

ENTERTAINING MONA LISA

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SCRIPTUS BOOKS

First published in 2015 in Great Britain by
Scriptusbooks Ltd
46 Murray Road
London SW19 4PE

Scriptusbooks.com

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Printed by printondemand-worldwide.com
Cover designed by Barbara Loxton Design
ISBN 978-0-9564466-4-0

ENTERTAINING MONA LISA

For Hilary with love

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Preface

All these stories are based on historical fact and are presented in chronological order, starting with the 20th Century and ending with the Roman period. Some readers have expressed interest in the sources on which they are based and brief notes are provided at the end of the book.

Philippe de Felice

London, 1st December 2015

THE CONVERSION OF HANS FRANK

THE CONVERSION OF HANS FRANK

Nuremberg, 15th October 1946

Dear Father Johannes,

You have always been my guide. To you I owe my call to the priesthood. Above all, you taught me how to pray. To you I now turn for help.

The war is over and Hitler is dead. For six years, we've lived in the shadow of death. Every time I close my eyes, I hear the mad shouts of cheering crowds, I see endless ranks of soldiers parading the streets, I feel the heat of burning cities... Our daily lot as Catholic priests has been to witness cruelties and injustices beyond description. But our faith was not shaken and we held firm. Throughout these long years, you and I prayed together and felt that God was near us, that Christ was also suffering on His Cross with us. Didn't Our Lord promise: *Whenever two or three gather together in my name, then I am in the midst of them?* Germany now lies in ruins. The rest of Europe is starting to breathe again. Everywhere there is new hope.

But not for me.

For me, the shadows are lengthening... When I close my eyes and pray, all I feel is silence and emptiness. It is only now, after all that suffering, that I understand a faith can die, just as a body may decay and die.

They say God has a purpose for us all, but haven't I suffered enough? Why should I be selected as the priest to minister to these monsters?

I pleaded with Bishop Andreas, I did everything to make him understand that there are things even a priest cannot bring himself to do. But he was immovable. My orders were to go to

Nuremberg and turn the other cheek. I begged him to release me from my vows, I threatened to appeal to Rome itself: I nearly broke down and shouted in front of the others. Why should I, of all the thousands whom they could have selected, be the priest ordered to offer forgiveness?

As I lay on my bed in the American army hostel I couldn't pray. Outside, I could hear the sounds of the deserted city. An occasional shout in the night, the distant cry of a patrol challenging someone breaking the curfew, then silence. The Allied bombers have left so little of Nuremberg standing that the wind howls ceaselessly through the half-broken buildings, their torn facades making fantastic shapes in the darkness. Sometimes, the bombs have left the side of a building still standing, its piping somehow hanging suspended at impossible angles, high up over the streets. There they hang, rattling in the wind, like demonic jesters clamouring for attention. The strangest sound is that moan, that persistent cry of the wind whistling through broken windows, through gaping roofs, like a perpetual accusation.

I lay still and cold for many hours, my mind a blank: I couldn't even decide who to pray for. For the countless dead lying strewn across Europe? For the survivors, so that their grief may be alleviated by grace? My clumsy words seemed a particularly grotesque way of helping them.

30th August 1946

I have done my duty according to my vows of obedience. I met the other priests assigned to give spiritual guidance to the accused. The priest in charge is Father Siktus O'Connor, an American from New York, the sort of large heavily-built man you see in Hollywood films. He welcomed us warmly and spoke enthusiastically about the power of the Holy Spirit: four of the

defendants have apparently returned to the Faith: Von Pappen, Kaltenbrunner, Seyss-Inquart and Frank. It seems that the Lutherans have done even better than we Catholics. Their pastor, Father Gerecke (another American, this time from Missouri) has apparently managed to 'net' -as he puts it- the majority of the accused, holding services in a chapel constructed out of two cells. There you can hear Von Ribbentrop, Field-Marshal Keitel, Admiral Dönitz, Von Schirach and Speer, all lustily singing their hymns and reciting their prayers in unison. Even Goering is there, but at least he has the honesty to admit that he only goes to church to get out of his cell..

The only ones who stubbornly refuse are Hess, Rosenberg and Streicher. I must admit that I have a secret admiration for those three, steadfastly rejecting the possibility of redemption and resolutely facing damnation. But Father O'Connor says he still prays for them every day.

