THE CLAY MESSIAH

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Image, front cover: "The yellow star that nine year old Vera Bader had to affix to her clothes," Artifacts Collection of the Yad Vashem Museum, Gift of Vera (Bader) Weberova

Image, front cover: "Dog tags and mezuzah worn by Lawrence Luskin." (1920-1973, US Army 11th Armored Division), from the Lawrence Luskin family collection. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust

Image, p. 69: Letters, Harold Porter to his parents May 7, 10, 13 and 15, 1945 [World War II Participants and Contemporaries Papers, Porter Harold: Memorabilia]; World War II: Holocaust, The Extermination of European Jews; Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library

Details of the Jewish service at Dachau from *The GI's Rabbi: World War II Letters of David Max Eichhorn*, permission Mark S. Zaid (ed)

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With the exception of Rabbi Eichhorn, all characters are fictional.

For Matthew

9 Tishrei 5705

(26 September 1944)

Avrum sank the blade of his shovel into the river mud and leaned his thin frame against the wooden shaft. His waterlogged boots sank into the muck and the autumn water seeped between his toes.

Hours ago, during the march from the camp to the river, he had been thankful for the boots. Those who didn't have them were forced to slip and shuffle in canvas clogs. But now the boots seemed a great weight, an anchor that would pull him into the frozen underworld of the lapping green current.

Avrum ticked off his days in a succession of painful labor. The day before it had been sacks of cement heaved onto his back, to be carried gasp after agonizing gasp from the cart to the construction site and then back for more. Today it was heaving shovelfuls of brown mud into a bucket that another tortured soul would drag up the steep wooded path from the riverbank. Avrum didn't know why mud was needed and hardly cared. Grasp with blistered hands. Lift with wasted muscles. He wanted to cry or scream or just collapse, or do anything but lift one more useless glob from the shore.

The lunch whistle blew high and shrill. It alerted the only guard in Avrum's sight, a plump German soldier with a long overcoat and dry boots who had been half dozing against a tree. Avrum loosened his grip and let his arms relax. An hour's respite.

The blue-striped prisoners spaced along the river's edge shouldered their shovels and found their way up the forested paths, sidestepping the unfortunate few who had to complete the journey laden with buckets of sludge.

The anticipation of a slice of bread renewed Avrum's energy. But his boots were too heavy to lift. He stood as still as stone.

The guard stared at Avrum as if he were an organ grinder's monkey who had decided not to grind the organ.

Avrum stared back.

The guard pointed his rifle.

Avrum wondered how it would feel to have a bullet penetrate his skin, his skull, his brain. Would the pain last for a moment or would it accompany him forever? A bizarre curiosity had squashed his mortal fear. Could that speeding scrap of metal put an end to his misery? He had lived fifteen years. He had witnessed fifteen times fifteen deaths. Was today the day? Was today *his* day to die?

He waited for the answer.

The guard glanced up at someone approaching from the road. An emaciated prisoner slipped and stumbled through the brush. Against his chest, just below the yellow star, he clutched a brown paper package. This he held out to the guard, who still had his rifle aimed at Avrum's head.

The guard lowered his rifle, grabbed the package and brought it to his nose. He inhaled and smiled and waved away the provider of his lunch.

The prisoner removed his cap and bowed from the waist. He bowed again and again as he backed away from the guard, down the hill towards Avrum.

The guard, now more transfixed with his meal than with Avrum, settled down against the tree to eat a sandwich heavy with thick slices of meat.

"Sit," whispered the man, now standing shoulder to shoulder with Avrum. Without turning his head, he tugged at Avrum's sleeve. "Sit."

Avrum lifted one foot and then another. The river had released his boots. He took a few determined steps, sat on a log beside the stranger and leaned his shovel between them.

"I knew your father," said the man.

Avrum stared at the river, still puzzled by the mystery of a bullet to his head.

"He was a good man."

Avrum thought about his father every day. In his nightmares he relived the panic of waking to his father's cold, dead body on the wooden shelf they shared for sleeping.

“And a great Cabbalist.” The man produced four slices of bread from his jacket and handed two to Avrum.

Avrum chewed.

“We’ve met once before, you and I.”

The guard snorted. Avrum turned to find him fast asleep against the tree.

“A lazy one, that,” said the man. He turned his eyes skyward. “Baruch HaShem.” *Blessed is God.*

Avrum tasted margarine. He hadn’t tasted that in months. He forced himself to chew slowly.

The man dropped to his knees and dug his hands into the mud. “Your father,” he said, “I was his teacher.”

Avrum noted the profile of the man. A long, slender nose. Gray eyes.

The man formed a mound from the mud on the brown strip between the lapping water and the brush. “Yes,” he said, “a good man.” He reached for Avrum’s shovel and began to dig. He formed a large mound beside the smaller one. With the shovel, he cut lines in the larger mound.

Avrum saw the man had created a child’s sculpture of a head and a torso with two arms. “What are you doing?”

The man, sweating now, dropped to his knees and began molding a nose. “I don’t think your father would want you to give up just yet.”

“You’re crazy. I don’t know you.”

The man sat up and rested dripping hands on his thighs. “Please, there isn’t much time. Come here and help me.”

Those fingers. Long and bony and paper white. Yes, he had seen those hands before. A man with those hands sat with his father in the closet of an apartment his family had been forced to occupy. He had a dark beard then, streaked with white, and a felt hat pushed to the back of his head. He and Avrum’s father drank tea from glasses and talked in whispers while Avrum’s mother, a radiant flower who had wilted in the dark of the ghetto, mended a shirt in the murky light of the only window. Avrum didn’t know his name, but when the man left, his father had called him Rabbi.

