A Day at a Time

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A DAY AT A TIME

for Victor Klemperer

“Anyone who does not lose his reason over certain things has no reason.”

—Gotthold Lessing

Just walking down the street
you have to heil Hitler many times.
You go shopping for meat
but the sign is in the window
and the butcher waves you away.

Don Carlos is banned because
on stage he said something
favoring the theme of freedom,
and an actor is shot for telling
a joke about Hitler. Another tax
is levied, but only against Jews,
another oath of loyalty required,
this time eternal, requiring a triple
Sieg Heil. A Farewell to Arms
is banned, too pacifist, soon all
books by non-Aryans are pulled
from the shelves. You find that
you’re banned from the reading
room. They take back your card.
At home you read quickly, knowing
that soon your books will be burned.
Two policemen drop by to pick up
your ration card—no more cigarettes
or chocolate or gas for the jalopy
you love. At the American Embassy
you are told that your number is 56,429 and your wife's is 56,430. But it is not likely any visas will be approved although back in America the policies are being reviewed.

Patience is advised. The two policemen return to search the house for weapons. You tell them you have an old saber from when you served the fatherland in the Great War, but you don't know where it is, that saber. They insist on helping you find it—the task takes a few hours, everything turned upside down, inside out. Basement and attic are ransacked.

At last the saber turns up in a trunk. You go along to the station to be charged for the crime, harboring a weapon. Soon they come back to collect your typewriter. It must be tiresome for the policemen, you say to your wife, to come back so often, one time for this, the next for that—the family silver, the radio—and to make the Inventory of Assets, possessions they will steal as soon as they kill you. There is always something overlooked, or which some bureaucrat has now thought of. Your professorship, of course, was the first thing to go, your pension cut down almost to nothing. You keep hoping a job will turn up in Japan or India.
or South America. A friend writes how it’s green there—you know what she means. You ask yourself if you’re going to hang on until it is too late—for months friends have been saying goodbye—they got out. You ask yourself this every day, long after it’s too late. The language they use is not the German you learned as a child.

When the Führer says he will swear in blood, he means murder. You can’t take your mother to the hospital lest she be euthanized. You are told your house must be sold but that you will be given seven and a half percent.

You notice how, as long as there is alcohol and gasoline, drunk driving seems an attractive, often fatal, diversion. You note that “veronal in a hotel room” is sometimes the answer. You see that many, e.g., yourself, are blacking out, going blind for minutes, even hours, at a time. You observe that there are potholes and mud craters on all roads but the magnificent, much-glorified Autobahn, shown off to foreigners. You perceive that meadows and woods, lovely as ever, wait it out for the hell to be over. You agree that once the Olympics are finished it will be open season on those without sabers, typewriters, jobs, radios, silver, pensions, houses, cars, books, telephones, synagogues, rifles, machine guns, tanks, cavalry, bombers, fighter planes, grenades, trenchcoats, motorcycles, swastika armbands, maps, garroting ropes, poison pellets, firing squads, friends from abroad, homelands (fatherlands, motherlands), visas, passports, adequate disguises, escape routes.