We've each been assigned one of the Catholics. Father O'Connor will minister to Kaltenbrunner, the former head of the Gestapo. ("I'm keeping the worst to myself", he said with a hearty laugh). Father Herenfeld is in charge of Seyss-Inquart, Father Michaelis has Von Pappen and I've been assigned Hans Frank, the butcher of the Poles. Apparently, Frank is the most unstable of the four: his moods swing wildly from tortured guilt to defiant arrogance. For some reason, Father O'Connor decided I have the necessary compassion to coax him back to salvation.

5th September 1946

I met Herr Frank for the first time today. He turns out to be surprisingly likeable. He immediately stood up and welcomed me when I came into his cell. He is a little shorter than me but

immaculately dressed in the suits his wife brings him to wear- isn't it odd how we humans insist on our outward dignity? On first meeting, he is the archetypal German lawyer: correct, polite, serious- the sort of man who'd think it a stain on his moral standing if a letter went unanswered for more than a week. Unlike some of the other accused, he is a man of considerable culture. We talked about the glories of German civilisation. He spoke enthusiastically about Goethe, Caspar David Friedrich and Brückner. He spoke feelingly about his walks in the Schwarzwald reciting his beloved Rilke! Then the pictures of Auschwitz and Treblinka came to my mind. Then I remembered that these indescribable horrors happened in Poland, where he was Governor-General, while he enveloped Poland in a shroud of darkness...

As our discussions continued, I somehow tried to persuade myself I could feel some compassion for this despicable monster. But every time I began to feel a sense of peace, the thought of his heinous crimes surged up, like an overflowing cesspit. I saw his bloated innocent face, I remembered his small hunched figure in Courtroom 600, sitting between Keitel and Speer, darting little furtive looks around him, as if asking for approval for the horrors for which he was responsible. Looking at him again, I was filled with a sense of such utter loathing that it terrified me.

Please, Johannes, please pray that I may save my faith...

9th September 1946

The reason why Nuremberg was chosen to host the trials of the Nazi leaders is not for any symbolic value or because Hitler held his rallies here. The reason is more banal: it is the only town in Germany where a large courtroom has been left standing at a reasonable distance from a capacious hotel. And Nuremberg's

Palace of Justice has the added advantage of having enough underground cells to house all the twenty-three accused in one place. There is something almost comical in the existence of the two buildings, the courtroom and the hotel, standing almost miraculously intact in a landscape of utter desolation- as if providence has somehow spared those two heavy late nineteenth century buildings for a purpose.

Things have now settled down to a routine. We start the day with Mass at the Sebalduskirche - unless the weather makes it impossible to use the ruined church, in which case we use the American army barracks. Afterwards, we go to the trial, sitting in the row at the back, with the other priests.

It is interesting how each nationality is reflected by its legal traditions: the chief Judge, Lord Lawrence, embodies a British sense of fair play- Olympian and slightly ironic as he presides over the trial, sometimes cajoling a witness or reining back a particularly aggressive line of questioning. The Soviets are brutally pragmatic: Major-General Nikitchenko makes it perfectly obvious that he's getting increasingly impatient at the whole lengthy procedure: for him, the trial should simply list the crimes of the accused and march them off to a firing squad. The French go to great lengths to establish the trial's theoretical justification, with wonderful flows of Cartesian rhetoric. The Americans imitate the British, only more aggressively and without the same poise. As for the German defence lawyers, they sit impassively, insisting on the observance of the most minute details of procedure. Their arguments are predictable: the trial has no legal basis, the accused merely obeyed the laws of the Third Reich, the whole thing is a dangerous precedent of retrospective justice... They don't have the nerve to accuse the Allies of indulging in victor's revenge: only Goering has done that, probably realising that he has nothing to lose, as he's bound to be executed anyway.

Gradually, the trial is turning into a routine. Even the daily revelations of new horrors become part of it. As the wheels of justice laboriously turn towards their inevitable conclusion, I often catch the accused looking bored or even falling asleep... At first, the guards tried to maintain decorum by nudging the defendants with their truncheons whenever they doze off in the heat of the overcrowded courtroom, but by now even they have given up and the whole grotesque charade grinds on day after day.

But today things were different.

Today, they showed a film that chilled the blood in my veins. The lights were dimmed and the courtroom became a vast hall of shadows. The screen slowly lit up and started showing the nightmarish discoveries Allied troops made when they reached Auschwitz and Belsen. A hush descended over the whole courtroom and only the distant whir of the projector could be heard from somewhere behind me. They showed us everything: the chambers, the ovens, all the paraphernalia of murder turned into an industrial process... But it was the faces of the survivors that tore into our minds: faces where the eyes bulged out, where the eyes had no trace of life, staring at us accusingly.

