



Ki Tetze

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SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Judy Taubes Serman is the coauthor of The Rarest Blue: The Remarkable Story of an Ancient Color Lost to History and Rediscovered (Lyons Press).

Leo Taubes was born in Austria in 1934 and spent his childhood during the war years in Holland. He passed away in 2019.

After my father passed away, I recalled that he had written a short story in his youth, set against the backdrop of World War II and featuring a young boy as the main character. As no one in the family was able to locate the story, I began some online sleuthing. I was sure I was on the right track when I discovered that Avigdor High School in London, which my father attended for some time after he was reunited with his parents, put out a journal of creative writing by the refugee children whom they took in after the war. According to an [article](#) on the National Library of Israel website,

their intention had been “to find a way to contend with the trauma that came to the school with the child survivors.” In their forward-thinking approach, they decided that “the children would be allowed to express and share their experiences and their stories, to let out the pain they were experiencing, in an attempt to begin to heal.” While my father’s story wasn’t in that journal, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a similar instinct that inspired him to write his piece.

After some more tedious searching, I finally found a story attributed to Leo Taubes in an old Yeshiva University yearbook that had been posted online.

To my surprise, it wasn’t the story I had vaguely remembered but rather a story no one in the family knew of. It was accompanied by an Editor’s Note: “This story won first place in the Jerome Robbins Short Story contest, 1954.” A faded, typed-up copy of the story I originally was looking for, poignant in its own right, was also eventually found by my niece among some of my father’s old

things. Knowing my father's wartime experiences, I believe "Saturday Afternoon" is largely autobiographical.

In November 1938, when my grandfather—along with countless other Austrian Jews—was arrested and interned in Dachau, my father, then just four years old, was sent alone on a Red Cross Kindertransport to Holland. There he lived with various families—some Jewish, others not—with no forewarning as to when he would suddenly be moved again, or to where, or why. These years were marked by loneliness, confusion, and fear. Eventually, an uncle arranged for him to stay in a religious orphanage for boys, which had its own school and synagogue. He recalled his time there with great fondness. He loved the comradery, the warmth at the Shabbat table, and the singing in synagogue; he loved school and learning and the thrill of hearing classical music for the first time. True, he had to wear the yellow star and witnessed the raids—"razzia" was the word my father used—when German trucks rounded up Jews, and he lived with a sense of ever-present danger. But for the most part, the stories he told us (his children) of those days gave us the impression that his general experience during the war was really not too bad.

As life became more precarious in Amsterdam—the orphanage was eventually raided, and many of the boys were murdered by the Nazis—his uncle secured a place for him in a small village on the sea in northern Holland with a non-Jewish woman who had several others living with her as well. During the harsh years of the war, they

endured the great Dutch Hunger Winter, with no gas, no electricity, and barely any food. Alone and with no support, he went abruptly from a rich Jewish way of life to chopping logs into firewood on Shabbat with no clear grasp as to why, or as to what his future would be. The RAF would occasionally strafe the area, and German soldiers often stole the food packages the planes would drop for the villagers. But even though he was poor, hungry, and often in danger, when my father would retell his experiences, all we sensed was an air of adventure. Any feelings of difficulty or uncertainty went over our heads.

When the war ended, he moved from place to place with no explanation until somehow his father, who had escaped to England, located him through the Red Cross in 1946. A British soldier appeared one day at the door of the house in which he was staying (in the Hague) and arranged for him to fly on an RAF plane to London, where he was finally reunited with his parents. Eventually he ended up in New York where Yeshiva University (YU) took him in, giving him room and board, until he graduated from college. Despite only learning English as a young teenager in London, he went on to complete graduate school at Columbia and immediately began teaching English literature and writing at YU. He continued to teach there for over 40 years. I believe he saw teaching at YU as a way of expressing his gratitude to those who took him in and because there he finally felt a sense of belonging, a sense of home. He went on to build a home with his family full of the warmth and nurturing that echoed what he once sought, a

testament to the resilience that permeates the story he wrote. Here is his award-winning story that was published in 1954.

