

WHO WILL CARRY THE WORD?

by Charlotte Delbo

translated by Cynthia Haft

Claire (early 20's) - Francoise (early 20's)

The Play: "Why should you believe those stories of ghosts...ghosts who came back and who are not able to explain how?" This is the last line in Charlotte Delbo's startling and touching play set in the 1940's in a Nazi death camp where thousands of women are confined. Among the greatest of human atrocities, the Holocaust of World War II continues to haunt the globe, somehow never to be forgotten or understood. In Ms. Delbo's stirring account of one camp, a camp with women of many nationalities, the issues addressed are of survival, friendship and the maintaining of personal values in the face of the horrible cruelty of the Holocaust concentration camp experience. The particular focus is a group of French women, some in their teens, some in their twenties. The characters are constantly barraged with choices—minute to minute they must decide which move to make in order to survive. It is as if they are living on a chess board. Ultimately, the decision becomes whether or not to survive in a world turned upside down by Nazi terror. Is it worth it? What price does one put on survival? When does one "give up?" To some, perhaps death is preferable to a tortured existence. For others, resistance, pride, anger, and a need to survive and make sure that this atrocity never again happens, becomes the breathe of life. The internal struggle between those who have lost faith in this life and those who will never give in or become the victims is the passionate argument that drives this drama. The play opens with a haunting prologue, poetic and challenging, and closes with the question, "Why should you believe..." In a stark series of scenes, we are placed in the middle of this human dilemma, forced by the hand of mankind at its worst. Ultimately the decision to survive become fueled by the burning need to "carry the word" and tell the world what has happened to those who were consigned to the camps.

The Scene: This is the first scene in the play (following the Prologue). The setting is the barracks. Claire and Francoise, who knew each other prior to consignment to the camp, set forth the argument that drives the

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play.

Special Note: The editors have selected this scene for advanced students. The playwright insists that no make-up be used and that the costumes be simple smocks or tunics with no stripes. In addition, we remind the actors that any thorough work on this scene must include an exploration of the Holocaust.

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(In the barracks. In an aisle between the boxes which serve as beds, that is to say, in front of the inclined plane, in the foreground. Some groups chat. On one side, a group composed of FRANCOISE, MOUNETTE, YVONNE, GINA, MADELEINE. Coming from another group, CLAIRE, who will be followed by RÉINE. Some standing up, the others lying down. It is late afternoon in winter. Hazy light inside. Outside, the light is hard and cutting on the snow.)

CLAIRE: Come here. I want to talk to you.

FRANCOISE: Who, me?

CLAIRE: Yes, you.

FRANCOISE: And who are you?

CLAIRE: Claire. Don't you recognize me?

FRANCOISE: Now I recognize your voice. Voices are difficult to recognize. Even the voices have changed. Are they muffled or is it my ears? And what did you want with me, Claire?

CLAIRE: Come over here.

FRANCOISE: Talk. Here, we think out loud.

CLAIRE: What have I heard?

FRANCOISE: What have you heard?

CLAIRE: That you wanted to commit suicide.

FRANCOISE: Yes, so what?

CLAIRE: You have no right to.

FRANCOISE: Oh, that'll do, Claire. Forget your formulas; here they aren't worth anything. It's the only right I have left, the only choice. The last free act.

CLAIRE: There are no free acts here. No choices like that.

FRANCOISE: Oh yes. I have a choice. I have a choice, between becoming a cadaver which will have suffered for only eight days, which will still be clean enough to look at, and one which will have suffered fifteen days, which will be horrible to look at.

CLAIRE: You have nothing left. No such choices, nothing. You are not free to do it. You don't have the right to take your life.

FRANCOISE: And why don't I have the right?

CLAIRE: A fighter doesn't commit suicide.

FRANCOISE: Claire, please. Forget your affirmations, forget your

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certitudes. None of them fit here. Don't you see that truth has changed, that truth is no longer the same?

CLAIRE: I am asking you why you decided to commit suicide.

FRANCOISE: You ask me!... Ask those who are lying rigid in the snow; ask their faces which are no longer faces; ask the sockets of their eyes which the rats have widened; ask their limbs which resemble dead wood; ask their skin which is a color no one has ever seen before. Don't you know all that a human being can withstand before dying? Don't you believe that to become so scrawny, so ugly, so convulsed, so trapped in what remains of skin and flesh, you have to have suffered to the limit, a limit which no one reached before us? I don't want to suffer to that limit.