At that very moment, a soft band of light from the screen illuminated the expressions of the accused: Goering's bloated face, Von Ribbentrop looking arrogant, Hess obviously quite mad and lost in some deep private meditation. Each of them was transfixed in the cold bluish light of the film, like creatures from another world. They claimed they knew nothing of what went on in the camps, but now their reactions were there for everyone to see. I watched their faces gradually change from bored indifference to horror as the film showed the mass graves where bulldozers rolled countless corpses into the pits, like great waves of putrefying flesh. At that moment, most of the audience held their breath, some even crouched down unable to bear what they were being shown. Truly we were witnesses to depths of evil greater than at any point in human history: even

Dante never imagined the unspeakable horrors of Auschwitz. He could never have imagined them for the simple reason that his was a naïve age which believed that suffering is always linked to guilt. This is why the Nazis were uniquely evil: they proved man's deepest sense of justice wrong, they inflicted untold suffering on people who were entirely innocent, whose only 'crime' was being alive in a form of humanity they were determined to exterminate.

Something forced me to go on looking at the accused. I saw Goering pursing his lips until they were drained of blood. Keitel covered his eyes with hands that shook uncontrollably. Admiral Dönitz- the Führer's chosen successor for the last days of the Reich- lowered his head in shame. Then I saw Hans Frank, collapsing in convulsive sobs, but none of his companions seemed to notice, so engrossed were they by the horrors before their eyes.

Since this film, I've begun to feel myself capable of the gravest of sins: despair or- more precisely- of doubts that Christ's incarnation and sacrifice were of any use at all. Auschwitz proves we humans are truly fallen creatures. The accused sitting on those heavily guarded benches were not mad, they were perfectly capable of normal thought. Hans Frank is the model of the polite and industrious provincial lawyer. But when I think what he did, then I feel shadows darkening in my mind... I'm finding it intolerable to be alone.

10th September 1946

The next day, I made my daily visit to Herr Frank.

At first, we sat in silence but I could tell he wanted me to be the

one to start talking. Instead, I merely watched him- God forgive me!- almost enjoying the sight of him writhing in front of me, guilt tearing him inside like an acid.

He stood up and paced up and down, smoking cigarette after cigarette nervously. I did nothing but merely watched him, filled with a loathing deeper than I can describe.

But it was his turn to surprise me.

'Father', he said, 'why exactly are you here?'

His question hit me like a knife. Suddenly all the gospel passages of forgiveness, of our duty to love and pray for our enemies flooded my mind. I remembered Christ inviting the Pharisees to cast the first stone, saying that he'd come to find sinners rather than the virtuous, Christ sacrificing himself on the Cross so that there could be redemption. What had *I* done to live by this example? What had I done but to act in a way contrary to everything that Christ stood for?

I've no idea whether my face reflected my inner turmoil, but Hans Frank stopped and looked at me with a curious expression, carefully placing yet another cigarette in his ivory holder.

I could not look at him without thinking of that film of Auschwitz and then remembering the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I was like one of those medieval sculptures of a man flanked by a demon and an angel, each whispering advice into his ears... I remembered those corpses stacked high and immediately afterwards the image of Christ on a stained glass window, hatred surging inside me while, above, I glimpsed the pure light of heaven...

'I am here to help you', I said simply.

'How can you help *me*?', he asked immediately. 'Haven't I done everything to ensure God will reject me?'

'God never rejects anyone', I replied, perhaps a little too mechanically. 'It is always *we* who chose to reject His love'.

'Are you really saying that there can be hope, even for someone like me?'

I looked at him, standing in his neatly-cut grey suit: urbane, suave but also somehow terribly vulnerable.

‘Yes’, I began to reply, grateful that the Catholic Church provides us with ready-made formulas, ‘the salvation of the Church is offered to every sinner’. Then I quoted the Catechism: *‘There is no-one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest. The gates of forgiveness should always be open to anyone who turns away from sin.’*

There was a long silence. He drew on his cigarette and inhaled deeply. Then he looked outside at the grey autumn day through the bars of his cell. He seemed to want to say something but then changed his mind at the last moment. I felt privileged to be a witness to his inner struggle: before my very eyes, I was watching a soul deciding its own fate.

I wondered whether I should intervene- whether it was my duty to say some words of encouragement. But I am ashamed to confess I couldn’t bring myself to do so: as I watched him struggle within himself, those images of Auschwitz came surging up again, and I -a Christian priest of fifteen years’ standing- I with all the venom that my heart could muster- I *hoped* for his damnation. I yearned for him to refuse, I longed for him to turn round and demand that I leave his cell- like Rosenberg or Streicher contemptuously refusing the attentions of the priests assigned to the care of their souls. At that moment, I passionately wanted him to reject me, to shut the door to salvation and plunge headfirst into the lowest pit of Hell.

