

Chapter 1_Tiglath-Pileser the Third ...

In the opening chapter of "Mother Night," we meet Howard W. Campbell, Jr., an American by birth but a Nazi by reputation, who grapples with his identity as a nationless person. Writing in 1961 while imprisoned in a modern jail in Jerusalem, Campbell addresses Mr. Tuvia Friedmann, Director of the Haifa Institute for the Documentation of War Criminals, intrigued by Campbell's past as a suspected war criminal. Friedmann has extended generous support for Campbell's writing, including a typewriter that bears the distinctive S.S. symbol, which recalls the period of the Second World War and Campbell's prior experiences.

Campbell reflects on his incarceration, feeling the weight of ancient history surrounding him, particularly as he regards the stones around his cell, some dating back to King Solomon. He muses on how the memories of the Second World War seem to fade, especially among younger Jews like his guard, Arnold Marx. At eighteen, Arnold is oblivious to the horror of the war—it ended before he was born and his knowledge of the past is limited. Despite his family's history, Arnold focuses on present ambitions, studying law and pursuing archaeology, specifically excavating Hazor, a site with a deep historical legacy.

Their conversation illuminates the contrast between their worlds: Campbell, entrenched in the guilt of a war criminal, and Arnold, who is preoccupied with Canaanite history, unaware of its connection to Campbell's own choices. Arnold shares facts about Hazor's destruction, mentioning the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III, a name which provokes little recognition from Campbell. The dialogue reveals generational differences regarding historical consciousness and the legacy of war, enveloping Campbell in a creeping sense of existential despair as he feels the remnants of his actions weigh heavily upon him, marked by the name Tiglath-Pileser, reminding him of the ancient echoes of violence and catastrophe long before his own.