

Chapter 4_Leather Straps ...

In the chapter titled "Leather Straps" from "Mother Night," we are introduced to Bernard Mengel, a Polish Jew and a late-night prison guard who shares a unique bond with the narrator, reflecting on their experiences during the Second World War. Mengel saves his life by feigning death, allowing a German soldier to extract three gold inlays from his teeth without realizing he was still alive. This act of survival underscores the harrowing choice many faced in the war.

As they converse, Mengel remarks on the narrator's troubled sleep, suggesting that his restless nights hint at a guilty conscience for actions taken during the war—a stark contrast to those like Rudolf Franz Hoess, the Auschwitz commandant who met a gruesome end via hanging. Mengel, who helped execute Hoess, recounts that his own emotional detachment developed as a result of the war. He believes he is a product of the atrocities around him, unable to feel anything profound about even the most significant acts of violence.

Mengel's description of hanging Hoess reveals his mortality: he tightened the straps around Hoess's ankles, but felt no personal satisfaction from this act of vengeance or justice. Instead, he views it as just another job, which parallels the mundane act of strapping his broken suitcase. This comparison lays bare the emotional numbness that war can impose, where life and death become equal tasks devoid of meaning or emotional connection.

Ultimately, Mengel highlights the prevailing notion that people justify their actions during crises, with soldiers believing they couldn't have acted differently. The chapter invites the reader to contemplate themes of guilt, morality, and the human condition, especially in the face of profound tragedy and conflict. Through Mengel's perspective, we see the complexity of guilt and the lengths individuals go to rationalize their experiences during wartime.