



Viktor E. Frankl, MD, PhD

SYNCHRONIZATION IN BIRKENWALD

A Drama

By Viktor Frankl

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(In 1945, shortly after his release following three years in Nazi prison camps, Viktor Frankl wrote *Synchronization in Birkenwald*. He recalls, "It was as if something deep inside me dictated the play. I could hardly write fast enough..." In this drama, the Athenian philosopher Socrates (469-399 BC), the Dutch-Jewish philosopher Spinoza (1632-1677), and the German metaphysician Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) join the dead mother of two sons and their fellow sufferers in a concentration camp to grapple with the eternal question first raised by Job: Why do we have to suffer? What is the meaning of an apparently meaningless situation? Out of the synchronization of time and space appears an answer which has made Viktor Frankl's contribution to health pre-eminent in today's world.)

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SYNCHRONIZATION IN BIRKENWALD

CAST:

Mother

Socrates

Kant

Spinoza

Karl

Franz

Angel-SS Man

Paul

Ernst

Fritz

Capo

Heinz

Richard

Empty stage before the drop curtain. Spinoza, Socrates, Kant in the attire of their day.

Spinoza (*writing*): Recording secretary: Baruch de Spinoza

Socrates: Be sure you get the exact time down.

Kant: Stop! I object. "Exact time" - Central European? Standard? Daylight Savings? Or what? I can see, meine Herren, my transcendental critique has been forgotten.

Spinoza: I beg your pardon, Professor Kant, I haven't forgotten it.

Socrates: Neither have I. I didn't mean it that way.

Kant: You do know what I mean?

Socrates: Certainly. Time and space are mere concepts of the mind--

Kant: So you know. Then why don't you apply this knowledge?

Socrates: I'm proof that I apply it. I lived in ancient Greece, yet I know your *Critique of Pure Reason* almost by heart.

Kant: Ah, I see.

Socrates: Spinoza and I, we are both - how did we put during our period as mortals? - we are in eternity. We are at present in eternity--

Spinoza: Priceless paradox!

Socrates: --since eternity is nothing but simultaneity.

Spinoza: How concerned we used to be with priority! And now there is no before, no after.

Kant: But I ask you once again: why do you insist on putting down the exact time?

Socrates: Why, professor for the sake of humanity: how can we make them

understand all this--eternity--temporality--simultaneity--

Kant: You're right. Continue with the records, Spinoza.

Socrates: I'd like to have the floor, professor.

Kant (*nods*)

Socrates (*rises, clears his throat*): Gentlemen, I am worried. Something must be done! You can hardly imagine how they live on earth. Belief is almost dead--any kind of belief. Nobody believes anybody any more. Nobody even believes in himself. And, worst of all, nobody believes any longer in an idea!

Kant (*half to himself*): Ideas are only regulative.

Spinoza (*half to himself*): The ultimate idea is God.

Socrates: Let's not quarrel about words--let's not quarrel even about concepts. You know exactly what I mean: the important thing, the most important thing is man's existence. Everything depends on what happens now. Two world wars have completely ruined the so-called morality of mankind.

Spinoza: He has a point, professor. The masses don't believe in anything any more. And the consequence is, they allow themselves to be abused and misled.

Kant: What do you propose to do?

Socrates: We must help the people. Someone must go down--

Kant: You optimist! Whom do you want to send? A philosopher, perhaps?

Spinoza: They'll laugh at him.

Kant: Or prophet? A sage, maybe?

Socrates: (*shrugs*)

Spinoza: They'll lock him up. A prophet--today! At best, they'll accuse him of hallucinations.

Kant: I tell you, Socrates, they'll not listen, not even to a real philosopher in the classical sense. They simply would not take him seriously.

Spinoza: Believe me, Socrates, I've had reports. A philosopher would be lost.

Socrates: Well, what do you want to do?

Kant: Something must be done, I agree. But what? How can we teach truth to humans--whet their appetite for truth?

Spinoza: Even professional thinkers--our representatives on earth have troubles. Believe me: they still haven't conquered materialism.

Kant: What do they say now is the year down there?

Spinoza: I've heard, 1945.

Kant: And they haven't learned! But has anything been done to teach them?

Socrates: We sent down what was available. We influenced the staffing of universities. We helped the authors of important works -

Kant: Helped them? How? Inspired them?

Socrates: Yes.

Kant: (*grunts*)

Spinoza: Socrates, I told you not to talk about this in front of Kant. You know he's written disparagingly about thought transference and that sort of thing.

Socrates: What of it? I felt sorry for humanity.

Kant: Oh, I admit you had the purest motives.

Socrates: Actually, I do know a way out.

Spinoza: Yes? And that is -

Socrates: Don't laugh; but I have spoken to contemporaries -

Kant: Contemporaries? Ah, you mean compatriots?

Socrates: Yes.

Kant: Well? And -

Spinoza: Why are you embarrassed?

Socrates: They are - uh - ancient Greek writers of tragedies.

Kant: Yes? And -

Socrates: They say there's only one way -

Kant: And what is that - ?

Spinoza: Go ahead, tell us!

Socrates (*with emphasis*): The Arts! They say, only the Arts can influence humanity.

Kant: Hm - not such a bad idea.

Socrates (*encouraged*): Frankly, I didn't used to think so. But - there is no other way out. I'm convinced of it now.

Spinoza: The Arts offer fantasies, myths, friction, but no truth. Should we support that sort of thing?

Kant: Spinoza, that's ridiculous - excuse my being so blunt. But the arts present "unrealities" that are closer to truth than man's so-called realities.

Spinoza: You're right; but with the Arts we open floodgates -

Socrates: Your doubts are not supported by what we learned from history, Baruch.

Kant: True enough, Socrates - - but what would you have us do? Inspire playwrights, go perform in their theaters, or what the devil else?

Spinoza: The professor is right. We cannot go down there and take roles in a play. We cannot talk to the humans as stage figures.

Socrates: That's the only way we can talk to them. They'll listen only to something they can see.

Spinoza: Possibly. But we'll feel like fools.

Kant: In any case, you never get - permission.

Socrates: I'll take care of that. It's been done before-- non-humans have become humans to help man on earth.