“Saturday Afternoon”

(Editor’s Note: This story won first place in the Jerome Robbins Short Story contest, 1954.)

A thin curtain of rain veiled the fields through which the train slowly made its way. Freddy’s eyes shifted from the woman sitting opposite him, and he put his face to the window. He peered at the bleak landscape rolling by, the flat pastures, desolate and naked except for an occasional cluster of bedraggled trees and some melancholy cows huddled together with dull, sad faces. He felt so sorry for them; they must feel terribly lonely and forlorn out there. This was his first acquaintance with the country, as far as he remembered, and his first ride on a train, but his initial excitement had not been strong enough to overcome his feeling of timorousness. He looked up at the woman sitting opposite him. She smiled encouragingly, but Freddy continued his serious scrutiny of her face. It was lean and rather heavily lined, with deep-set eyes and a slender nose. Her hair was grey, but yet there was something youthful in her appearance and a definite kindness and sympathy. He lifted the corners of his mouth tentatively. She smiled again. “It’s a shame that it’s raining,” she said. “Yes.” He nodded his head. “The country is so pretty in the summer; I think you’ll like it. There’s always something to do, and we have a wonderful garden, with all sorts of trees and flowers that you

can help take care of. Do you think you’d like that?” “I think so. I’ve never done it.” “This is your first time away from the city isn’t it?” “Yes.”

He looked down at his neat pants and newly shined shoes. It was his first time away from the city—except, of course, when he had first come to Amsterdam, but he couldn’t remember that too clearly. There had been a pair of mittens and a scarf that his mother had given him when he left. He still had the scarf; the mittens had been lost somewhere en route to one of the families he had lived with at first, before he came to the orphanage. He felt a momentary stab of sadness—the Jewish orphanage of Amsterdam. Just two weeks ago he had still been there, and then one day his uncle had come for him and explained that it would be safer for him somewhere in a small village. He had understood that because he had heard what the Germans were doing. But it had been strange at first to wear his clothes without the yellow star. He had been so proud of that distinctive badge, not exactly sure of what it implied, but happy because everyone else in the Home had worn one, and it made them into a sort of fraternity. Of course there had always been that spirit of comradeship, a wonderful warm feeling of being at home, of knowing everybody else there. He had been one of the youngest children in the Home and a great favorite with the directors as well as with the other boys. How he loved that place, everything about it. There had always been something to look forward to, Saturdays and the Jewish holidays, celebrated with so much spirit and beauty, the evenings of entertainment, someone’s birthday, the playing, the outings, the

school. There had been classrooms right in the building and he had really enjoyed going to school. It was just as good as playing.

He was suddenly struck by a frightening thought. "Will I go to school?" he asked the woman anxiously. "Yes, certainly. You'll be just like all the other boys and girls in the village," she reassured. "But what about Saturday? Do I have to go to school then?" he persisted fearfully. "No, there's never any school on Saturdays." "What about church? Do I have to go to church with you on Sundays?" She tried to quiet his fears by speaking in a calm, soft voice. "We don't go to church. When we pray, we do it at home." Well, that was all right. He wouldn't have to be with them when they prayed. "But what about Saturdays? What shall I do? I'm not allowed to work on Saturday, you know," he added as explanation. "May I pray by myself?" "Yes, of course you may, Freddy," she said in a tender voice. "You can do anything you want. We don't want you to do anything you don't like." She smiled sweetly at him, and he looked at her gratefully as he sank back in his seat. His eyes returned to the window. It was almost dark outside, but the rain had stopped. In the distance he could see the black outline of the dunes. They looked terribly high and grim in the half-light, but he didn't mind at all. "Is that where we're going?" he asked curiously. The woman looked where he pointed and nodded. "We're almost there now," she said. "We still have to take a bus when we get off the train. You'd better put your coat on; it's cold outside." She took his suitcase down from the rack, and Freddy picked up the bag lying next to him and hung it across his shoulder. It was made of thin cloth and had his name on it, written

in India ink. It was the only thing he had been able to take with him from the orphanage. He remembered how he had felt jealous of the other boys. In addition to this small bag, they each had a pillowcase stuffed full with clothes, prepared in case of an emergency, but he hadn't gotten one. He didn't need it, really. What were his friends in the Home doing now? It would be nice and warm there, with bright lights and lots of busy, happy noise. He could picture it, and it was painful.