CLAIRE: Can't you see further than yourself and your own death? Can't you see...

FRANCOISE: I see. I am lucid. I am logical. I've never been more reasonable.

CLAIRE: You don't want to fight.

FRANCOISE: I'm willing to fight, to try, but with a chance, even a little one, however small, but a chance. And I don't see any. No one will survive. If it's to be death for death's sake, then better right away, before having suffered that suffering you see written on the dead there in the snow, over there on the pile where the ravens and the rats get together, those naked dead bodies, entangled in a pile, even on top of those still alive, who arrived a week before us. I prefer to die before becoming a corpse as ugly as those.

CLAIRE: Coquetry is out of place here.

FRANCOISE: I have no gift for lost courage.

CLAIRE: Will you listen to me?

FRANCOISE: You must wait until my eyes do not see what they see, for my ears to listen to you.

CLAIRE: My eyes see as well as yours. You're afraid. You're a coward.

FRANCOISE: Afraid to suffer, yes. A coward—another word that is meaningless here.

CLAIRE: I'll tell you again that you don't have the right to take your

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life. You don't have the right because you're not alone. There are the others. And above all, there are the little ones, Mounette, Denise, and her sister, Rosette, big Hélène and little Hélène. Aurore, Rosie who isn't even sixteen, all the little ones whom you taught to recite poetry, whom you had perform in plays before we left, when we invented pastimes while we waited for the departure. They admired you because you were grown up. They listen to you, they follow you. If you commit suicide, they may imitate you. Suppose that among them, there is one who has a chance to come back, just one, and that because of you, she loses that chance. Even if you were to die in fifteen days and become as tortured a cadaver as those, you have to stand it.

FRANCOISE: What good will it do? None of us has a chance. No one knows we're here. We're fighters off the battlefield, useless. If we fight to get out, it's no use to anyone, not even to ourselves. We are cut off from everything, cut off from ourselves.

CLAIRE: There must be one who returns, you or another, it doesn't matter. Each of us expects to die here. She is ready. She knows her life doesn't matter any more. Every one of us looks to the others. There must be one who comes back, one who will tell. Would you want millions of people to have been destroyed here and all those cadavers to remain mute for all eternity, all those lives to have been sacrificed for nothing?

FRANCOISE: It's exactly that. For nothing. To die here, in this place, whose name we don't even know—perhaps it has no name?

CLAIRE: There must be one who comes back, who will give it its name.

FRANCOISE: Here, at the frontiers of the inhabited world, yes, it's to die for nothing. It's already as if we were dead.

CLAIRE: If the world never knows anything about it. But there will be one who will return and who will talk and who will tell, and who will make known, because it is no longer we who are at stake, it's history—and people want to know their history. Haven't you heard them, the dying, who all say, "If you return, you'll tell"? Why do they say that? They say that because none of us is alone and each must render an account to all the others.

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FRANCOISE: The others... Other people in other places. To us, here, *they* have lost their reality. Everything has lost its shape, its depth, its sense, its color. All that is left is the amount of time we must suffer before dying.

CLAIRE: Yes, the others, the people you know, your friends—this one or that particular one—have lost their reality. But I speak of men, of the men of the whole world, those who are now and those who will come afterwards. To them you must render an account.

FRANCOISE: Why me? One more, one less... Choose someone else for your mission.

CLAIRE: We arrived two hundred, 200 women from all the provinces, from all classes, who were thrown here into this population of 15,000 women. 15,000 women who are never the same. They die by the hundreds each day, they arrive by the hundreds each day. Of these 15,000 women from all countries of all the languages of Europe, how many will survive? 15,000 women more or less, 200 women more or less, what difference does it make? You, me; it doesn't matter who—no one matters. They will only matter if there is one who returns.

FRANCOISE: It won't be me.

CLAIRE: Don't you really want to understand anything? Even if you hold out for only fifteen days...

FRANCOISE: I won't hold out for fifteen days because I don't want to, because I don't believe it matters, because I prefer to finish it off right away and skip those fifteen days.

CLAIRE: Suppose you hold out fifteen days during which you will have helped others to hold out? Even if you give up then, fifteen days will have been gained. Another will take your place, then another, then another, so that there will be one who makes it until the end.

FRANCOISE: Until the end... When do you see it arriving?

CLAIRE: I don't see it any more than you. Even if there is no hope, even if all is lost, you still have to try.