Kant: You will see--you will not get permission.

Socrates: Understand me right, professor: I don't really mean that we go down and play theater. But we must present to the humans a piece of their own reality so that they can discover truth.

Spinoza: He means: a picture of their lives.

Kant: A real story? A plausible one, at least, so that it appears to be real? With a lesson to be drawn from it, I suppose.

Socrates: Something like that.

Spinoza: Not a bad idea. But what can we - what does it have to do with us?
What can we supply?

Socrates: The commentary!

Kant (*after consideration*): Have you a suitable story in mind?

Socrates (*beaming*): Everything is prepared, professor.

Kant: And the commentary?

Socrates: We'll provide it as the story unfolds.

Spinoza (*suddenly uncertain*): The humans won't go along with that. Do you know what they'll say? That it breaks up the unity of time and space.

Kant: Excuse me (*laughing*), Herr Spinoza; unity of time and space - in view of our eternal presence that can hardly be a problem.

Spinoza: Maybe so. But how can we go about it? Inspire the fantasy of a playwright? Or infiltrate the performance while the actors are on stage?

Socrates: Much simpler. We'll present pure facts: Our talks, the way we voice them, will be made audible - in the theater!

Kant: How do you propose to do that?

Socrates: We'll simply produce our records on a stage on earth.

Kant: Everything we've said so far, and whatever else we may be moved to say by the play you plan to show us?

Socrates: Exactly. Baruch, how did your records begin?

Spinoza (*reading*): Recorder-Baruch de Spinoza. Socrates; be sure you get the exact time down. Kant: Stop! I object. "Exact time"- etc., etc.

Socrates: Very well. Everything we've said so far will be presented.
(*Solemnly*) And now we simply insert ourselves into the performance of "Synchronization in Buchenwald" on the stage of theater in
(*use names of theater and city*).

Spinoza: It won't work. They speak English here.

Kant: Baruch, remember, we don't speak in words any longer, but thoughts.

Socrates: And thoughts are understood by all humanity. What we think here, everyone will understand as if it were spoken in his own language-

Kant: - because it is the truth.

Spinoza: I see -

Socrates: The play can begin -

Spinoza: (*happily excited*): Curtain!

Kant: You forget, Baruch, that we've been in the theater all along.

Socrates: Don't you yet understand the situation, Baruch?

Spinoza: (*a little confused*): Oh, yes, I do -

Socrates: We simply pretend that a playwright invented us and that actors perform our roles - (*amused*) - delightful, isn't it? The audience is deceived, too: we let the audience play roles today - the roles of spectators. And you will see: they will not suspect that it is they who are playing, and that we are reality; that our play is also reality.

Kant: Now, seriously, Socrates, what do you have in mind, what kind of a play?

Socrates: I'll present a picture of hell, and prove that man can remain a man

even in hell. Just as we here in heaven - or what they call heaven - have remained men, in some way, haven't we?

Kant: Certainly, certainly, thank God!

Socrates: And they called him an atheist.

Kant (*smiles, then*): Well... I'm ready, Socrates.

Socrates (*calling upward*): The curtain between eternity and time, please!

The drop curtain raises. One sees, in the twilight, a dilapidated barrack in a concentration camp. About in the center a small, iron stove. The right end of the barrack continues into the wing and is not visible. Left, a door, still farther left a small open space between the barrack and barbed wire fence which runs behind the barrack. Inside the barrack, at knee height, and running along the back wall, a wooden platform covered with straw.

Spinoza: Where are we?

Socrates: In the concentration camp Buchenwald.

Kant: (half to himself): Terrible -

Capo (*Camp policeman, one of the inmates entrusted by the camp leader to watch over other inmates, enters from the left with a group of inmates. He stops at the door, barks an order*): Get in here! Block 6, barrack 9!

Franz: Quick, Karl, so we can get a place near the stove!

Karl: (*limping*): Wait, I can't walk so fast - my left leg ...

Franz: Take my arm.

Karl (*does so*): That's better. (*They enter the barrack, with the others, taking their places on the straw; some are fighting for preferred spaces. They sit or lie down on the platform. Capo exits*)

Fritz (to Ernst): Did you hear the camp leader swear at us because they gave us only one blanket at Aushwitz, and because we are so filthy and lice-infested?

Ernst: And you think that shows he cares? You always think a new camp will be better than the old one.

Fritz: Wasn't I right? Weren't you sure we'd be sent into the gas? Instead, we have come to a normal camp.

Ernst: "Normal camp"- ! It may be our last camp, or the second to the last - but in the end they'll finish us off, all of us.

Fritz: Can you prove it? As long as you can't, I prefer to behave as if I'd survive.

Ernst: I won't wait till the last moment - the disappointment would be too Terrible -

Fritz: You mean you couldn't survive it? (*laughs*)

Ernst: At least you still can laugh.

Paul (to all of them): I had two cigarettes in my knapsack. Where are they? Who "liberated" them this time?

Franz: This eternal liberating! Among comrades -

Karl: Who'd steal from one of his own people - we're all together in this.

Franz: Just think of Otto -

Karl: My God - he paid for it.

Ernst: A great and just world! A guy takes a slice of sausage and pays for it by being sent to the gas chambers -

Kant: (*has entered with Spinoza and Socrates from the right, mingled with the inmates and listened to their talk*): Foolish men, I tell you, Baruch. On their plane, they think everything will balance out: good deeds and good jobs, high morality, a high income.

Spinoza: Beatitudo ipse virtus - happiness, too, is an achievement: and only the virtuous can be truly happy.

Kant (*impatiently*): I know, I know. But you, too, project everything onto one plane - you and your monism!

Socrates: Gentlemen, let's not fight. Something important is at stake here!

Kant: Tell me, Socrates, why don't humans learn anything?

Socrates (*shugs*): They just don't. And they pay for their philosophical errors in blood and pain and suffering and death. But didn't we, too, have to pay for our philosophical wisdom with blood and pain and suffering and death?

Spinoza: He's right, professor.

Capo (*returns, tears the door open, shouts into the barrack*): Don't expect chow tonight, you bastards. Our kitchen wasn't prepared for you pigs. (*exits*)

Ernst: Great - we haven't had a bite for two days, and now we have to starve through another night until they ladle out the black dish water tomorrow.