"We'll be home soon," said the woman, "and then you can eat something warm and get right to bed. You must be tired." The train was slowing down, and people were moving in the corridor. Freddy's heart was beating faster, and he wished that somehow they wouldn't have to leave the train yet, that perhaps this wasn't the right station and that they could stay on a little longer. But it was the last stop, and he would have to get off unless he wanted to be carried back to Amsterdam when the train went there again. The station was crowded and noisy; people were running about in confusion, but Freddy let himself be guided by the woman who weaved her way with sure steps to the bus stop. Freddy did not talk while they were riding. He was looking at the country through which the bus was speeding. He tried to get some impression of what his new home would be like, but it was too dark to see anything clearly. On one side of the road, the land was flat. A few houses stood out in the darkness, their windows lit up. On the other side were the dunes, just some big woods, except that they grew on a hill. And behind them was the sea. Was that the sound of the sea? Or was it only the trees waving in the wind? How long would it still take? Weren't they

there yet? A cheerful voice penetrated his mind, and he opened his eyes. He picked up his bag automatically and followed the woman out of the bus. He watched it disappear in the distance and looked around. He couldn't see anything—not one house, just trees all over.

Was this the village? He had not expected big buildings and streets but surely a few houses. Here there was nothing except a little path toward which they were walking. "Is this the village?" he asked, trying not to sound critical. The woman laughed slightly. "No, the village itself is about a mile further. Our house is down this road though. There, you can see it now." Freddy walked closer to the woman—Aunt Lena, she had told him to call her. He wanted very much to take her hand and hold on to it, but he was a bit afraid of trying. They had reached the house, and Freddy looked through the lighted window—his new home. It was cold in the hallway, and Aunt Lena hurried him into the room where a bright fire was burning in the grate. Two women sat at a table, eating supper. Aunt Lena pushed him forward. "Here he is," she said. "Freddy, this is Aunt Rose and Aunt Mien. They work on our farm. Would you like to sit down and have something to eat?" After eating a bowl of hot soup, Freddy whispered that he was full and would like to go to sleep. He said good night, and Aunt Lena took him upstairs and showed him the room he would have. He undressed quickly, shivering because of the cold, and after washing and brushing his teeth he crawled under the blankets and lay still, looking up at the white ceiling. Aunt Lena, who had been unpacking, turned off the light and sat down on his bed. "Shall I tuck you in nice and warmly?"

"Yes, please." He snuggled lower under the blankets as she adjusted them. She passed her hand over his forehead, gently brushing the hair away. "Whenever you get up tomorrow, come downstairs and we'll decide what to do then, all right?" "All right," he whispered. She stroked his face and smiled her warm smile. "Good night, Freddy." "No!" He shot up from beneath the covers and clutched her tightly. "Don't leave me! Please, stay a little longer," he pleaded tearfully. "Oh, don't go yet." And then he broke out crying and buried his head in her breast, his body shaking with deep sobs that he didn't try to suppress. His arms were tight about her neck, and he only relaxed them a little when she kissed his cheeks and hugged him closely. "It's all right, Freddy," she said soothingly, rocking him gently back and forth. "It's all right; I won't leave you." She whispered reassuring words till his sobbing gradually subsided and was substituted by a few snuffles. Finally his breathing became easy and deep, and then she loosened his arms and put him back under the blankets.

