to seem to me that it was her. The woman walked to the other side of the wall at a certain distance from me. And when she was opposite me, I wanted to shout out: 'Mom!' but at the last moment I refrained. The voice of reason never left me. It told me: you have to keep quiet. And I kept quiet. What young German, a member of the Hitler Youth, goes into the ghetto to embrace an old Jewish woman?

"To speak, to betray myself, would have meant certain death. They would have seized us and killed us. I don't know. And maybe, if it really had been my mother, I wouldn't have thought twice, I would have thrown myself on her and not thought at all about what would happen afterwards. Maybe it would have happened that way. I don't know and I never will. And maybe I would have ended up in the ovens at Auschwitz. But I survived. Some star was guiding me, and I kept silent."

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23. For ten days he rode the ghetto tram back and forth. He was unable to spot his parents. Later he found out that his mother was already dead. In his pocket he kept the crumpled card on which he had written in Polish: "Perel Family, 18 Zgierska Street, Lodz Ghetto. Solly is alive, watch the

passing tram." But he never showed the card to anyone. Eventually, he tore it into small pieces.

At that time, he met a girl in Lodz. A German girl from the Ukraine who invited him over for New Year's Eve. When she gave him the address, he was stunned, because it was the address of his family's house, the house of his childhood. That night, he danced a tango, which his sister had taught him. He danced on the second floor, door on the right. The ceiling which the champagne corks bounced off was the floor of their old apartment. He welcomed in the New Year 1944. Everyone wished each other a speedy victory by Hitler. Everyone cried for joy. Even Jup cried. The show went on.

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24. "In April 1945, I turned twenty, one day before Hitler's birthday was celebrated. Not as grandly as in previous years. The war ended. I got the nicest present possible from fate, a present that I did not know what to do with at first. Salomon could emerge at last. 'Mazl-tov, Shloymele!'"

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25. Just then, on Brunswick Street, he met a Jew, who was still wearing the striped uniform of Auschwitz. Thin, skin and bones, his head shaven. On his sleeve it said "Jude."

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26. "I didn't believe my own eyes. I passed him, but turned back at once and ran after him. After all, the Jewish spark had not gone out in me, it had only been buried deep, deep, of necessity crushed by stones. Suddenly, I underwent a shock. There still are some Jews on this earth... I went up to him and asked: 'Are you Jewish?' But he avoided me and went on his way. I hadn't realized that I was still wearing a German uniform, albeit without a swastika. Why did he avoid me, why didn't he want to talk to me? After all, I'm... I ran after him again and caught up to him. And then I suddenly remembered two Hebrew words, two words which I didn't even know I remembered. With those words began a Jewish prayer, I might have heard them long before in the synagogue with my father. And now I said those words: 'Shma yisroel.' Now he believed me. He believed me that I was Jewish and I hugged him so hard, I almost strangled him. I cried like a baby and couldn't stop crying. That moment was my return to my Jewish roots."

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27. Manfred Frankel, a Jew from Brunswick, was the first one to tell him the way the Jewish people had been annihilated. At that moment, he understood for the first time what was hidden in the words that he had repeated.

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28. "Who was I then? I had gotten rid of the mask that had been forced on me, but I had not yet uncovered my real face. Something old had ended, but nothing new had begun. Once again, I was condemned to solitude, a completely different one, but just as difficult to bear. I deserted the vanquished, but I was not a victor. I felt bitterness.

"I was standing on the ruins of the Third Reich. I myself was in ruins. I no longer belonged to anything. Before, I had at least belonged to the German Reich, to my mates, to the school. Now I had no one. Moreover, my entire previous survival technique was now useless. I had nothing to look forward to. I had no purpose in life, no future, no one. When I heard about Israel, I didn't hesitate for a moment. I wanted to have a homeland, a future, a purpose. I wanted to belong to something."

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29. The Israeli journalist to whom he told his story first did not believe him. He told her that he had served in the Twelfth Armored Division and that they had captured Stalin's son near Smolensk. She thought that he had made it up. Without his knowledge she wrote to the main German military archives in Koblenz. It turned out that the division exists to this day and that his commander is now a general and an advisor to NATO. He wrote to him.