Karl (*to Franz*): Franz, Franzl, you'll see I was right: you shouldn't have come along with me.

Franz: I shouldn't have but I had to. You know how it is.

Karl: Yes, I know. Your eternal self-sacrifice and I'll tell you I've had it up to here. You could have gone to America - but no: you didn't want to leave our family. And look what happened. To save you from the

Gestapo, our sister sacrificed herself. And grief about Evi's death killed father. And then it was my turn. And now mother is alone. God only knows if she's still alive.

Mother (*small, with scarf around her shoulders, sad and worried, from the right where no entrance to the barrack is visible*): There they are. (*Remains near her sons*)

Karl: So we go on sacrificing - there's no sense to it.

Franz: Don't talk like that, Karl. You know as well as I do that this mess we call life would be senseless and not worth living if we weren't ready, every moment of it, to give it up for something else.

Karl: Something else? What?

Franz: Call it what you will. You feel it as much as I - at least, we sense it.

Karl: Everything has a limit. You cannot simply throw away your life.

Franz: Why not, if this throwing away has meaning?

Karl: You call that meaning - that we're all ending up dead?

Franz: Perhaps even that. This filthy mess of a life is certainly without meaning if you hold on to that mess. If you're not ready to sacrifice your life, you're just vegetating and in the end you die like an animal: But if you're ready to throw away this mess of a life, for someone, for something, even your death may acquire meaning. That's what I think...I wouldn't have dared talk about this if we weren't stranded here.

Kant: Well, - did you hear, meine Herren?

Spinoza: I don't trust them.

Socrates: Perhaps everything will turn out well yet.

Mother (*steps up to the philosophers, shy, humble*): Excuse me for interrupting, gentlemen, but these are my two sons - they were the last thing I had left. Aren't they wonderful? Aren't they good children? But foolish, oh so foolish! Franz could have gone to America, in time. But he stayed, with my husband and me. I know why: he didn't want to leave us behind - yes, that was it. We implored him to go. No, he said, I want to remain. I'm not so badly off here, he said. Do you see? He didn't want us to know that he only stayed because of us.

Kant (*comforting*): We just agreed that your son Franz is very wise, my dear lady.

Socrates (*to Mother*): Don't worry, please. Things are working out.

Mother (*repeatedly bowing before them*): I thank you very much, gentlemen. With whom do I have the honor - ?

Kant: You know, my dear lady - we don't like to mention names.

Mother: Oh, excuse me. Of course. I just thought - I'd like to - Would it be possible for you to put in a word for me?

Spinoza: What for? And to whom?

Mother: I'm so lonely for my two boys - and here they suffer so much-I know it. I see it - I thought perhaps I can ask for permission for them to join me.

Kant: That won't be possible, my dear lady.

Spinoza (*softly to Kant*): Couldn't we try, professor?

Socrates: I'd rather not, Baruch. Let's not interfere. But I'll tell you something: (*to Mother*) Stand by your boys - we'll stand by, too.

Mother (*moved*): I thank you, gentlemen. I thank you very much. The good

Lord will reward you. And believe me, the boys deserve it. Look - here - (*she rummages slowly in a handbag and fishes out letters and little packages*) - all this I received from them.

Spinoza (*to other philosophers*): How so? I've heard they cannot write from these camps, and certainly not send packages?

Kant: What is it?

Socrates (*looking closer*): Don't you understand? These are thoughts the sons have directed toward their mother. And prayers they have prayed for her. These I call true gifts -

Mother (*proudly*): Yes, beautiful gifts, aren't they? So many letters, one almost every day, and once in a while a package - Can't I be proud of them? And aren't they worth worrying and caring about?

Kant: You're quite right.

Spinoza: Indeed you are!

Kant: (*to the other two philosophers*): If the people only knew that everything has a meaning, and that the meaning goes far beyond what is apparent.

Socrates: How amazed those unpublished philosophers would be if they knew that even their unexpressed and hardly conceived thoughts, if they are really great thoughts, are recorded here and are waiting for their frustrated author to come up here and receive them - in print.

Kant: But why think of only of our own profession? Why not of others - painters, composers? Don't you remember that eternal - moment when Franz Schubert joined us and, with tears in his eyes, received the score of his symphony in A minor - as the "finished" symphony?

Socrates: Do you recall, professor, how the heavenly hosts celebrated? Those songs of praise -

Spinoza: Interspersed with motifs from the A minor.

Kant: Oh, if people only knew!

Karl: Do you think mother is still alive?

Franz: (*half to himself*): Tell me, mother: are you alive?

Karl: What are you thinking about? Why don't you say anything? Why are you so quiet, Franz?

Franz (*still softly, thoughtfully*): Mother, are you alive? Tell me, mother: are you alive?

Karl (*impatiently*): Speak to me, Franz!

Mother (*coming closer*): I can't tell you, Franzerl. I mustn't tell you. But what does it matter - whether I am alive or not? (*Emphatically*) Am I not with you - one way or another? Either way?

Franz (*talking past her*): Mother, tell me: are you alive?

Karl: Please talk to me, Franz. You scare me. Are you - all right?

Franz (*aroused*): What did you say? Yes, I'm all right. I just was thinking.

Mother (*to the philosophers*): Did you hear? He's thinking of me. All the time he's thinking of me.

Spinoza: Yes.

Mother: But he has doubts. What shall I do, what can I do to save him the tortures of doubt?

Kant: You can do nothing, my dear lady. Wait - and let him wait.

Mother: But I'd so very much like to help him -

Socrates: You cannot do a thing for him.

Mother: And they're so hungry - both of them.

Black Angel (*comes, as the Mother before, from the right; to the philosophers*): What rotten luck! This has to happen to me!

Kant: What is it?

Socrates: What's the matter now?

Spinoza: For you something is always the matter.

Angel: I must go down. I must go to them.

Kant: Why?

Angel: The woman here has filed a petition. She wants to have her sons with her.

Spinoza: And what can you do about that?

Angel: I have to go to them - to test them.

Kant: They'll recognize you.

Angel: No, they won't.

