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little chews

“Thoughts Are Free” by Matias Travieso-Diaz

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*Die Gedanken sind frei, wer kann sie erraten, sie fliehen vorbei wie nächtliche
Schatten.
Kein Mensch kann sie wissen, kein Jäger sie schießen, bleibt dabei: Die Gedanken
sind frei!*

*(Thoughts are free, who can guess them? They fly by like nocturnal shadows.
No person can know them, no hunter can shoot them and so it'll always be: Thoughts
are free!)*

-Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*

Jack, a disabled pensioner, was a survivor of a workplace accident at a meat-packing plant: a cooling pipe bearing ammonia had ruptured and released a noxious gas that, when inhaled by Jack, had caused immediate chemical cauterization of his larynx and damaged his lungs, leaving him debilitated and incapable of producing sounds.

After becoming mute, Jack had been taught to play a mouth organ as a way to strengthen his diaphragm and improve pulmonary function. Although incapable of achieving the resonance and pitch-shifting required for blues or complex compositions, Jack became able to play recognizable folk and popular tunes and other simple melodies, and spent hours trying to tease songs out of his silver Hohner harmonica.

Despite his being disabled, Jack's mind remained sharp, and he became engaged in political activities, joining the popular resistance to the then-ruling tyrant. For that reason, he was one of hundreds of civilians seized by the government's Posse during a mass protest against arrests of immigrants in his home city. Together with other protesters and immigrants singled out for deportation, Jack was taken to a warehouse in a far suburb that served as a temporary detention center. The facility became overcrowded, with detainees sleeping on the floors and having limited space for movement. There were not enough beds, and some detainees, like Jack, had to sleep on the floor. Winter was approaching, and the warehouse was inadequately heated, so Jack found himself shivering in discomfort day and night.

As days went on and Jack's incarceration continued, life at the prison turned even harsher. Food became scarce and of poor quality, portions were reduced, and meals were delayed. Hygiene supplies were limited, and clean drinking water was often unavailable. There was inadequate medical attention, and no care was provided for chronic conditions such as Jack's (who required periodic doses of antifibrotic drugs to arrest the progressive fibrosing of his lung tissue).

Complaining detainees were subjected to physical and degrading abuse by the detention center staff.

Jack realized he was likely to perish soon due to the extreme conditions of his confinement. The thought of impending death did not bother him as much anymore, but he greatly resented the inhumane treatment that was shortening his days. He had no words to share his anger, but did the next best thing he could: he would play from memory on the harmonica several protest songs he had learned during his convalescence.

Finally, a lawyer from a public interest firm was allowed – pursuant to a court order – to visit the warehouse and interview the inmates to learn, and report on, the conditions of their imprisonment. Jack wrote up and handed to the visitor an unusual assignment: “Please get me a cassette player, a taped recording of protest songs interpreted by S. [a folk balladeer from the 1960s], and a written copy of the lyrics of one of the cuts in the album, the German song *Die Gedanken Sind Frei*.” To honor the request, the lawyer went back to court and, over the regime’s objections, was able to secure and deliver to Jack the materials he had sought, under instructions that he and other inmates were to be allowed to exercise their constitutionally protected freedom of speech to listen to the songs on the cassette and discuss them.

Jack convinced a handful of incarcerated men and women to listen to *Die Gedanken Sind Frei* and memorize the song and its lyrics. Two weeks after their mass arrest, the cassette player was yanked away from Jack’s hands by the prison guards, but by then the deed had been accomplished: Jack, playing the harmonica, led his fellow prisoners on a rendition to the song, including its last stanza:

And if I am thrown into the darkest dungeon,
those efforts are futile,
because my thoughts will burst all gates
and tear walls apart: *Thoughts are free.*

After repeatedly intoning the protest song, the prisoners went into a spontaneous hunger strike, which was soon reported by the press and made the subject of motion after motion by the public interest lawyers. At the end, the regime had to bow to national and international pressure, and the unjustly incarcerated protesters were released.

Jack was unable to benefit from his deliverance. His body's unbridled attempts to repair the damage to his lungs had led to the failure of his respiratory system. As the scarring thickened the walls of the air sacs in the lungs, the muscles used for breathing had to work increasingly hard, until Jack reached a point of respiratory exhaustion; he could no longer muster the strength to take another breath and asphyxiated to death.

His untimely passing was lamented by all who knew him. The mourning was subsequently joined by many thousands who learned of his deeds and came to revere him as a martyr of the resistance, and his Hohner harmonica became displayed prominently in the museum that was built to store memorabilia from the era when terror had afflicted the nation during those long-gone years of darkness.

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