

VACATION WITH LENI

I was so excited to be back in Europe. I'd been saving for years. Imagining the people I'd meet, the places I'd see. Due to the declining birth rate, prices were at their lowest in years. My generation was the largest on earth-and everyone said it was all downhill from here! They would dwindle and shrink, cities would become more and more compact, small communities would turn to tribes and the individuals would be forgotten. The only constant in life is change and I had happily made my peace with the transforming tides of society. I was single and a remote worker anyway, so I had resigned myself to being born into the waning days of our experiment with civilization.

It had taken a while, but I finally found a vacation that fit the bill for me-a round trip journey tracing the impact of the Holocaust through tours of the Third Reich's most notorious concentration camps. I was nervous about the idea of being in buses, hotels, and tour groups with twenty other people, but I felt like it would do me some good to socialize. I asked for the time off and my supervisor looked at me in surprise through her webcam. I'd never taken a day off. She said she was proud of me. I won't let you down, I told her. I was going to have fun and maybe learn something in the process.

Buchenwald and Dachau passed uneventfully. Each day we flowed through the restored camps. The upkeep was impressive. They felt more like reclaimed museum spaces than death camps, reminding me of Pioneer Works or Mass MoCA. We sat at the benches where the prisoners would pound at door hinges and cookware to support the war effort. We'd make small talk about how tragic it all was and watch hours of black and white footage of shoes being thrown into a pile. Every night we'd sit at a long table and eat sausages or schnitzel with boiled potatoes. Eventually everyone heard my story. I do digital marketing for a software development service. I do yoga once a day. No, none of my friends wanted to come on this trip with me.

At Auschwitz, we were promised a completely immersive experience. No more tours. We were loaded onto a train and shipped across the Polish countryside. I watched it go by through a slat in the side of the relic wood paneling. The heat was unbearable. I knew we'd start to crack. We were unloaded and gave up our luggage. Men and women were separated. We were stripped of our clothes and forced into showers. Only half of us emerged.

Mornings were the hardest part. We slept ten to a single long bunk. No cushions, and a shared blanket. We could either eat the morning potato and receive a respite from the biting hunger, or save it for lunch, when the pain would be even greater. My job was assembling door knobs. Steven, a media sales professional from Florida, was selected to be our capo, a prisoner chosen for their sadism, to watch over the workers. I was never beaten by a guard, but Steven would pound at my hands with a length of wood if he felt I wasn't working fast enough. Sometimes he'd do it just because I was an easy target. The weeks passed, and we were kept long after our food stipends ran out. I missed my flight back to New York. I caught a glimpse of the women-they were doubled over, clothes in tatters. Hair falling out from stress. We didn't look much better.

The guards were swathed in black. Silver totenkopfs shimmered atop their caps. They resembled members of the SS, though I wasn't sure how the ranking system worked here. I doubted they were members of the German military-the uniforms appeared symbolic. Most of them just sat at computers all day while the capos whipped and tasered us. Despite my treatment, I had to admire the dedication to historical accuracy. An eccentric woman in a harsh denim bodysuit (with a belt, epaulets, and flared legs) would show up every month with garment bags of uniforms. Through eavesdropping, I learned she was a Hollywood costume designer. I realized the extent of my captors' crimes. They had truly pulled out all the stops. This also explained the Scandinavian looking guy with thick, round eyeglasses who showed up with blueprints, expanding the camp everytime a shipment of prisoners came through. Definitely a blue chip architect. Throughout the waking nightmare that was my life, I came to draw

conclusions about the nature of my imprisonment. The only way to keep Europe competitive in the face of changing labor dynamics was to source and exploit slave labor from first world countries, under the smoke screen of eastern countries like Poland, who had far less exposure. They would take only the most irony poisoned and oblivious of us, the ones most likely to submit and dwell on our collective misfortune and hopelessness. A half-hearted rebellion proved my hypothesis. Some of the more stubborn males made a dash for the gate, throwing stones at the guards. They were easily hosed down by machine gun fire. Whoever was behind this camp had harnessed the memory of one of history's most egregious atrocities, and weaponized that story in the name of capitalism.