Socrates: In disguise? Incognito?

Angel: Of course.

Spinoza: Disguised as what? As who?

Angel? An SS-man, of all things!

Kant: Funny!

Angel: Not for me. This had to happen to me: as SS-man -

Spinoza: What good will that do?

Socrates: You heard him, Baruch: he must test them.

Angel: I have to torture them to the breaking point. That's supposed to show what is in them. (*Disappears right; at the same time an SS-man appears from the left behind the barrack*)

SS-Man (*yanks the door open*)

Paul (*standing at attention*): Attention! Herr Troopleader, prisoner 87126 reports: sixteen prisoners from the new transport in new quarters, block 6, barrack 9.

SS-Man: Number 118103!

Karl (*jumps up*): Here!

SS-Man: Out, you pig!

Karl (*quickly, softly*): So long, Franzl. Don't give in! (*exits with the SS-Man*)

Mother (*frightened, to the philosophers*): What will they do to him?

Kant: Don't be afraid, my dear lady. (*With emphasis*) It is for his own good.

Mother (*worried*): He will question him, he wants to get some information. They'll torture him, Karl!

Spinoza: Didn't you see the angel here before? Your son is to be tested.

Mother (*in torment*): Why test him - I'll vouch for him!

Socrates: No one can vouch for anyone else.

Mother: You really think it's for the best?

Kant: Yes. He may come to you sooner.

Mother: But it will hurt him.

Spinoza: Pain is unimportant.

Socrates: Please try to understand.

Mother: You can tell that to each other. But don't tell it to a mother, gentlemen, not to a mother -

Franz (*half to himself*): Help him, mother. Help him.

Mother: He's in good hands, my child. Don't worry.

Franz: (*steadfast*): Help him, mother.

Paul: Why are you so quiet?

Franz (*aroused*): What do you want?

Paul (*curious*): What did your brother do? Is it about the switch in the transport list?

Franz: Probably.

Paul: Was that necessary? To take a false name - a false number - do you realize what that may mean?

Franz: We wanted to stay together. And the little Czech wanted to stay in

Auschwitz. The camp elder is his friend - he brings him an extra bowl of soup every night-it may save his life - as long as he can stay in Auschwitz.

Paul: The Czech was to come along with this transport?

Franz: Yes. He suggested to Karl to swap name and number. This way Karl and I could stay together - and the Czech with the camp elder and his soup.

Paul: This can be disastrous.

Franz: The camp elder knew about the switch. It was all right with him.

Paul: So what? If your brother is made to talk, you're all finished, all four of you.

Franz: I'm not afraid.

Paul: Don't put on an act. Don't you have anyone waiting for you at home?

Franz (*lost in thought again*): Mother, are you alive?

Mother: I'm with you, child, I'm with you. You must believe it.

Franz: Mother? If I only knew whether she's alive.

Paul: Stop brooding, you gloomy fool. Chin up - we'll see what happens.

Franz: Yes, we'll see.

SS-Man (*bringing Karl back, pushing him*): Na, du Arschgesicht. I'll give you another chance to think about which one you are. I'll give you five minutes, then I'll pick you up again, you scum, and we'll see if you've learned to talk. (*exits*)

Spinoza: Fantastic! Did you see, gentlemen, he acts completely like an SS-Man.

Kant: He is one.

Spinoza: But he is the angel.

Socrates: Yes - but while he is cast as an SS-Man he doesn't even suspect it himself.

Spinoza: I don't understand - after all, it must occur to this SS-Man that all of a sudden he is there - as if dropped out of a clear sky: without a past, without his own destiny - he's bound to notice that, sooner or later!

Kant: How naive can you get - Baruch? From our point of view he's cast in a Role - from their point of view he's been on earth for years, he has his past, his destiny, his parents and grandparents, his wife and children -

Socrates: We aren't on the same plane with the living, neither in time nor in space. Don't forget, it's only by a trick that we deal with them - a trick for this play-acting.

Spinoza: But you said that all this was real, more real than reality; that it was true - and not mere play-acting.

Kant: Everything is theater and acting and nothing is acting and theater. We are puppets, here as well as there. Here against a theatrical background, there against a transcendental background. It's acting, in either case.

Socrates: But we hardly know what we're playing. Not even in our own case do we know it. We know our parts only dimly. We are lucky if we can get a glimpse of the role we are to play.

Kant: We must listen, as much as possible, to the prompter: to the voice of

our conscience.

Mother (*has joined them and heard the last part of the discussion; naively*):
And before whom are we playing, gentlemen? Please tell me.

Spinoza: Before an unsuspecting audience - so unsuspecting that they believe we are playing.

Socrates: Meanwhile it is they who are playing: they're playing the part of an audience.

Kant: Yes, they're always play-acting. They are play-acting their parts for each other, and each person is also play-acting to himself.

Mother (*simply*): But before whom do we all play? There must be Something - there must be someone who watches us, somewhere -

Kant: You're on the stage for the first time, my dear lady?

Mother: Yes, Sir.

Kant: Then tell me what you see - here. (*points at the audience*)

Mother: (*blinking*): I can see nothing, the lights are blinding me, I see a large black hole.

Kant: And if I tell you: there is an audience down there-?

Mother (*looking at him trustingly*): Then I'd have to believe you.

Kant: Yes, (*Firmly*): We have to believe; for we cannot know. None of us knows Him, the greatest Spectator of our lives' play. He sits in the dark. Somewhere there (*pointing*). But He watches us, constantly - believe me, my dear lady.

Spinoza: Believe him!

Socrates: Believe us!

Mother (*firmly*): Yes - I believe.

Franz: And what are you going to do?

Karl: (*meanwhile has told Franz*): I won't tell him, of course.

Franz: That would mean goodbye, now - forever.

Karl: (*tenderly*): You old dog - what else shall I do? Denounce the camp elder? Why - don't you allow me to accept your philosophy of life, just once? Today - I'll bring the sacrifice. Today I'll give meaning to my life - according to your theory. Today I'll catch myself a meaningful death!

Franz: Don't talk that way, Karl. It hurts.

