

Title: "I Am One of Them"

Lead:

With the beginning of a new decade, it is not only just, but necessary, to revise the past. This year marks the seventy-five years since the Auschwitz liberation, to commemorate this I meet with Elie Dawang, one of the Holocaust survivors and an advocate for equality, to relive his experiences, to learn from what's lived and to 'never forget'.

Body:

It was a snowy Sunday morning, the snowstorm from the previous night had saddled and in the early city hours, you could feel a certain optimism. Maybe it was my perception, but I've always thought that a city is at its most beautiful when it wakes up.

Small in stature and voice, his demeanor and posture peaceful and controlled, with the reassurance of someone who has walked the Earth twice, or maybe thrice. Like many of his age — he just turned eighty-six this past January — he carries himself with care and steadiness. Elie Dawang is a man like no other. He is a testament, of resilience and hope.

Born in 1934 in Paris to Lithuanian parents, his early childhood memories trace back to his family's business in Paris' 19th *arrondissement*, and "long afternoon walks in the neighborhood's park [Parc des Buttes-Chaumont]." Despite having moved to the French capital for not that long, the Dawang family garnered a robust business selling textiles that they fairly traded through family connections and references from back home in Lithuania. They lived a comfortable life in a two-bedroom apartment — as comfortable as a post-World-War-I economy could allow.

"My parents married very young. Their families were part of a rising bourgeoisie Jewish community and their union not only meant an alliance within the community but also an act of Jewish assertiveness, something everyone was looking for after the uncertainty of the WWI," he softly mutters while sitting calmly in his living room, wearing a casual light blue shirt and a gray vest — that matched his pants — with a wool newsboy cap as chaplet.

There is this *naïveté* to Elie; in a flick of an eye eighty-six reduces to six, a decisive age in his life story. It was the spring of 1941 when Elie's childhood was mercilessly robbed by the Nazis who began invading Western Europe.

J'Occupe!

Up until today, the Nazi occupation is considered one of the lowest, grimmest episodes in modern French history.

“I remember the confusion. I had just turned six that winter, I was excited to see spring blossom —it had been particularly cold that season— and suddenly the whole city was in deep fear. The murmur around was that ‘the Nazis were coming for us’, ‘Hitler had got the Third Republic*’,” explained Elie over coffee, the matinal Sun hitting right on his face.

Forty million was the population of France at the time, three-hundred thousand of this number made up by the Jewish community. Lo and behold, the doors started to close as restrictions and regulations started to rule against the sons and daughters of David. “As a Jew, the law didn’t allow for you to own a business,” such was the case of the legendary Galerie Lafayette. “If you were a non-French Jew you were instantly arrested if you were a French Jew you were also arrested. The fate of the Jewish community in France was completely undecided,” he said, now handing me a black-and-white old photograph of German soldiers going up Champs Elysées. The Arc de Triomphe standing in the back, unconquerable; a grayscale of solemnity and almost palpable silence, death and fear thick as smog in the air.

** NOTE: Back then headed by Philippe Pétain. This treaty was later confirmed in history with The Armistice of June 22, 1940.*

“We were driven in kettle cars.”

“They woke me up in the wee hours of the night. It was so quiet and so dark I can’t almost recollect. My mom told me to bring the necessary, that ‘we didn’t know where we were off to*’ but that ‘we were going to be fine as long as we stayed together’,” a knot in Elie’s throat manifests in his voice. “She put her hands on top of my eyes as we were leaving our building. Going down the stairs I remember other kids crying, parents shushing them down. We were driven in kettle cars.”

The Dawang family was arrested in September of 1941. They arrived in Auschwitz in the third week of the same month. It was the first group sent to this concentration camp.

**NOTE: "When you were sent to Auschwitz you weren't told you were going to be exterminated."*

They were assigned the same room except for Eliana, Elie's mother, who was sent to another wing with the rest of the women. Elie remained with his father, his innocent mind still wrapping itself around his mother's words: "we [are] going to be fine as long as we stayed together."

"I was locked up with my father for three days. No food, barely water; no bathroom. People crying themselves to sleep every night. The most deplorable state of life, based on the simple reason of being Jewish," the old man reminisced while pouring his second cup of coffee of the morning, "Out of the three-hundred thousand Jews that were sent to Auschwitz from Paris only a hundred survived, two of this hundred were kids. I'm one of them."