In the beginning I made thousands of door knobs, but we later moved on to more profitable enterprises. I was forced to make hundreds of burner social media accounts, following C-grade influencers and planting political comments. Sometimes they would make me shop online for hours, harvesting my precious data. I participated in countless online focus groups. I told Starbucks, yes, I would give out of five like a shaken latte and an egg ball right now. I tried not to give up hope—we would be liberated, we would see the end of this sick experiment. Another train came, more prisoners. This time a study abroad program from Oregon State. I took their luggage, whispering to them to volunteer for labor. Don't tell them you're an English major. Don't say you studied art history. Say you're an engineer. Say you're in pre-med. Some design program from RISD rolled into camp. We piled hundreds of Balenciaga sneakers. Summer turned to fall. Ice crystals would cake the windows in the morning. Bitter cold. Some of us began to lose hope. You might die of the cold, you might die of the disease. Once you lost hope, your days were numbered.

One morning, I stood in the courtyard waiting for my cup of broth. It was thin, vaguely onion flavored. I could see one of the art students eyeing my shoes jealously. Nike Air Max. I had them fair and square by participating in a program which pre-distresses sneakers for sale in a Soho boutique. He had long since broken through the sole of his Vans. This meant frostbite. Unlike

me, he hadn't worked his way up to the tech warehouse, and was assembling the chassis for a new consumer-grade Tesla sedan. Hard, cold, monotonous work. He lept at me, tearing at my feet. I fought back as hard as I could, pounding my metal bowl into his head. Two rats fighting in a maze. The SS guards separated us, furious that we had disrupted the morning routine. One of them turned to me. Turkewitz, you don't like it here? You have a problem with the camp? You don't want to work? You don't believe in labor? You don't want your compatriots to eat? I replied no, I liked working, I didn't want to leave the camp. I only wanted to keep my shoes so I could continue amassing online data. They didn't believe me. They called out to the guard tower, OPEN THE GATE. The doors swung open, miles of open road beyond them. If you don't like it here so much, why don't you just leave! Walk out the door! As he gave his command, he cocked his machine gun. I knew I could die on my feet, or running. I charged for the gate, remembering to run in a zig zag, making myself a harder target. The ground exploded around me. I thought of Michael Jordan sweating Gatorade. I thought of the pocket of air underneath my heel which promised superhuman athletic ability.

A few months later I was sitting at Lucien in the East Village, proudly wearing those same Nike's. A reporter from the Atlantic's recording device was under my chin, listening to me recount my experience yet again. They'd all wanted my story: the New Yorker, the Times, Vanity Fair, etc. I'd survived a genocidal tourist trap, with strong fascist vibes. My life wasn't enough. I wanted to milk the experience for all it was worth. I hired a publicist and a ghost writer and started guesting on podcasts. If I had known that McKinsey & Company had spent years consulting the groups behind these camps, I wouldn't have taken a six figure deal to lecture at their annual summit. My stylist rejuvenated my closet in a style they called survivor-casual. My nonprofit, Davin Without Borders, sought to eradicate exploitative tourist entrapment across the globe: Cambodia, Armenia, Rwanda, Serbia, the Congo, and many more to come as the system of international production became more and more fragmented. I forked at my soggy fries telling

her how I had escaped the camp with the RISD student on my back, only for him to die from his injuries (his body conveniently shielding me from the hail of gunfire). She drops a few words that have lost their meaning to me - hero, sacrifice, example, icon, inspiration. I tell her I only lived so I could ensure history never repeats itself. I start to lose interest in the cafe, and tell her it might be better to finish the interview from my apartment in Chinatown. She agrees and we step onto the street. I glance at her chunky sneakers, remembering a pile of them. Lightly dusted from the ashes that drifted out of the sky.