Karl: (*more and more heatedly*): Since when has that been an argument? You old dog of a brother! (*Puts an arm around Franz's shoulder*) You've told me again and again: Pain, suffering is part of life - suffering too, has meaning.

Franz: That's true. But if it is you yourself who has to do the suffering - if it is you who is to stand the test -

Karl: Only then does it become true. Not when you're merely talking about it, only when you stand the test have you "made" it true. Haven't I learned my lesson from you?

SS-Man (*returns from left*)

Karl: Attention!

SS-Man: Here I am. (*To Franz, softly*) I'll stand the test - I'll stand it - I'll

pass it, the test!

Franz (*lets his hand go silently*)

SS-Man (*exits with Karl*)

Mother (*to the philosophers, worried*): Now he's being tested, gentlemen?

Kant: Yes - now he's being tested.

Paul (*to Franz*): That's it, isn't it?

Kant: Yes, but he'll pass the test, he said so - he pledged himself to the test.

Paul: Quite a fellow, I must say. You can be proud of him. That's the kind of a brother to have.

Franz: He's so different from me - I talk - he acts.

Spinoza (*excitedly, looking toward the far right*): Look, professor, he's knocking him down.

Kant: I don't see well - who, the angel?

Socrates: Yes, the angel.

Spinoza: The boy is down - he's bleeding.

Socrates: But he doesn't tell!

Kant: He doesn't tell! Despite the beating!

Socrates: He's silent. He remains firm.

Spinoza (*deeply moved*): He must be suffering terribly - Oh, I wish I could help him! But what can I do -? I've written books, but they're not read, and they're not understood. I've called out to them. I've tried to tell them, tell those humans - *Affectus desinit esse passio* - life ceases to be suffering - But they didn't hear me, they still don't know how to act.

Kant (*excitedly*): He must remain firm-oh, if I only could call out to him my categorical imperative: Oh human, act only on that maxim -

Socrates (*sadly*): He doesn't understand you. (*Pointedly*) You would have to talk as a human, not as a humanist.

Spinoza: What do you mean - as a human? They translated us into every kind of human language.

Socrates: What's the use? No human can understand what we say or write unless he has found out for himself, and lived it. Was this not our fate, too? We had to live what we believed. Before that, our thoughts were not effective. At least, this was the way it worked with me: I became effective-not through my dialogues but through my death.

Spinoza: Look! He still won't tell - but he's losing consciousness.

Kant (*lively*): Gentlemen, this is a case for my seminar. This I have to demonstrate!

Spinoza: What seminar?

Kant: They assigned the suicides to me. I am teaching them about the meaning of existence.

Spinoza: And what happens to them after they've taken your course?

Kant: They are regrouped into transports.

Spinoza: What kind of transports?

Kant: Destined for CCSPE, as the poor devils themselves call it - in their death cell kind of humor.

Spinoza: You're talking about those who have committed suicide and are about to be born again?

Kant: Yes

Spinoza: What do they mean by CCSPE?

Kant: Concentration Camp Sun-Planet Earth.

Spinoza: They're poor devils indeed, having to go back there again.

Kant: You should see how they try to dodge when such a new transport is arranged. Not even the angel is happy about his mission. (*Laughingly*)
But what has to be, has to be: and what has to become, has to become and must be born anew.

Socrates: How are you going to use this?

Kant: I'll have the scene recorded and transcribed.

Socrates: To present in your seminar?

Kant: Yes - but I still have to wait. First, he really and finally must have passed the test.

Socrates: Just look at him - he no longer moves.

Spinoza: And the SS-Man kicks him with his boots.

Kant: Poor angel - if he finds out what he had to do -

Spinoza: The boy won't be able to take it - you'll see he'll talk in the end.
He'll tell him the names. I'll take a bet, professor.

Kant: I don't bet, but you'll see I'm right. Look for yourself how he fights with himself - but he won't have to struggle much longer. His last journey is about to begin. Isn't this boy magnificent? He can take it, as they say in the prize ring.

Socrates: There-! (*Softly*) It is over. The boy is dead.

Kant: (*triumphantly*): He passed, Baruch!

Spinoza: You were right, professor. It's a case for your seminar.

Kant (*busily*): And do I need it! I'm running out of material. No one believes any more that man can be stronger than nature, including his own nature. I'm being called an idealist, even the founder of idealism. But I'm a realist, gentlemen, you've just seen proof of it.

Socrates: Oh, we all agree with you - the realism of the ideal! If only the humans could see it!

Spinoza: If everyone would think of himself as a good person - he would become good. But no one expects anything - neither of himself nor of others. In consequence, no one makes a demand on himself.

Black Angel (*from the right*): The job's done. Incredible! (*sighing*) And it had to happen to me!

Spinoza (*naively*): What became of the SS-Man?

Angel: Of whom?

Socrates (*impatient, apologizing*): He means your mortal frame.

Kant: He continues his life, Baruch - on the level of earthly time he must continue to exist up to his end; up to the day he meets his just fate - the day of atonement...

Angel: What did you think of him - quite a feat for a boy, wasn't it? (*exits right*)

Kant: Quite a feat.

Socrates: There he is.

Spinoza: The dead boy?

Kant: The boy. The man.

Mother: Karli!

Karl: Mother! (*They embrace*)

Mother: Come, let's go to Franzl.

Franz (*to Paul*): He won't come back, you'll see.

Paul: I'm beginning to think so myself.

Franz: Perhaps, by now, I'm all alone in this world -

Mother: But we're with you, Franz.

Franz: Heaven knows -

Paul: And the hunger -

Franz: Come, I've a piece of salt here. (*Reaches into his pocket*) Here, suck on it!

Paul: Thanks. But it'll make me thirsty -

Franz: Thirst - hunger, hunger, thirst - it's a change, at least, isn't it?

Paul: You're right - let's have it. (*Sucking*) A great fellow, your brother. I

can't get him off my mind.

Franz: And why he - why just he? Why always the wrong one - God knows, he was so much better than I!

Paul: Don't talk rubbish - you're one of our best; the best friend I have here.

Franz: You don't know everything - you don't know me well enough.

Paul: Maybe so - are you a murderer?

Franz: Even that. Don't laugh.

Paul: Come on, you're upset. Let's not talk about it.

