

The Little Jewish Lady

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I CAN SEE HER now, the little Jewish lady who came to the music club meeting that April night. Actually, she wasn't from Woodville but from Crockett City, twenty miles away. But another, much younger lady from over there who belonged to the Woodville Evening Musicales had brought her as a guest. And I myself was a guest also: it was the annual special program, with "brought-on" musicians from Memphis the main attraction. And since I was president of one of the "junior" music clubs, I had been asked to represent my group. It was a big event too, and I wore a coat and tie for the occasion. At seventeen I wasn't all that eager to get all dolled up like what my father called "a country corpse." But this was worth making the effort for—"professional musicians" (from one of the college faculties in Memphis) actually performing in my home town.

The club meeting was being held in one of our oldest residences—what my mother's generation usually called a "colonial" home—white columns out front, a splendid facade, but dwindling away in the back to a series of rooms and hallways apparently tacked on in haphazard fashion as time and increasing family dictated—a combination my mother always referred to as "a Queen Anne front and a Mary Anne behind." But the first bathtub in Woodville had been installed

there—perhaps the first indoor plumbing too: I had always heard that. And the Larrimores, whose house it was, had lived in Woodville since before Christ, as one of my aunts put it; and they were very hospitable people who always liked having company. So it seemed only natural that they had asked the Musicales to hold their big meeting there: they all belonged to the Musicales—two old maid sisters and their old bachelor brother—but, of course, none of them played or sang. Music was just another one of the "finer things" that everyone ought to support.

And so there they were—Miss Katherine and Miss Susan and Mr. Courtney—all dressed in their best, greeting the guests at the door and making them welcome in every possible way. ("O, it's a wild April night: the weatherman on the six o'clock news said it might even *storm*. But what does that matter when there's music like this to be heard—a string quartet right here in Woodville? We are certainly privileged tonight!") Of course I knew right then that most of the guests had probably never heard a string quartet in their lives: it was almost as if they had been asked in to watch a lion tamer at work. They seemed interested and guardedly polite, but obviously for them the proof of the pudding would be in the hearing. And they had adopted a wait and see—or wait and hear—strategy.

("How good of you to lend your lovely home for this occasion! You're always so public-spirited!" This to the Larrimores. Then to each other: "This is all going to be a new wrinkle for me! I just hope I'll know how to do.") And there was lots of bowing and smiling.

But the little Jewish lady was different. I should say she was in her seventies, and it was obvious that she had been very ill. Her face was drawn, and she seemed so frail she almost tottered when she walked, but of course she could hold fast to the arm of the friend who had brought her. She was dressed for the occasion too—in what used to be called a long black "dinner" dress and wearing a corsage, which had perhaps been given her by her companion. In any event, she looked as though she had prepared for something big, something important. And she sounded that way too when she greeted the Larrimores. "How kind of you all to do this, and how wonderful of my friend Mary Alice to bring me over all the way from Crockett City! Years ago, when Papa sent me to the conservatory in Cincinnati, I studied the violin; but I never went on with it, really almost put it aside when I married. And now my husband is gone, and the children are all grown and married with their own families of course. But my music remains a great resource." And I heard someone sitting behind me (we were already seated in the folding chairs everybody in Woodville always borrowed from the funeral home when they were entertaining a big crowd) say that yes, that was Mrs. Baumann from over at Crockett City and she had been Gertie Segal before she married, the daughter of a big dry goods merchant in Nashville, and they understood she had been very ill and, meaningfully, the outlook wasn't any too good either (people hardly liked to say the word "cancer" back then). Anyhow, it was good to see her up and about and they were glad she was making the effort and hoped it would

all do her good. And I wondered, was that what music was for—to make you feel better, do you good, like a dose of medicine? For that matter, what did the little Jewish lady mean when she said it had been a great "resource" for her? I don't think I had ever heard anybody say that. For me back then music was just something that was fun, something you *did*, like reading; but did you really take it all that seriously? And did it all have something to do with Mrs. Baumann's being Jewish?