Rabbi? The title meant nothing here. With his shaved face and scalp, striped prisoner's cap and yellow star, he was just another despised and dispensable Jew.

"Come. Come now," said the rabbi.

And a crazy one at that. But this man, this rabbi, was also a witness to Avrum's existence. He had memories of Avrum's parents. It was as if Avrum had uncovered a forgotten photograph. It brought him to a time before this time, when he belonged—when he was cherished.

Avrum dropped to his knees and felt the wet cold creep into his legs. He couldn't fathom why he should do this. Except that this didn't make any sense and neither had anything else that had transpired since his mother sewed the first yellow star on his jacket half a lifetime ago. And if he was ready to give up his life a few minutes ago, he might as well die helping a rabbi make a man out of mud.

When they were finished, Avrum relaxed his tired hands and stared at their creation. The rabbi had made wells for the eyes and inscribed a mouth. Avrum had done his best with the legs and feet.

"Well done." The rabbi studied the sculpture and stroked a beard that wasn't there.

Avrum checked on the guard, still sleeping under the tree. "If you say so." He sat on the bank, too tired to lift himself. "Is this supposed to be somebody?"

The rabbi focused his gray eyes on Avrum for a moment before turning away. "Who do you wish it to be?"

Avrum almost laughed. A wish was as unreal to him as a pastrami sandwich or a feather bed.

But, in spite of himself, Avrum wished. He wished it was his father—Papa, who would wake up and say, "There's my good boy. There's my Avrumel." But no. Avrum couldn't even begin to imagine that this lump of drying clay could transform itself into the bright and complex being who had been his Papa.

Avrum wished again. He wished this lump of clay was a monster that would rise up from the earth with bloody, dripping fangs—a monster that would dig its claws into the heart of every

Nazi in the camp, leaving each one white and lifeless in a puddle of his own blood. But not just the Nazis—also the Kapo who had whipped him during roll call because he had swayed with hunger and fatigue. And the Block Elder who had tried, more than once, to slip his tobacco-stained fingers into Avrum's pants. Evil wore both green wool and blue stripes. It wore the broken crosses of the Nazis, the yellow stars of the Jews and the red triangles of the political prisoners.

Avrum spoke to the cold earth he squeezed between his fingers. "I wish—"

The rabbi leaned closer.

"I wish I didn't have to be afraid all the time. I wish—I wish I had someone to protect me—to care for me. Is that too much to ask?" Avrum grunted a laugh. "If I live in shit and sleep in shit and smell like shit, do you think it's too much to ask that I might close my eyes and pretend, for an hour or two, that I don't live in a shit-hole? Do you think this lump of clay can do that for me? Do you, Rabbi?"

Avrum looked at the man squatting beside him. The rabbi's body rocked back and forth, back and forth, swaying like a branch in the wind. With his eyes closed and his lips barely moving, he chanted. He chanted Hebrew words and letters that formed a long and droning prayer. Had Avrum heard it before? An image flashed, of Papa reading from a worn and ancient book as Mama whispered that he should put it away.

Avrum erased the memory. He erased everything. He leaned forward and back. He closed his eyes and rocked. Back and forth. Back and forth. Again and again. Only an hour for the midday meal. Only an hour to rest. But time had no meaning. The ache of hunger seemed far away. Avrum let the empty feeling carry him. For how long? He didn't know. The singsong chant of the rabbi embraced him, lifted him and set him down again on a cushion of silence.

Avrum opened his eyes. The rabbi had a stick and he was writing in Hebrew, from right to left, across the forehead of the muddy sculpture. Three letters: Aleph. Mem. Tav.

The whistle blew, signaling the end of their break. Avrum

turned his attention to the guard who cursed and fumbled clumsily for his rifle. Avrum sprang up, grabbed his shovel and began to dig. A fellow inmate slid down the hill with a bucket in time to catch Avrum's second lob.

He didn't dare turn his eyes to the man-shaped pile of mud. There were no comments from the other laborers. The guards seemed oblivious as well. The pain of Avrum's labor was swept into the whirlwind of his thoughts.

A golem. Avrum had heard stories of golems. They were creatures molded of clay and brought to life through secret recipes of Jewish mysticism. Sometimes the golem, a lumbering creature that couldn't speak or reason, was meant simply to serve the synagogue of the rabbi who created it. In the greatest and most fearsome story, a golem was created by a revered rabbi in Prague in order to save Jewish citizens within the walled ghetto from attacks by the neighboring townspeople, after being accused of using the blood of Christian children to make their matzah. The golem, an invincible giant, slew the invaders, saved the village and was returned to clay by its creator.

Avrum searched his memory for the legends told to him. Each tale had a teller, and each story conjured a memory. On the knee of his father. A rainy afternoon in the attic, listening to his cousin Eliyahu. Memories and legends intertwined, his past as surreal as a folktale. And his present more ghoulish than any tale of horror.

A whistle brought Avrum back to his reality. Cold. Wet. Aching. Consumed with hunger. The workday was at an end. He turned for the first time to where the man of mud had rested but found only footprints and puddles. Someone else must have dug it up or perhaps it had been trampled. On the way up the hill, and during the weary march back to the camp, Avrum looked for the rabbi but saw no sign of him. Avrum couldn't find him among the ragged groups consuming their evening meal of watery soup or among the masses of prisoners who stood at attention throughout the drawn out roll call. He began to believe he had dreamed the entire episode.

Limp with exhaustion, Avrum crawled onto the shelf he shared

with four others. But sleep did not come easily. Memories bore memories. And each lump of remembrance, no matter how sweet or how pungent, was soured by loss. Confusion and grief consumed him. And through it all, there flashed the three letters the rabbi had inscribed on the forehead of their golem. Aleph Mem Tav spelled *Emet.*

Truth.