Franz: Did you know Felix, in Auschwitz?

Paul: What about him?

Franz: Don't you recognize the coat I'm wearing?

Paul: Is it his?

Franz: Yes. I got him to trade his coat - for one bread ration.

Paul: Someone would have taken it from him anyway - he was being sent to the hospital.

Franz: Probably someone would have taken his coat. But who can tell? Maybe, by some chance, he could have kept it - and then it might have saved his life -

Paul: His transport was sent to the gas from the hospital. Their fate was sealed; none of them could work any more.

Franz (*stubbornly*): I misused his hunger - and my hoarded, saved-up bread, too. If the transport had not gone into the gas, and if Felix had

recovered, he would have frozen to death - my coat was so thin, without a lining.

Paul: If - if - ! If it were not for the word 'if' I'd be a millionaire. You're as much of a murderer as I am a millionaire.

Franz: That's not the way to talk. And that's not the way to act, as I have acted. It's not the outcome that counts -

Kant: That's true, of course.

Spinoza: I wouldn't have done what he did.

Socrates: What more do you want him to do? He now realizes it.

Spinoza: Too late.

Kant: He won't do it again.

Paul: We're not angels, none of us.

Franz: But we have to make our choices, over and over again, every moment. None of us starts out as a devil, either - not even the SS-Men.

Paul: Now you've cracked up completely. The bastard who may have your brother on his conscience, he is no devil?

Franz: He doesn't have to be.

Spinoza: He's close - I bet he'll guess - he'll see through our play!

Kant: No one can see through the angel.

Socrates: Long after I left the earth, an ancient Jew told me an ancient Jewish myth. The continuance of the world, it seems, depends on the existence on earth of exactly thirty-six perfectly just men. But no one must know who they are. If one of them is found out, he's called off immediately and disappears.

Spinoza: I know it, that myth.

Kant: That's our tragedy. Whatever we say, someone has said before us.

Socrates: If no one had, it would be an even greater tragedy.

Heinz (*had stepped behind the barrack, comes back, with grim humor*): My luck! For half an hour I've been trying to fish a potato from behind the barbed wire. I finally got it - whom may I offer this treat?

Paul: Toss it over here, you ass! He's half dead with hunger, our Franzl.

Heinz (*with comic gesture*): **Bon appetit!** It's a rock. Use it to knock down your brother's murderer, Franz.

Paul: Leave him in peace.

Franz: (*thoughtfully*): In peace - Karl probably has his peace - but not I, not Yet - I won't find peace until -

Paul: Don't torture yourself.

Franz: What do you know? I'm dirt - nothing but dirt.

Paul: You've sacrificed enough for your family - I know, I've heard about it.

Franz: I wanted to - oh yes, I wanted to. I wanted to do so many things.

Once, when I was still back home, I dreamed - about a concentration Camp - and someone asked me if I would volunteer to go there, to help the prisoners. And, God knows, never in my life have I felt so good as in my dream, when I said yes and went to the camp behind those miles of barbed wire, and stayed with the prisoners in a camp - just about like this one. But later, when I really was sent to one, I failed, I'm a lousy weakling, not an iota better than the others.

Paul: Who can say that he's better? Or worse?

Franz: Look - my sister, for example, she was different. She had a chance to get out of prison - all she needed to do was to make believe that had pricked she was coughing blood. She already her arm - spit into her handkerchief, and wiped the blood into it. She had learned to feign those rattling chest sounds - and then she didn't do it. She simply couldn't, she said.

Paul: That was plain silly.

Franz: You can't say that. It isn't as simple as that.

Spinoza: What is your opinion, professor?

Kant: Don't ask me that. My strictness in ethical principles has been resented enough by the humans.

Socrates: The boy is right. It isn't as simple as that.

Franz: But I don't want to give up either. Not yet. I keep dreaming, even here. Not about the camp. About what I'll do later, outside, when I'm out again.

Paul: What do you want to do - then?

Franz: I'll get a car -

Paul: Yes, I dream about that, too.

Franz: - and I'll drive around. Day and night, up the street and down the Street - according to the list.

Paul: What list?

Franz: I've made up a list, in my mind. With names of people whose life will be in danger, during those first waves of hate. I know hate will come. Violent passion that will destroy people, including those who did a lot of good, secretly, without anyone knowing about it. I've prepared a list of such people, including even some who are wearing uniforms now, the uniforms we hate so much. But beneath those uniforms, here and there, still beats a human heart. Not often - but it happens: someone who remained human, in spite of everything and who does what he can - but only a few know it. These few carry a responsibility, they must see to it that those exceptions are remembered. A mercy list - I've prepared a mercy list - and I'll go to the people on my list to help them.

Paul: You are a fool, a dangerous fool. Worse: a traitor.

Franz: (*smiling weakly*): A traitor? To whom? To what?

Paul: To all of us suffering here - who are made to suffer because of the people you want to help.

Franz: I'm no traitor. I am not betraying that which is truly human.

Paul: You call it human to help criminals escape justice?

Franz: What is just about paying back wholesale hate with more wholesale hate? What's just about revenging injustice with injustice? Do we have to keep on doing to people what they have been doing to others? To treat them as they have treated us is not justice. It's perpetuating injustice.

Paul: An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Franz: The bible is not always easy to understand. Take Cain, mankind's first murderer. Why did the Lord mark his forehead?

Paul: To mark the murderer. To warn others.

Franz: Wrong! The mark was to protect Cain, to see to it that people would not go on punishing Cain after he had been punished by God. To make sure that he be left alone. Don't you see? Just think what would have happened otherwise: the killing never would have stopped; one murder would have brought about another, one injustice would have followed the next - if man had gone on to pay back in kind. No! The links in the chain of evil have to be broken. We shall not go on

forever

repaying hate with hate, injustice with injustice, force with force!
The chain, Paul - the chain - that's it - it must be broken - (*sinks back onto the boards*).

Paul: Are you sick?

Franz: Yes, a little.

Paul: Rest a while. I'll leave you alone. But call me if you need anything. I'll look after Ernst. He won't last long.

Franz: I'm afraid you're right.

Paul: Ernst, how are you doing?