The first few days Freddy was too busy to think much about what had been going on. He went to school and saw the farm and got used to the village. But now it was Friday night, and he was nervous and half expectant. It would be just like the previous nights, no different; and yet maybe there would be something special. Surely there must be a little of the feeling, even in this place. But no matter how much he tried, he could not feel within himself any of the Friday-night feeling. In his mind he could hear the voices in the orphanage singing, but it was only an unreal echo and made him aware more sharply of his actual

surroundings. He looked around the table. Aunt Rose and Aunt Mien had just come in from work. They had been on the farm the whole day and still wore their work clothes. The conversation was sparse and subdued as Freddy sat silent, dabbling listlessly at his food. What would he do tomorrow? And next week? It was really too much. He couldn't see any possible way of going on like this week after week.

Saturday was a glorious day. The sky was clear, and the sun was bright and strong. The whole country had become cheerful and jubilant, and Freddy had caught the excitement. He was eager to go outside and explore the woods and fields. It was a good thing that there was no school—because it was Saturday. Suddenly he remembered and realized that he would have to come late for breakfast; he had to pray first. Hurriedly he finished dressing. He started his prayers slowly and earnestly, but sometimes he found that he had forgotten what came next. He tried to visualize the synagogue in the orphanage and the place in the prayer book, but it all became confusing. He was hurt and a little peeved and raced through the remaining prayers. After breakfast, he was left alone in the house. The women had gone to the farm; although they had asked him to go along, he had refused. He went out into the garden and strolled around leisurely. It was beautiful. There were no flowers yet except for some crocuses, brightly colored flames burning fiercely in the short grass. Everything was neat and orderly. It was probably a lot of work keeping it like that, and a lot of fun too. He liked this village life, the fields and farms, especially the dunes. Some day he would have to go exploring

there; maybe he could even walk all the way to the sea. But right now it was very boring all by himself. Maybe he should have gone to the farm after all? No, that wouldn't be right. He decided to finish an adventure book he was reading. He lay down on the grass in the hot sun and read till he fell asleep.

As the weeks passed, Freddy adjusted completely into his new life. He made friends at school, and a few enemies. He learned to accept without feeling strange the practices and routines at home, so different from those at the orphanage. True, certain things had been difficult. The first time he had been served bacon, he was very embarrassed. He explained that he didn't feel well and wasn't hungry, and Aunt Lena had understood and prepared something different for him. After that she had remembered, and whenever there was bacon he had eaten something else. But, somehow, he felt differently now. Everyone always ate it with so much relish, and it looked so good. He had been tempted to ask for some, but he was afraid of appearing ungrateful or presumptuous. It was the same with Saturday. After the first week, he hadn't been asked to go along to the farm in the morning. It was a sort of relief, but later he sometimes wished that they would ask him again. After all, he wouldn't do any work. He only wanted to see what everyone was doing and have someone to talk with. But he couldn't bring himself to ask outright. At breakfast one Saturday morning, he was full of questions about the farm and the work; how was this done, how did that grow, was it difficult, was it fun, perhaps he could go along today to see what they were doing. He half

expected a reaction of surprise or some reproachful glances, but his statement evoked only a pleasant agreement. That afternoon they had burned a huge pile of dead branches and leaves, and Freddy was fascinated by the flames shooting up high. When the fire showed signs of dying out and nobody was around to keep it alive, he collected some branches which he threw on the fire with great energy. Only later did he fully acknowledge to himself what he had done. He was momentarily ashamed and regretful, but the feeling passed and gave way to pleasanter recollections. It had been a wonderful day; he would like to come more often.

From then on he went to the farm after school and every Saturday afternoon. There wasn't much he could do yet, but he gradually became familiar with the work and came to enjoy it. One day, Aunt Lena showed him a small plot of land and told him that he could have it and grow whatever he wanted. But he would have to take good care of it. Freddy was almost overcome with excitement. He took a shovel and dug up the ground, then raked it smooth and stood admiring the fresh, brown earth—his own piece of land. He got a few packages of seeds and scooped out the soil in the form of his name. He sprinkled the seeds and scattered earth over them and watered the whole plot carefully. After that, he went to the farm every day to inspect his little garden till finally the fragile shoots appeared, spelling out his name. He felt himself quite the farmer now, as if he had lived in the country all his life.