I really didn't know much about Jews in those days. There were of course always several Jewish families in every small town down South—usually in the dry goods business or operating tailor shops, usually something to do with clothes. They never seemed to live out in the country, on farms; and I had heard my father say that they hardly ever did manual labor though of course they worked like dogs in their business houses. Yes, they were a foreign element, with names that often sounded German, sometimes even Spanish; they often had big noses too and swarthy skins. And of course they had never accepted Christ as their Savior ("He came unto his own and his own received him not") but were still waiting for the Messiah. And yet in many ways they were very much a part of the community, quite "Southernized," you might say. But in Europe they had recently been through terrible things—before and during the war which had just ended. And only now was the full extent of their sufferings coming to light—with revelations about the concentration camps and the gas chambers and all the rest. They had suffered deeply; that was all there was to it. But why did the Nazis (or was it all the Germans?) feel that way about them? What had they done to provoke such animosity?

I had never understood that. I didn't think it was just because they had rejected Jesus; I didn't think the Nazis and

others like them were so sanctified that they would persecute anybody on religious grounds. It wasn't a doctrinal affair. Perhaps they were jealous of a people who, everybody was always telling you, were extremely gifted and extremely bright—and often very successful in the world too. The Jews knew how to make money, how to make things work, how to invent, how to perfect. And they weren't lazy. Maybe the Nazis were jealous of their success. Did it really seem to some people that the Jews were indeed "chosen" in many ways, and did the Jews sometimes act as though they felt that way too? But then why didn't they fight back? Why did they *let* the Germans (who were also a talented and gifted people) treat them so dreadfully? I had never figured that out. And certainly when *Life* magazine began publishing the photographs of the death camps, it was all even harder to understand. I remembered vividly the naked bodies, all stacked like cords of stovewood, waiting for burial. I remembered the gas chambers, the ovens, swept and garnished almost as though waiting for some official tour of inspection, maybe even waiting for Judgment Day. (Years later I recalled that image when I first saw the Frankfurt airport glittering with an efficiency that was almost surgical.) And it was all scientific and deodorized and absolutely matter of fact. It had all happened right here in this world too, in the light of common day, not upon the midnight hour in Transylvania. And maybe that was the scariest part of all. What had happened to progress? What had happened to science? Was Edgar Allan Poe still true today?

Anyhow what did all this have to do with Mrs. Baumann? And why did I find myself thinking of her as "the little Jewish lady"? Did that suggest some sort of prejudice against her—and by extension all other Jews? Or did it suggest that she and they were, yes, different from us, but maybe different in a good way? Had they

indeed been chosen once and were they still, no matter what they had done or not done? The New Testament was full of people being "chosen" for things, like being invited to parties. (It was a very social book, I always thought, with lots of eating and drinking, lots of entertaining.) And sometimes they accepted but quite often they seemed to decline, and often for very humdrum reasons. But the host would then summon another batch of guests, sometimes even send his servants out to bring them in by force because he was determined to have a house full. And for the folks who stayed away the worst thing of all might be realizing too late that they might ultimately be missing out on what it was all about, the biggest party of all; and it was all their own fault and nobody else's. (Was that what Hell was?) No matter now. Mrs. Baumann *was* somehow special here. Alone of all the guests she seemed to understand this music—Schubert and Beethoven quartets, even finally one by Debussy.

This music made demands on you: you couldn't just hum it, you had to think about it. I could tell that myself. And the performers seemed to feel that way too: they were apparently lost in their music-making, which obviously had claims on them body and soul. (After all, I had always thought, you could play the piano *acceptably* but never the violin, which was either exquisite or hideous, no two ways about it.) But somehow Mrs. Baumann seemed to know what demands were being made, and her face and indeed her whole body reflected such empathy, such understanding. Perhaps she herself, in the presence of the music, had become some sort of instrument, to be played on, to respond—in a way I thought I never could. What did she know that I didn't know—or any of the rest of us for that matter? Could you learn it in school, or was it just born in you, like they always said genius had to be? Did talent make

any sense at all or did it just *happen*, and was it as inscrutable as the will of God often seemed to be? Was there something of the “chosen” about it all, and was it something like this the Jews were always supposed to have had? And did people resent them for that? Were most people finally *afraid* of anything like that?