Ernst (*in the faltering manner of speech of a person weak with starvation*):
Terrible, thanks. (*Factually*) Tomorrow you can write me off.

Paul (*forced*): Nonsense. I've often felt worse than you do.

Ernst: I know what I'm saying. A strange feeling: to know that today I am, and tomorrow I'm not. At least not here. Where will I be tomorrow?

Spinoza: As long as they think of the "where" as a three - dimensional space, they won't understand and can't be helped.

Kant: It's better for them not to see the whole picture. Not seeing the world in all its dimensions forces humans to make choices.

Socrates: Yes, if they could see the totally, their lives would have no challenge.

Mother: My child, do you feel faint?

Franz (*murmuring to himself*): Mother! Mother! What's the matter with me? What's happening to me? (*slowly*) Is this death?

Mother: I don't know - and if I knew I wouldn't be permitted to tell you.

Karl: Just wait, Franzl. We're with you - don't be afraid.

Franz: Karl, I wish I were with you!

Karl: Franzl, I am with you.

Mother: He doesn't hear you - they never hear us. Haven't you found that out?

Karl: That's exactly what pains me, mother.

Mother: One gets used to it. It won't be long.

Karl: For him it will.

Mother: Not even for him. As soon as he is with us, it will be all right.

Franz: I am to die? How beautiful! I was always afraid - but now I know how it is. (*Happily*) I'll get near - to you - to everything.

Spinoza: Is he dying, professor?

Kant: We'll find out.

Socrates: I think, it's the other one's turn. (*Pointing to Ernst*) Don't you think, professor?

Kant: How do we know?

Franz: Or isn't this death yet? Do I still have hope? Will I be allowed to finish my work, my unfinished work? The play (*sadly*) which I always planned to write. The notes are lost - thrown out at the shower when I arrived in Auschwitz. Mother - Karl! You know how much this hurt. Do you know? And now I don't even have the hope left to finish it, that play? (*Overwhelmed, in pain*) Not even a page of it is left - nothing of me will survive! Tomorrow maybe I'll be nothing, gone, just like you, Karl, and perhaps mother.

Karl: Mother, can't you calm him down, can't you comfort him?

Mother: How? He doesn't see us, he doesn't hear us, no human understands anything we're thinking. You have to accept that! They must walk their paths to the finish, alone, everyone by himself. No one and nothing can help them - that's exactly what counts: that they find their paths by themselves.

Karl: So that's what we called life?

Mother: That's it - as far as we can grasp it now.

Franz: But I'll have courage - once in my life, this one time. In my life, I said? I meant in my death. Yes! Mother! Lord! I'll have courage! I - shall - give up! Yes, I shall voluntarily give up the completion of my

play!

Spinoza: Did you hear him? He is giving up the completion of his play.

Socrates: And by doing so he completes himself - to a totality.

Kant: You will see, Baruch, that's the way it'll come out!

Franz: Ernst here, right there - he's not going to die. It is I who must die.
(*Aloud*) Paul?

Paul: Yes, what is it? What do you want, Franz?

Franz: Come here. How is Ernst doing? Better, isn't he?

Paul: How can I tell, lying there?

Franz: I can tell - somehow I know. You'll see, he'll get over it.

Paul: Could be - it almost looks that way. But you - how do you feel? Are you better, too, Franz?

Franz: Yes - and no - it depends on how you look at it.

Paul: Pull yourself together! Till tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll get a bowl of soup again, you'll see. Good, hot soup - maybe with a potato in it!

Franz: Maybe - maybe not. Maybe nothing at all -

Paul (*ironical*): Going to pot - hunger getting you?

Franz: Leave me alone.

Paul (*back to Ernst*)

Franz: Nothing - a great big nothing. So that's what man is - that's what I am. And yet! (*Raises himself*) Man is something - maybe even I - something indefinite - something you cannot touch - but we have to make it real - somehow, that's what counts - in life - in death - Lord, let me die - I'm ready to make real in me what no one can see or touch.

Fritz (*watching Franz*): Why is he so quiet, our Franz? He hasn't said a word to us all day and he was always philosophizing -

Paul: Shut up, idiot. He doesn't feel well.

Franz: I am well. Oh, how well I am! I'm close to things, and to you, mother,
and Karl, and to truth - (*ecstatically*) - and to the completion of this play called life! I'm close, Lord, you know it. Help me further - so I can touch it. Don't take Ernst there; take me - I want to be with you. Take me for him - I give myself up for him - I want to be close, to mother, to Karl, to YOU. Take me, Lord! I give up my claim to the play and its completion - now, now I am ready - I'm close to You, and now I know: This fraction of a life - it will be complete if I give it up - if I let go. Take my life; accept it as a sacrifice - for the others - for Ernst wants to live; he wants to see his wife again, at home. But I have given up the claim - renounced - I really have, you know it, Lord!

Paul (*has bent over Ernst*): Ernst, what's the matter? What is it? Go on, move!

Fritz: He can't move, you sap. He's stone dead.

Paul (*feels Ernst's face, then closes Ernst's eyelids*) Heinz, Richard! Come Here - Give me a hand - let's get the corpse out of here - the air is foul enough. (*Softly*) You may take what he has in his pockets. His coat isn't so bad either - yours is worse, Richard. Why don't you swap coats? (*They do it. The corpse is dragged along the floor and left outside the barrack door*)

Paul (*turns again to Franz*)

Franz: What - Ernst is dead? No, that can't be!
Paul (*shaking his head*): Still raving and ranting?

Franz: He didn't accept it -

Paul: Please pull yourself together!

Franz: He didn't accept it - my life - my offering - I'm just dirt - I'm not worth even that much!

Mother: You mustn't talk that way, Franzerl.

Franz: Karl was more worthy.

Karl: We are waiting for you.

Mother: (*to Karl*): I'm going to write another petition.

Kant: You better not, my good lady.

Spinoza: Why can't she make another petition?

Karl: Never mind. I'll do it this time!

Black Angel (*from right*): I also thought that it was Franz I was to pick up.
But the orders were changed at the last moment.

Karl: Can I no longer make the petition?

Angel: No, it's too late.

