

Us And Them

“Good. Next!”

I was startled out of my daydreams, again. I looked up; only two more girls from the table across mine, then it was my turn.

One of them stood up and started reading from their textbook.

“During the last century, many efforts were made to unite people, who were then living in many separate nation-states. One of the greatest achievements was under the National Socialist Party during the Second World War.”

I knew exactly about what the girl was going to read out loud. An angry little man, parades of smiling, blond-haired blue-eyed youths. The triumph of one people, united against the undesirable elements of their society. Rather than listen, I let the eyes in my head slowly lose focus, and my mind’s eye wandered.

Gone was the blackboard; in front of me now stretched a wide avenue of packed gravel, lined by tall pines and rows of prison barracks. People walked on by, or were huddled together in small knots, conversing in low whispers. Gone also was my school uniform, though I felt not much different in this new uniform. On one leg of my striped trousers was sewn this:

A pink triangle pointing downwards.

“Das ist er!”

I looked up and saw the man who called me out. Two guards flanked him: he had this on his jacket:

A six-pointed yellow star.

“I had to tell them everything, it was either you or my Anna!” He forced those words through a bloodied nose and dislocated jaw. “I’m sorry.”

I knew what he told them. Outside, I was a bookseller, selling books. In here, a bookseller only sells dangerous ideas. Ideas that could get you killed.

“Halt! Häftling!”

The guards gave me chase, but I was faster. Passers-by tried not to look, their hearts already hardened by long, cruel hours of labor. There was only one place for me to go: the fence. One of two things could happen: either I avoided the guards and scaled up to freedom, or:

Actually, I knew only one thing would happen; the fence is electrocuted. I ran straight ahead.

I was jolted out of my daydreams. I looked up; the girl had finished, and the next one was standing up to take her turn to read.

“In the last decade of the twentieth century, many conflicts erupted in a peaceful world as the weak nation-states started to unravel in disunity. Among them were the Yugoslavian War, where-”

I’ve read about this before, though I didn’t fully understand it.

“-unite their people, separated by borders, into one glorious, unified country.”

All I understood about it was that no matter where and who the armies fought; the people always suffered. I let my mind take flight again-

-this time landing in the mouth of a subway tunnel, looking out onto a silent street. Heaps of rubble formed little molehills, the moles who dug them up hiding miles away and whose presence was only felt by a deep rumble, a whistle and minutes later without warning, a loud bang as everything came crashing down around you.

“Sara.” A young boy, barely past puberty, was down beside me in the tunnel, whispering as he tugged at my sleeve. I had a friend!

Excitedly, he kept gesturing at a corner-shop window. From the glass that was not broken, we read: **PEKARA**. It was a bakery, miraculously untouched amidst the destruction.

“Maybe there’s food.”

And then I realised I was hungry, deathly hungry. I felt everything.

“Mmmmm. Smells good!”

The smell! It was irresistible to the both of us. Despite our fear, we braved the open air of the street, driven by desperation. Darting in between rubble-piles, we made it to the other side and turned the corner-

-directly into a young man, barely out of his late teens. He looked as miserably hungry as we did in his oversized dark green jacket.

“Food please?” said my little friend.

The young man shook his head, eyes pleading in silence.

“Please?”

Again, no. I felt the hairs on my neck stand. Danger. I realised now; this man was a soldier guarding the bakery.

A soldier, on the wrong side.

It all happened too fast for me to do anything. My friend, desperate and agitated, forced past the soldier; the soldier reached for something in his jacket. Both of them stopped dead as the crack of a sniper’s rifle broke the silence in the streets.

The soldier, now slumped against my lifeless friend, held a piece of bread in his hand.

“Stand up, girl!”

I leapt to attention. It was my turn now.

“Begin.”

I looked down at my open textbook and started from where the last girl stopped.

“Unification efforts were more successful in the 21st century. For example, the assimilation of the Uyghur peoples-”

I hesitated as my mind drew a blank. Who were these people?

“-through voluntary re-education-”

In my mind’s eye, I saw what had really happened. Boys and girls in classrooms, taught that their language and their people could and did not exist.

“-renouncing their religion-”

I saw their congregations reduce from hundreds, to ten, then two, then none, as their beliefs were made illegal.

“-joyfully became citizens of a unified country. Thus, we should strive to unite as one, like they did.”

I could not believe what I just said. Was that really what unity meant?

My mind raced back to those daydreams. How real were they, compared to this textbook?

I saw the prisoners in the camp, diverse peoples who were united in the suffering they faced for committing the crime of simply being themselves.

I saw the girl, the boy and the soldier, speaking different languages but understanding each other over their common need: hunger.

I saw the men and women taken far from home to toil away in factories, united by their common heritage that they never let go, even when they were forced to forget.

No. To me, those dreams, those people, and their unity are real.

999 Words.