Mrs. Baumann couldn't—and wouldn't—have hurt a fly; I knew that for certain right then. But did people somehow fear her for all that—even the people right here in this room? They didn't know what she knew and perhaps never would: I felt pretty sure about that. And I didn't think it had anything to do with education or “opportunities” either; it was more like grace—and just as mysterious. And it was never plainer than at the conclusion of the program when, amidst the polite applause, Mrs. Baumann, with tears in her eyes, half rose, as though she wanted to speak, then gave a sigh almost ecstatic before seeming to collapse back into her seat, murmuring “Thank you, thank you.” (To whom was she saying it—the musicians, the composers, maybe even God?) If she had had a fit right there, some of the other guests might have been more easy in their reactions: they would have known what to do then. Now they just seemed embarrassed but sympathetic: they cleared their throats and looked tactfully away. Yes, they would overlook the little scene and go right on with their lives and the world's work and things would soon be back to normal. But for the moment we all adjourned to the dining room for punch and cookies. And the evening dissolved into small talk.

I never saw Mrs. Baumann again after that night. I think now I read the account of her death in the Memphis paper some six months later. And all the pertinent facts of her life were right there—“fine musician,” “friend of the arts,” the usual sort of things, and of course her many connections with good works in her com-

munity. Her father and perhaps her husband had left her the “wherewithal” for that—another Jewish syndrome, philanthropy, I was learning. But were they really that generous or just buying some sort of protection? I never seemed to make up my mind about that; but I noticed that when I thought of her now, Mrs. Baumann was no longer “the little Jewish lady.”

I never forgot her or her sigh of ecstasy, “Thank you, thank you,” that night at the music's end. And years later she was very much on my mind when, with a party of tourists in Eastern Europe, I visited Auschwitz and the death camp there, now preserved as a memorial to all those who had died and also perhaps as some sort of *memento mori* for the living. (When I asked one of the guides—a pretty young woman from the village—if she didn't find her job depressing, she replied, “Yes, I did at first. But we thought some of us here ought to do it.”) And I saw the gas chambers—immaculate of course, just as they had been in *Life* magazine, with the ovens right next door. And there were the private “interrogation” cubicles, the barracks (it was a Polish army facility originally—that was why the Germans decided to use it—housing already in place and very near a major rail junction), even the gallows on which the commandant had later been hanged. (The Allies had turned him over to the Poles and let them literally execute the sentence.)

There were many personal relics on display too—the prisoners' spectacles, their wooden legs, all sorts of prostheses, but, for some reason, no false teeth. And there was even a glass case filled with their chamber pots: presumably, they had been allowed to bring other such “personal” items along to what they thought was a “relocation center,” just as later they had been herded naked into what they were told was the shower room to get cleaned up before they were

sent on their way. Again, it was all sorts of everyday stuff that you saw and perhaps all the more horrifying for that very reason. We were a very quiet party of tourists, I can tell you, as we made our rounds: after all, how can you speak of that which is literally unspeakable? And certainly it was all too deep for tears. There seemed nothing to do finally but listen, almost like school children, as the young woman, our guide, recited her script—again, all very objective, all very flat, as though she were giving out a recipe or a set of directions. But I shudder now when I think of it.

Had there been many people like Mrs. Baumann who had perished there, I wondered as we drove on our way towards Cracow, the next stop on our tour. I had no way of knowing. But was the world, in

one way or another, always out to get the talented and gifted? Or was it just blind chance, a Duke's Mixture, and no more discriminating than just a matter of what larger group you happened to be born into? And did it make any kind of sense, the tormentors and persecutors of these people being themselves some of the most gifted practitioners in both the arts and the sciences? And finally did it make any difference at all—who got the genius, who got the talent? Did it make *them* any better? My God, look at what they quite often did with it! It was all a great enigma, and I felt it always would be. But in the back of my mind, so many years later, I could still hear Mrs. Baumann, in her rapture, murmuring "Thank you, thank you."