The Sun was not even out when his father woke him up, abruptly. Feivish, Elie's father, had somehow managed to arrange an escape for his six-year-old son: hiding in a service trunk, Elie was to meet an old, well-accommodated lady back in Paris; the road anything but easy. Thanks to his trading contacts and merchant peers, Elie was meant to get into a commercial caravan that was making its way back to the French capital. It was a very dangerous operation, but Feivish was sure that "God was protecting his son."

From Poland, Elie traveled crammed between trunks of ware, uncomfortable but optimistic — he was not to fail the operation commanded by his loved father, they were no longer together but everything was going to be fine.

The years that came are a blank space for Elie. He was relocated to Orsay, 20km south-west of Paris, a suburban town that is now a student hub. Days and nights were spent eyes-wide-open, scared of officers knocking on the door asking for papers — Elie's were successfully replaced with another name and origin, in these new records Elie was Jacob, the young grandson from this wealthy old lady who avoided persecution thanks to "solid political liaisons."

Records and tireless queries, along with Feivish testimonies, give faith to Eliana's fatal destiny: she was one of the many Jewish who were gassed in chambers. "My mother was very sick already at the time. I'm not sure she would have survived anyway," explains the old man. "I hold great respect for my mother. Even on the brink of death she stayed persistent and with a light mood in order for me to not collapse or see the real magnitude of the situation," he now reads from an old, battered notebook.

A New Day

After four years of torture, famine, and desperation Feivish reunited with his first and only son in May 1945 in the backyard of Elie's Orsay house. "It was the best day of my life. It felt like another part of me was re-attached. My father was a completely different person; flesh and bone, he had severe pneumonia and multiple dental infections. It took him years for his health to recover," Elie's eyes glimmer, "even though my dad was physically back home, there was a disconnection. His mind was somewhere else. Somewhere beyond right and wrong."

Three years after his reappearance, Feivish found love again in the heart of an English Jewish nurse, Aida, while attending a check-up. Aida quickly won Elie's confidence and in 1951 all three of them moved to Montreal with the hopes of starting from scratch, far from the "darkness of Europe."

"My dad never recovered from the trauma. For the rest of his life he had nightmares every single night. He would wake up soaking wet, out of breath from the bad dreams." Feivish Dawang died in Montreal the fall of 1990, leaving two grandchildren behind, Sarah and Jacob Dawang (the same name that saved Elie's life multiple times) from Elie's marriage of fifty-five years with Daliah, a sweet small-framed lady with a thick French accent who intermittently and coyly intervenes our *tête-à-tête* to ask if we want to refill our cups with coffee or tea.

Both of his kids are now professionals of law and biology, with careers outside of their native Montreal, with kids and houses, responsibilities and duties. Elie shares a two-story house in the middle of Côte-des-Neiges with his wife, his cocker spaniel Bertie and a handful of squirrels he feeds every morning during his walks. He likes to keep himself in shape so he can "play with his grandchildren and help around the house."

Elie also maintains a busy schedule advocating for human rights and sharing his story with anyone with a good set of ears. "What I admired about my father the most was that, in contrast to many survivors, he made sure his story was heard," he mumbles, "I am immensely grateful to still walk on this Earth, to be able to muster intelligence. My 'papa' is gone, physically, but his resilience and survival, his fearlessness and grip still roar in my account, my mom as well. She lives in my daughter, in my grand-daughter. She lives in every Jewish woman who can freely decide her future."

Chivalrous as he is, Elie walks me to the front door; what was morning now became noon. Clouds block the Sun, tinting the day blue and making the weather a bit colder. I bid adieu to Elie and thank him for such a wonderful morning, as I walk past the front lawn he walks confidently and steadily towards me — as beforementioned, Elie is wearing just a shirt and a vest. I ask him if he doesn't need a jacket or a scarf, he replies, "I am alright. This is nothing — we are having a weird winter anyways. Besides, I

like to come out to the front to watch people, makes me feel like I'm part of something bigger. Plus, breathing suits me well —you know, feeling my lungs and my nose working— reminds me that I'm alive.”