‘Even I, Father?’ he said suddenly.

I looked up at him, startled out of my thoughts by his question.

‘Father, do you really mean that if I asked you to hear my confession and I was sincere, I could receive the sacraments?’

I could not help myself twisting the knife:

‘If your repentance was sincere’.

‘How could you know that?’

'You can always tell', I replied simply.
Without saying another word, I handed him my Rosary and left.

12th September 1946

Two days later, I had my first pastoral meeting with Herr Frank. I let him talk and he unburdened his soul, his rambling words fluctuating violently from extreme arrogance to abject despair. There were impassioned rants about the vanished glories of the Reich followed by convulsive sobs, as the horror of his crimes overwhelmed him.

He spent a great deal of time talking about Hitler. For him, the Führer answered Frank's craving for certainty. His presence cancelled doubt: he had almost become a god. Hitler was selflessly devoted to the German *Volks*, completely free of personal greed compared to the fawning and corrupt rabble around him... Whenever he felt disgusted by some atrocity, the Führer would be there, gazing at him from his portrait on his desk and the doubts would melt. At such moments, he would look at his idol and realise that he was only being a weakling, that shedding blood was necessary to create a better world, that it was his lot to live through the times when Europe's purification must take place. In centuries to come, they would look upon his generation as heroes, those who had ushered in the New Order. As he spoke, I imagined Hans Frank in his palace in Krakow, surrounded by his terrified Polish servants- all praying they might get out alive while their new master harangued them about the glories of the Third Reich.

The Führer had a mesmeric hold on all his followers were transfixed by him, subjugating their consciences and willingly surrendering their free will to that demon. A true German- a true National Socialist- should always place himself in the position of the Führer, Hans Frank insisted. His duty was to imitate Adolf Hitler, in every act and in every thought.

Führerworte haben Gesetzeskraft: the words of the Führer have the force of law! He even quoted me a lecture he once delivered on Aryan Law: ‘*Say to yourselves at every decision which you make: ‘How would the Führer decide in my place?’ This unity of your will with the will of Adolf Hitler will endow you with the authority of the Third Reich!*’

As he ranted, I remembered the words Saint Teresa. ‘*Christ has no body now on Earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion looks at the world. Yours are the hands through which he now blesses*’... That incomparable saint and that repulsive man had each modelled themselves on another being but with what vastly different results! Truly it is we mortals who chose our salvation or decide to be damned.

His confession went on. He described his life of luxury and splendour while Poland starved. His governor's residence was not in Warsaw but in Wavel Castle, a Renaissance palace on the hills overlooking Krakow. From there he ruled over Poland, the Lord of life and death, intoxicated by the thrill of his power over the millions of men who cowered at his feet. He smiled suddenly ‘Some even quipped that with me, Hans Frank, in power Poland had become ‘*Frank-Reich*’...’

‘I loved the Wavel’, he said, remembering the cool breezes that fanned the surrounding gardens during the hot summer months. He pillaged old masters from the Royal Palace in Warsaw. His wife, Brigitte, now the mistress of a wonderfully grand establishment, hugely enjoyed her time in Poland. There she indulged in her fantasy life of style and luxury, even going out shopping in the Jewish ghetto ‘because they turned out such gorgeous lace...’

His wildest ambitions were now fulfilled. He was now Governor of Poland, he the small lawyer from Karlsruhe, who had shocked his elders and betters at the Munich Bar by joining the nascent Nazi movement, even taking part in the Beer Hall Putsch. He was particularly proud of that: *he* was an ‘Alter Kämpfer’, one of the old fighters who had been ‘in the

movement' from the beginning. I think he was proud of this mainly because it proved that he wasn't the weakling which, deep down, he considered himself to be.

To keep his subordinates in control, Hitler used to encourage rival factions within the Third Reich. In Poland, a parallel S.S. administration competed with Frank's civil government, each outdoing the other in brutality to gain the Führer's approval. It became a mad race of murder and cruelty for its own sake: whenever the SS hanged a hundred Poles or Jews, Frank would order even greater numbers to the scaffold. He even confessed to envying these men of violence. He secretly longed to be as ruthless as the S.S., to be as free from the constraints of humanity as they were.