Mother: (*resigned*): Come, Karl. We'll stay with him - as long as it is Permitted -

Angel: Now I'll have to pick him up (*points to Ernst's corpse in front of the door, then stops*) But no, that's not the way. (*exits right*).

SS-Man (*front left, shouting from the outside into the barrack*): Filthy pigs! I'll show you, throwing the corpses in front of the door. Block elder!

Paul: Here, Herr troopleader!

SS-Man: Get going with that stinking corpse - toss it into the ditch, not in front of the door!

Paul (*apologetic, stammering*): Our people are too weak -

SS-Man (*slaps him*): I'll show you "too weak" - get with it, you goddamn bastard!

(*Three inmates drag the corpse behind the barrack. SS-Man exits*)

Black Angel (*from right, to the philosophers*): What assignments I get - nothing but torturing people. But this Karl, he was terrific. He didn't give in!

Kant: Come and join us, Karl!

Karl: What is it gentlemen?

Kant: Do you know him?

Karl: No.

Angel: I was the man who had to torture you - who killed you.

Karl: (*disinterested*) Oh? It's strange - if someone had told me, then -

Socrates: You would have been surprised, wouldn't you?

Spinoza: It would only confuse the humans.

Kant: In time they find out everything by themselves.

Angel: In time? In eternity!

Mother: I'm still too stupid to understand all this -

Kant: We are not done yet, my dear lady. We're still play-acting.

Mother: If I only had both my boys with me -

Karl: Come, mother, let's help Franz.

Angel: Help him you cannot. But you may be with him, for now.

Mother: I'm grateful to you, even for that -

Angel: Have faith - we need him only a little while longer - there -

Mother: Where?

Angel: Here.

Kant: On stage.

Angel: In life.

Franz: Why? Why do I have to go on living - now - in this way?

Spinoza (to Angel): Can't he be made to understand?

Angel: He has to find out himself - that's the only way.

Franz: Is this mercy? Death would have been merciful. But to go on living?
Why should I survive - this - this dying?

Angel: Let him be - he'll find out.

Karl: Why don't you at least tell us?

Angel: Ask these gentlemen.

Kant: We still need him for a while.

Mother: But what for, gentlemen?

Socrates: He has to write a play - he has to complete his play.

Karl: But he has lived it, lived it to the end - lived it to completion.

Spinoza: The record is not yet complete.

Mother: What record is he talking about, Karl?

Kant: The play we're showing here - now - on this stage!

Mother: I'm all mixed up.

Karl: I am too, mother.

Socrates: You'll understand later.

Franz: Paul!

Paul: Yes - do you feel better?

Franz: Don't laugh - but I want someone to hear about it: I've promised myself something.

Paul: And what was that?

Franz: I'll be a better man. I've been sentenced - sentenced to live.

Paul: Don't be foolish.

Franz: Oh yes, believe me. I've been sentenced to live on, to carry on this filthy existence: I'll make it fruitful, and I'll complete what I've begun. It will end no sooner - now I know.

Paul: You talk nonsense.

Franz: I know what I'm talking about, and I also know what I must do.

Karl: He means his play - you know, mother, the incomplete play he had to throw away when we arrived at Auschwitz. That's the only time I saw him cry.

Mother: My poor boy.

Kant: Do you know what is being played here?

Mother: I'm beginning to understand -

Angel: A little more patience, you two. And you, gentlemen, you know what you have to do.

Kant: Yes, we know.

Angel (*exits right*)

Spinoza: What did he mean?

Socrates: We have to make our exit.

Spinoza: Why? Why all of a sudden?

Kant: We are now superfluous.

Spinoza: Oh, I see-*sub specie aeternitatis*, from the angle of our eternity and simultaneousness the play will now be discontinued?

Socrates: You have gotten the message - you, of course, in Latin.

Spinoza: Don't act so superior. All right. I did write in two languages: Latin and Hebrew, and you not at all. All you did was talk, and that only in Greek.

Kant: Don't fight, gentlemen. Remember, we've become superfluous.

Socrates: At least for the moment.

Spinoza: All right, let's go.

Kant: Just a second: listen to this!

Paul (*to Franz*): Try to sleep. I'll also lie down. Wouldn't it be good to sleep through the hunger? But I'm afraid I'd dream of nothing but food.

Franz: At least you can dream of it.

Paul: (*lies down on his board*)

Franz: Mother - Karl - Lord - now I'm alone - alone with you. And now I promise you to fulfill the task which - maybe - I'm only imagining. But imagination or not - this is a question that can be decided only by action - by my actions. We'll see.

Spinoza: He means the play he wanted to write?

Socrates: And which we have just played: our record.

Kant: Shall we go, gentlemen?

Spinoza (*to Socrates*): And you think the people will understand all this?

Socrates (*shrugging*): We did what we could.

Spinoza: You'll see, the humans will say it's all make-believe. They'll brush it off as theater, as stage illusion, fantasy.

Socrates: And?

Kant: What the humans hear and see here is bound to be too overwhelming, believe you me, my dear Baruch.

Spinoza: I have to believe you.

(The philosophers exit right)

Franz: I have to believe. *(Raises himself from his board while the others are sleeping or are restlessly moving about)* And I do believe! In myself! In you, mother - Mother!

Mother: Yes, my child -

Franz: Karl!

Karl: All right, Franzl -

Franz: Lord!

(Utter silence)

Translated by Joseph Fabry

NOTES

Dr. Frankl wrote the drama *Synchronization in Birkenwald* in 1945, shortly after his release from 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ years in concentration camps. "It was," he recalls, "as if something deep inside me dictated the play. I could hardly write fast enough, even though I used shorthand. The play was written within a few hours."

The Athenian philosopher Socrates (469-399 B. C.), the Dutch-Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), and the German metaphysician Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) join the dead mother of two sons and their fellow sufferers in a concentration camp to grapple with the eternal question first raised by Job: Why do we have to suffer? What is the meaning of an apparently meaningless situation?

Out of the Synchronization of time and space appears an answer not apparent in the here and now. It is the answer which has made Viktor Frankl's contribution to health pre-eminent in today's world.

Viktor Frankl was professor of psychiatry at the University of Vienna, and visiting professor at the United States International University in San Diego.