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30. "I wrote to ask whether he remembered little Jup and that today I can tell him that that Jup is, in fact, Jewish... He answered that he was glad that I was still alive and that he would like me to attend a reunion of the veterans of the division. I didn't attend.

"But a few years later, I decided to go. There were my army mates, my schoolmates. They came with their wives to look at the wonder, that is, at me. It was a shock for them. They couldn't stop asking me: Jup, how could it have been possible for you to behave so splendidly that we didn't notice anything strange about you? To which I answered that although I may not be a born actor, somehow life took care of me. It created instruments in me that enabled me to adapt myself to the surroundings that fate had dealt me. Since I was among you, I became like you. And I pulled it off. I remember one of them saying then: If we had known that you

were Jewish, we would not have reported you. Sorry,  
don't believe you, I answered."

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31. Salomon Perel knows and remembers that they killed  
parents. And he has a problem with that. When he is  
about it, he feels like a wound is being reopened. But  
can't be someone other than who he is.

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32. "I hate those people who were at the front, who  
commanded, who participated directly in the killing. But  
think that young Germans were also victims of Nazism. They want  
brains were pervaded with totalitarian ideology. I know that's easier for me  
to fight for their fatherland and were sincerely to forgive them  
and still ask for it. I am inclined to forgive them. I  
I am not a vengeful person, but I don't know what it means  
because I didn't suffer as much as other people did. I  
suffered in a concentration camp, to suffer hunger and pain...  
to be in a luxurious jungle. In that case, I'd be putting  
I was in a whole people on one scale and say - they all  
"I don't believe in the collective guilt of all Germans.  
I can't put a whole level, on an inhuman level, on a level with  
did it, they're all guilty. I told my S.S. officer: I've shaken hands with  
myself on their level, but in the meantime I was also Jup and  
barbarians. That is an act of charity."

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33. When God asks him in heaven who he is, he'll answer: I'm  
a Jew. I am Shloyme Perel, the son of Azriel and Rivke,  
the grandson of the wise man of Vilkomir and Rabbi Eliakon  
Bar Halperin, may he rest in peace. And he'll add: I never  
stopped being him, but in the meantime I was also Jup and  
that has remained in me and can't be erased.

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34. "To this day, an inner war is going on between Jup and  
Shloyme. For Jup has remained within me, along with  
everything connected with him. For example, when  
happens sometimes that I react like him. As if I  
I'm in Jerusalem and I see a Jew with a new, acquired one.  
long coat, my first impulse is not one of sympathy. Or when  
had lost my instinct or replaced it with a new, acquired one.  
Only after a while does Shloyme anxiously take over. Or when  
I see a typical Jewish name, like Goldstein or Rosenzweig, in  
the credits of a movie or on the cover of a book, I think,

Jup thinks within me, the Nazis were right, the Jews really are poisoning European culture.

"Recently, there was talk in Israel of a man who killed his autistic grandchild and then committed suicide. My first reaction was to agree with his decision. Unproductive elements should be eliminated, that's what we were taught, that's how it should be, after all. We can't allow unhealthy growths to form on the shoulders on a healthy society, that's what I truly thought. And immediately I was terribly alarmed by this thought. And I was ashamed of myself. But that's what had been drummed into my head. I now know that children like that have the same right to live as other children, that they can find happiness, if only in a limited way. Shloymele in me knows that for sure.

"It isn't me that thinks otherwise, it's Jup in me who does. After a while, I curse him, but his thoughts are still present in me. It sometimes happens that Jup manages to prevail over present-day Salomon for a fraction of a second. Those are the remnants of the brainwashing that I underwent then. Present-day Solly always has the last word, but I know that Jup always has a strong influence on Shloyme."

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35. Salomon Perel loves the boy in the photo, the boy in the Nazi uniform.

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36. "I know that it's hard, I know. I'm always thinking about the Jews who perished then in such a horrible manner. But I will always remain this way: two-fold. The wound in my soul will never heal. I know that. I'll never be able to solve this riddle. And I'll never condemn the boy in the photo. After all, he's the one who saved my life."

Paris, autumn 1990.

Translated by Paul Glasser with the author.

P.S. On November 14, the premiere of Agnieszka Holland's film "Europa, Europa" took place in Paris. The film tells Salomon Perel's story. Ramsey Publishers has published his memoirs.