One afternoon when it was raining, Aunt Lena had a visitor. Freddy looked up from his book. It was

Mrs. Maars, a woman who had recently come to the village. She wanted to get a few children together once a week to learn some Bible stories. Aunt Lena turned to Freddy. "I think that might be a good idea, once a week," she said to him. Freddy was not enthusiastic. "When do we have time to do it?" he asked. "Well, Saturday afternoon would be most convenient." "But on Saturdays I work on the farm," he protested. "Oh, you can still work in the mornings, and after the lesson. You won't be learning the whole afternoon." Freddy was not exactly pleased. What did he have to learn the Bible for? He wanted to work in the fields or play ball with the boys from school. But the decision was made, and he grudgingly accepted it.

The following Saturday afternoon, Freddy went over to Mrs. Maars's house. There were four other children, sitting around the table and eating cookies. Mrs. Maars came in and broke the silence that followed her entrance with a few words about the nice stories that were to be found in the Bible, stories about the beginning of the world and the Jewish people and lots of other things. The word "Jewish" made no special impression on Freddy, but when she selected a book and suggested that Freddy would be able to read it, he stared at her in surprise. Why him? He looked at the black book with the golden lettering and started. Images crowded his brain, and the letters blurred. He could recognize the word! But what were those letters? He couldn't identify them, but the whole word was familiar. It said "Torah." For a moment he was terribly confused. He had learnt that once. He had been able to read all those letters a long time ago, but he had forgotten them. There were so many things which he didn't

remember anymore. But he couldn't use them now; there were different interests, other things he liked to do. "Can you read it, Freddy?" asked Mrs. Maars. He shook his head thoughtfully. "No." "You've forgotten it already then?" she said with a smile. He nodded and saw that the other children were looking at him curiously. "Well, let's go on," said Mrs. Maars. "This book is a Jewish Bible, and it's written in Hebrew, the Jewish language. Our Bible is a translation of this, but otherwise it's just the same." Freddy wasn't listening. He knew that already; he knew the story of the creation that she began to read. He had known it for a long time, and her voice had brought it to the surface. He couldn't wait till the story was finished. And when Mrs. Maars showed them to the door and said that she hoped to see them all again next week, he resolved not to come.

He rushed home, running half the way and arriving out of breath. "Did you like it?" asked Aunt Lena pleasantly. "No," he replied forcefully. "Oh please, I don't want to go again next week." "But why not? What happened?" she asked with surprise and concern in her voice. "Nothing happened, but I know all the stories she's going to tell. I learnt them all once. I just can't go there every week. I really don't want to." "I thought you'd enjoy it; that's why I wanted you to go there, because you've learnt them and this would remind you a little bit. We'll talk about it some other time. But if you really don't want to go, you don't have to, all right? Now have a glass of milk." Freddy drank the milk slowly and then went up to Aunt Lena. He stood on tiptoes, put his arms around her neck, and kissed her. "All right," he

said. He picked up his cap and jacket, said goodbye, and started off toward the farm to see how his plants were doing.

THESE DAYS

Hannah Butcher-Stell is a Writing MFA candidate at Sarah Lawrence College, holding a bachelor's degree in English from Rollins College.

Ten Days of Awe and I am lying
on the carpet, looking out

the window, at a world
I do not know yet.

How many blessings have slipped
through my skirt and scuttled

to the floor, our marriage
just a few weeks old, our *chuppah*

flowers preserved.
I sleep, and this is standard.

I eat, and this is standard.
I pray, and this is standard—but rare

that I feel Presence like this, like I'm
standing on the edge of a needle

about to thread.
Soon it is the very eve

of Yom Kippur and my new husband
says he does not feel he deserves

to ask G-d for what he wants.
How many blessings pass

without us noticing, I say, but not to him.
They wear many cloaks

and different faces; they know our names.
We eat, and this is standard.

We pray, and this is standard—but rare
that we just lie down,

hold our breath like we've done these days.

Watch the needle shake
before going in.

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