Standing on the balcony of his private apartments, he would look at Krakow beneath his feet, admiring the old streets and spires stretching below, feeling like a god. Everything around him belonged to *him*: he could switch between magnanimity and brutality as the whim took him. The whole process was immensely exciting, even intoxicating. At this point he smiled disarmingly: 'It was like a drug, Father. The power and the certainty of being able to use force without any resistance is the sweetest and most noxious poison that can be introduced into a ruler's mind.'

And so came a slow but deadly transformation. Gradually, he began to lose his fear of divine retribution, he began to feel liberated, as if suddenly placed beyond the reach of good and evil. He would look up defiantly at the starlit sky and know there was nothing above him. No God. No punishment and no reward. His earthly existence had only as much meaning as his thoughts were capable of giving to it. Whether he ordered someone's death that day was of no more consequence than if he ordered a merciful delivery of food to the ghetto: ultimately, it did not matter for both acts were of equal insignificance. The day he understood that, he said, he knew he had transcended the limitations of petty humanity, like an eagle soaring in the sky: he

had truly become a man!

I listened to him hour after hour, as he paced up and down his cell. I tried to think of something else, but I could only feel an overwhelming sense of disgust. I have sometimes doubted the dogma of Hell, even the existence of Satan. But that evening, as I listened to him ranting about the Führer, about the vanished glories of what Germany might have been, I felt I was in the presence of pure evil, as if Hitler's very presence was conjured back into the little cell where we sat.

Suddenly he stopped. Then with terrible slowness, he knelt down in front of me, asking for my benediction.

'It tortures me now to think how far I strayed from God', he said.

I couldn't find words to express my nausea and revulsion. In fifteen years as a priest I've heard terrifying sins in the confessional, but never before have I been confronted by pure evil. I looked at him and he looked at me.

Suddenly I could stand it no longer and rushed out of the cell.

14th September 1946

Today, I was not required to visit Herr Frank. I was immensely relieved...

It was a fine crisp morning, with a freshness in the air. The sky was so blue it momentarily helped me forget the degradation around me, the daily horrors revealed in Courtroom 600. My thoughts soared upwards and I went out, deciding to go to the city parks, where I hoped the rich autumnal colours would remind me that there was still beauty in the world.

The people of Nuremberg are in a desperate state. As I walked to the tram station, there was a commotion in the street in front

of me: a carhorse had fallen into a bomb crater and the driver was badly hurt. Luckily for him, a patrol of soldiers was nearby and he was driven off to hospital. But the crowds had their own reasons for wanting him out of the way: as soon as the army truck had turned the corner, a policeman put the horse out of its misery and the crowd got to work. Like a swarm of flies, they flocked to the carcass producing butcher's knives and cleavers out of their pockets: with much shouting, arguments and even the occasional fight, the horse was swiftly dismembered, the blood of the poor beast splashing everywhere on the clothes of the respectable housewives.

I watched the whole spectacle with horrified fascination, reflecting on how odd it was that, only a few hundred yards away, we were confining a few dozen men and keeping them well fed and housed until the day of their execution, while all around us there were children and old people almost dying of hunger.

My tram stopped at Dutzendteich Park, where Hitler once held his rallies. The arena was still there, with its endless rows of seats, filled with an eerie silence. The Americans have tried to destroy the huge slabs of concrete, but in vain. The strongest charges of dynamite cannot dent the titanic structures spawned by the Thousand Year Reich, so now they leave the whole area as an empty memorial. Just one year after the war has ended, vegetation is already spreading all over the concrete structures and birds have made their nests under the cavernous arches.

I sat down and my thoughts inevitably returned to Hans Frank, that odious and repulsive man sitting in his cell, waiting for the hangman but also waiting for me to save his soul. For days, I had been fighting against such thoughts, but I knew what my faith, my God and my entire calling meant. However much I rebelled against the thought I knew that if I couldn't 'save' him, if Christian forgiveness couldn't stretch even to a Hans Frank, then we are all doomed. The greatest saints in history considered themselves appalling sinners- and they were right.

Even Saint Teresa was a sinner, her life filled with imperfections and not just because of the lofty standards she applied to herself. She was a mere human and therefore could never achieve purity. Perhaps the cruellest result of the Fall, I understood, is mankind's ability to conceive of perfection without being able to achieve it! Like the stars in the firmament, these absolutes shine above our heads, to taunt and inspire us. This is why Saint Teresa suffered, why she was right to kneel and beg God for grace and salvation.

I stood up and started walking energetically across the vast arena. Perhaps it was fitting that such thoughts should have come to me in such a monstrous place, but I now suddenly understood how I could offer Hans Frank absolution. He would have to earn it by finding the self-disgust and, yes, the courage to take the hand of forgiveness which was being held out to him.

