

Chapter 3: Briquets ...

Chapter 3 introduces Arpad Kovacs, a guard who replaces Andor Gutman each night at six o'clock. Arpad is portrayed as an energetic and extravagant individual, known for his tendency to boast. Upon beginning his shift, he eagerly requests to see Gutman's writings, offering praise without having actually read them, walking up and down the corridor with an air of confidence and cheerfulness. His actions project a sense of superiority and a need to be seen as an important figure, which contrasts with the more subdued and somber atmosphere around him. This dynamic sets the tone for the chapter, highlighting the stark differences between the two men, as Arpad tries to bolster his self-image by emphasizing his own survival and resilience during the Holocaust. The casual demeanor with which he engages in these conversations gives insight into his personality and beliefs.

Arpad uses a vivid metaphor to criticize those who passively accepted the Nazi regime, calling them "briquets," a term implying that they are easily shaped and molded by the pressures of the environment, much like bricks made from coal dust. He contrasts this with his own actions, claiming that he took the initiative to survive by acquiring false papers and joining the Hungarian S.S. This decision, according to Arpad, set him apart from those who simply went along with the regime's demands. His disdain for passivity and complacency shapes his view on self-preservation, suggesting that survival in such a brutal time required more than just endurance—it required active participation in one's fate. He is unwavering in his belief that taking control of his own destiny, no matter the consequences, was the only way to ensure his survival. His views offer a glimpse into the moral complexities of those who navigated life under the Nazi regime, as the need for self-preservation often led to difficult decisions.

As the conversation shifts to Gutman's role as a Nazi radio propagandist, Arpad's initial enthusiasm for the broadcasts quickly turns to disappointment. Upon reviewing a

transcript of one of Gutman's broadcasts, Arpad dismisses it, feeling that it lacks the intensity and conviction he would have expected from such a platform. He had imagined the broadcasts to be more incendiary, with a greater sense of drama and persuasive power, but instead, he finds them lacking in the emotional charge he had anticipated. This reaction reflects his perception of power and effectiveness, showing that he values aggressive and impactful actions over subtlety or nuance. Arpad's surprise at the lack of dramatic effect in the broadcasts serves as a reminder of the limits of propaganda, and the disconnect between the ideals it attempts to promote and the realities of its implementation. It also demonstrates his own desire to be involved in something that is seen as powerful and impactful, even if it means resorting to exaggeration.

Arpad's conversation then shifts to his time with the Hungarian S.S., where he recalls with pride that his Aryan appearance and loyalty helped him avoid suspicion about his Jewish heritage. He claims that no one ever suspected his true identity, allowing him to work without the fear of exposure. His pride in his deception grows as he recounts the work of his unit, which was tasked with uncovering potential leaks within the S.S. regarding their plans for the Jewish population. He boasts that his unit's actions led to the execution of fourteen S.S. men who were allegedly working against the Nazi cause, a success that earned him praise from high-ranking officials, including Eichmann. His self-congratulation reveals the complexity of his character, as he seems to take pride in his actions despite their morally ambiguous nature. Arpad's story serves to underline the lengths some individuals were willing to go to in order to align themselves with those in power, using their position to further their own survival.

As the conversation concludes, Arpad expresses regret for not recognizing Eichmann's significance at the time, suggesting that had he known how crucial Eichmann would become, he would have killed him on the spot. This bitter reflection highlights the complexity of his moral compass, as he navigates the blurred lines between survival and complicity. Arpad's views on morality and survival are rooted in a pragmatic, almost cynical approach to the world, where decisions are made based on what is best for the individual, regardless of the larger consequences. This chapter raises important

questions about identity, survival, and complicity, especially in times of extreme pressure and uncertainty. It demonstrates how individuals in dire circumstances often make decisions based on self-preservation, sometimes crossing moral boundaries in the process. Arpad's perspective offers a lens through which the complexities of wartime survival and collaboration can be explored, with all its shades of gray and difficult choices.