16th September 1946

Perhaps it is the boredom of prison or perhaps it is the lawyer in him, but, in the last week, Herr Frank has been particularly insistent that we should discuss theological points.

It is a bit like debating with a medieval scholastic. He constantly asks questions like: 'Can grace be varied according to the needs of the individual soul?' or 'Are there different types of grace to match the circumstances of each individual?' Herr Frank finds new questions to ask me on every visit, as if trying to learn a whole procedural system, as if theology were a science reducible to a few set formulas.

I try to make him understand that religion is not simply a set of rules, that the Holy Spirit shines through every moment of our lives, radiating the presence of God through our human imperfections, that dogma is only shorthand to express mystical

experience, but I am not sure he really understands me. I comfort myself with the thought that he is, at least, inquiring about the Faith, that this is a beginning, that something is happening in the depths of his being. As if a very, very dry plant is beginning to come back to life.

Herr Frank's mind is better trained than mine. He often finds holes in my explanations. But he is keen to learn and pretends not to be too concerned when my arguments are less than watertight: perhaps he has at last begun to understand that faith is beyond reason because it is based on a deeper reality, that faith is beyond logic and beyond the arid limitations of the human mind.

But, deep down, I find his questions irritating, mere word games while, all around us, the reality of transcendence whispers in the background. If there could be a cast-iron definition of God, if one could find an incontrovertible proof for the existence of God, it would have been found by now. How glad I am that no such proof has ever been produced! I prefer a hidden God than a God who forces his creatures to believe in him by the sheer majesty of his divine presence.

20th September 1946

Today, Herr Frank asked me to hear his confession. I was so taken aback that I immediately agreed to do so, without thinking about what I was committing myself to do. He immediately began to recite the confessional opening formula, saying it off pat, as if he had been practising for this moment for some time. And before I knew what I was doing, he was kneeling to my left and began to recite his sins, as if this was the most natural thing in the world: in an instant, the man responsible for the horrors of wartime Poland, was listing his crimes in a matter of fact tone, like an inventory.

At the Seminary, we were taught to shut our eyes while hearing confessions, so as better to see the inner soul of the repentant sinner. But this time, I not only opened my eyes, but I positively ogled the confessant kneeling before me. Was it really the power of the Holy Spirit that I was witnessing, shining through this list of appalling crimes or was he a consummate actor, playing his part to diabolic perfection?

As I listened to his monstrous list, I looked at him, I stared at the bald crown of his head, at his sober and respectable suit. No, I would not- I could not- allow this to pass as an act of contrition and open the gateway to Heaven so easily. Something inside me urged me to make him suffer longer. I wanted to see the torturing guilt really come to the surface: I convinced myself that it was my duty to test the sincerity of his 'conversion'. Most of all, I wanted him to crawl before me and grovel for forgiveness, to clutch my legs with desperation like all the countless victims he had sent to their deaths. It never entered my mind that I might be being seduced by a particularly subtle and dangerous temptation.

Solemnly, I told him to think again. To look into the depths of his heart and only then to ask for God's forgiveness. I knew - God forgive me!- that this was totally unjustified, that here was a truly repentant sinner before me- but I not only wanted him to suffer, I wanted to *see* him suffering.

I rose quickly and left him shaking on the cold floor of his cell.

24th September 1946

My next visit was scheduled three days later.

Those intervening days were a terrible torment for me. I kept being haunted by the memory of seeing him kneeling on the

floor of his cell, confessing his crimes in that precise, soft voice of his. Of course I knew perfectly well that I had abused my powers as a priest: I had deliberately refused absolution, I had violated my vows of charity, I had offered a stone to the one who had begged me for bread...

If Hans Frank died now, he would die unforgiven and would be damned for Eternity -unless it was theologically correct that an act of late repentance is sufficient to earn divine forgiveness *in extremis*. But that would only happen if he was truly repentant at the exact time of his death: should he die without absolution, if my deliberate refusal had turned him against God, if the fragile shoot of contrition had been killed off by my act of cruelty, then his soul would be damned forever. His lost soul would be on my conscience for the rest of my life, however much he might have deserved eternal damnation.

How I wrestled with my conscience during these three days! One moment, a surge of guilt would make me want to race over to give him absolution. But then I'd remember what he'd done in Poland and my heart would be filled with such loathing that I almost knelt down to pray that he might be thrown into the lowest pit of Hell. Once I was almost on the point of demanding to be driven to the cells but I then reflected that there was no guarantee that- at the point when I would arrive- Hans Frank would be in a state disposed to receive absolution. My sudden arrival would then have no purpose and might even provoke a *false* act of contrition... To grant absolution in response to false contrition would be even worse than letting God's unfathomable mercy respond to a deathbed conversion... And so the whole cycle of guilt, doubt, followed by rationality would begin again.

I began to think that it was *I* who was being driven mad.

Hans Frank stood up as I came in and greeted me with a slight bow. His face looked untroubled. It suddenly dawned on me that perhaps he had accepted my refusal to grant him absolution as something perfectly normal- as part of the usual process of 'earning' one's salvation. I found him polite and even strangely submissive, as if he had become convinced that, provided he did as he was told, then he would achieve his objective. I have said before that Frank strikes me as a fundamentally weak man and that his is the sort of personality that needs to anchor itself on a strong outside influence. The irony was not lost on me that if it was Adolf Hitler who once dominated his mind and cancelled all doubt, now a mere twelve months after his idol's death, it was I -or rather Christ through me- who now performed the same function!

We discussed the reading I had given him. He said he'd been particularly comforted by the quotation from Isaiah: *'I live, says the Lord, ready to help and comfort you more than ever, if you will trust Me and call on Me with devotion'*. He spoke feelingly about his yearning for penance, quoting the words of St. Thomas à Kempis: *'I desire no consolation that would deprive me of contrition'*. He declared that this was 'the key': it proved to him he would have to suffer- and be willing to embrace suffering- to achieve true peace.

He never mentioned Poland again, as if he was now removed from his past and even from his present. He knew the trial would continue, that he was almost certain to be sentenced to death- after all, he had pleaded guilty to all charges against him. All that interested him was to prepare himself for death. And so, I was privileged to witness the Holy Spirit at work, saving a man and claiming him back from the edge of the abyss.

27th September 1946

Today I received a call from the prison to come urgently. I set off immediately, arriving in Herr Frank's cell expecting the worse. But he had not slashed his wrists and I wasn't called upon to administer extreme unction.

As I entered his cell, he stood up, looking at me with a matter of fact expression. Then he asked very politely whether I would hear his confession again. We proceeded with the sacrament at once and I watched my hands making the sign of the Cross. It was thus that I finally heard myself reciting the ritual words that cleansed away the deliberate murder of millions of nameless Jews...

1st October 1946

The court has handed down its sentence: like most of the defendants, Hans Frank is condemned to death by hanging. The executions will take place the following week, on the evening of the 14th October.

12th October 1946

Frank had a 'blessed night' yesterday: that is his term for a night when he isn't tormented by his guilt and can bring himself to believe that God has accepted his repentance. He said he was suddenly seized by a feeling of immense peace when he recited the end of the Hail Mary: *'pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death'...*

It was when I talked to him that I understood why the Church

always teaches that the worse sin is not lack of belief. It is despair. Nothing can be worse than rejecting God's love and losing hope. Although the words burn in my throat, even if I feel a sense of utter repulsion at the thought of this man receiving forgiveness for his crimes, I know in my heart of hearts that Salvation means nothing if it excludes a Hans Frank. Sometimes I have doubts about his contrition: is it more based on the terror of eternal punishment than a genuine conversion? Is it therefore a true rejection of the horrors of his past life? If the Nazis were miraculously brought back to power and he was released, would he revert to his abominable crimes? Either he is a consummate liar and an actor of genius, or somehow the Holy Spirit has genuinely began to work in him. But it is not for us priests to cast out but to welcome sinners instead.

Even so, I began to hate Hans Frank far more for what he was doing to my priestly vocation than for his unspeakable crimes in Poland. I knew that my own soul was being corroded by his presence and that the sooner he was dead the better it would be for me. A few more months of this tortured, contradictory inner turmoil and I would no longer feel able to administer the sacraments, I would no longer be able to function as a priest. Desperately, while he knelt down and prayed at my side, looking genuinely all a truly repentant sinner should be, I would try to fill my mind with something else than loathing and contempt. I tried to occupy my thoughts with the Rosary, reciting the sequence of prayers again and again, but after a while my fingers ended up just fingering the beads mechanically, my mind a complete void.

Christ have mercy on me.

13/14th October 1946

The final day before the executions arrived and the atmosphere of the cells changed dramatically. They would not tell us who

would go to the scaffold first, but only that all would be hanged by two o'clock in the morning.

Everyone could hear the noise of the US Army sappers putting up the scaffold, but strangely no-one commented on the noise of the saws cutting wood or the sound of the nails being hammered in.

Extra security measures were introduced to prevent any of the condemned men from committing suicide: all the accused were forced to wear handcuffs at all times, daily exercise was forbidden and they slept with the lights on to detect any suspicious movements.

The accused were allowed to take Communion at about midday, while the afternoon was left for them to prepare themselves and for those with families to see them once more.

I gave Hans Frank the last rites just before 10pm. That would leave him about two hours to prepare himself for the final moment. We recited a few prayers together- the Credo, the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria- and then I laid hands on him. Afterwards I anointed his forehead and hands.

I felt exhausted by the emotions of the last few days. But as I knelt and rather mechanically prayed for his soul, a strange sense of peace came over me. The long process had now come to its fitting end and felt an odd lack of emotion at the thought that the man who I had guided back into the Faith was about to die.

I have often had to give extreme unction to the sick and the dying, but this was the first time that I had administered the sacrament to a healthy man. As I laid my hands and felt the slight warmth of his head, it felt terribly strange to know that this speaking and breathing man would not see the dawn in the morning, that in a few hours he would be dead. I was being allowed to watch a man making that awesome transition from the living to the dead.

A little after midnight, the executions began. We were not the first to be called upon but had to wait for at least an hour.

We didn't say much to each other, and I simply sat in the cell, ready to be called upon if he needed me. I felt calm, and oddly I did not expect him to flinch at the last moment and suddenly reject Christ. I didn't really pray but somehow blankly concentrated on the pattern made by the brickwork on the back wall.

Finally the doors opened and four soldiers came in, one from each of the Occupying Powers. The officer in charge of the executions, an American called Colonel Anders, read out the Court's sentence once again and led Herr Frank out the cell. I followed the platoon a few steps behind.

We walked quickly along the corridors lit by the crude and rather clinical light of neon strips. The soldiers marched in step, with Frank in the middle, arms tied in front by handcuffs. As I walked, I could not help myself observing the way his legs and hips moved. It was then that I was struck by the full absurdity of the killing that was about to take place. With great solemnity, we were about to put to death a perfectly fit man, a man who was presently breathing the same air as we were breathing, who was seeing exactly the same things that we were seeing, whose legs walked as quickly as mine. The difference was that, in a few minutes, with a sudden snap of a rope around his neck, he would be dead and we would be alive. In ten minutes from now, he would no longer be part of the same world. In ten minutes, he would know whether there was life after death, whether centuries of prayer and devotion had a purpose.

We had now reached the place of execution. There was a small crowd of people in the room, representatives of Britain, France, America and Russia, as well as two German observers and a few journalists. The scaffold stood in the centre of the large hall,

draped in a black cloth.

Beside me, I could hear Hans Frank mumbling a prayer softly, over and over again, but the sound started to irritate me. I suddenly desperately wanted him to die as quickly as possible, I began to loathe him again.

Hans Frank was led to the scaffold, his body beginning to sag as he started to be overcome with exhaustion. I blessed him as quickly as I could and watched him go up the steps to the execution platform. An American sergeant put the rope round his neck, and, just before he put the hood over his head, I caught a glimpse of Hans Frank's face, looking straight in front of him. It was a strange expression, calm and empty, as if he had suddenly regained his strength at his final moments: afterwards, I could not decide whether his last expression was one of resignation or of ironic defiance.

The sergeant gave a little signal that all was ready.

I shut my eyes at that moment and all I heard was the trap door suddenly opening and a dull thud as his body reached the end of its fall.

There was a short silence and two doctors went under the scaffold to certify the fact of death. As with all the executed Nazi leaders, his body would then be put in a wooden coffin, the rope still round his neck with a small label for official identification. Tomorrow the bodies would be cremated and their ashes thrown in a river to prevent any martyrs' shrines being erected.

Afterwards, when all the condemned had been executed, I was invited back to the officers' mess where we were offered Bourbon by Colonel Anders and Cognac by a French officer whose name I can't remember. We all talked rather louder than usual, as if we needed to fill a silence. I found that I was laughing quite loudly, and that everyone was laughing as well. Someone offered a few biscuits which I ate greedily, feeling the warmth of the Bourbon going down inside me. A Russian

officer handed round cigarettes, explaining that they were American contraband, and everyone laughed loudly at the joke. We all chatted and laughed, Soviet and American, British and French, all together exchanging pleasantries amicably.

I remember lifting my eyes to the dawn just beginning to emerge on the horizon. I looked at the skyline now breaking slowly with a thin but dazzling strip of light. It was then that I realised that the shadows were still crowding in my mind, that I could still hear the soft whispering of damnable thoughts.