

# “THE MAN WITH THE BROKEN FINGERS”

by Carl Sandburg

The Man with the Broken Fingers throws a shadow,  
Down from the spruce and evergreen mountain timbers of Norway –  
And across Europe and the Mediterranean to the oasis palms of Libya –  
He lives and speaks a sign language of lost fingers.  
From a son of Norway who slipped the Gestapo nets, the Nazi patrols,  
The story comes as told among those now in Norway.

Shrines in their hearts they have for this nameless man  
Who refused to remember names names names the Gestapo wanted.  
“tell us these names. Who are they? Talk! We want those names!”  
And the man faced them, looked them in the eye, and hours passed and  
No names came – hours on hours and no names for the Gestapo.  
They told him they would break him as they had broken others.  
The rubber hose slammed around face and neck,  
The truncheon handling pain with no telltale marks,  
Or the distinction of the firing squad and death in a split second –  
The Gestapo considered these and decided for his something else again.  
“Tell us those names. Who were they? Talk! Names now – or else!”  
And no names came – over and over and no names.

So they broke the little finger of the left hand.  
Three fingers came next and the left thumb bent till it broke.  
Still no names and there was a day and night for rest and thinking it over.  
Then again the demand for names and he gave them the same silence.  
And the little finger of the right hand felt itself twisted,  
Back and back twisted till it hung loose from a bleeding socket.  
Then three more fingers crashed and splintered one by one  
And the right thumb back and back into shattered bone.

Did he think about violins or accordions he would never touch again?  
Did he think of baby or woman hair he would never again play with?  
Or of hammers or pencils ho good to him any more?  
Or of gloves and mittens that would always be misfits?  
He may have laughed half a moment over a Gestapo job  
So now for a while he would handle neither knife nor fork  
Nor lift to his lips any drinking -cup handle  
Nor sign his name with a pen between thumb and fingers.

And all this was halfway – there was more to come.  
The Gestapo wit and craft had an aim.  
They wanted it known in Norway the Gestapo can be terrible.  
They wanted a wide whispering of fear  
Of how the Nazis handle those who won't talk or tell names.  
“We give you one more chance to cooperate.”  
Yet he had no names for them.  
His locked tongue, his Norwegian will pitted against Nazi will,  
His pride and faith in a free man's way,  
His welcoming death rather than do what they wanted –  
They brought against this their last act of fury,  
Breaking the left arm at the elbow,  
Breaking it again at the shoulder socket –  
And when he came to in a flicker of opening eyes,  
They broke the right arm first at the elbow, then the shoulder.

By now, of course, he had lost all memory of names, even his own.  
And there are those like you and me and many many others  
Who can never forget the Man with the Broken Fingers.  
His will, his pride as a free man shall go on.  
His shadow moves and his sacred fingers speak.  
He tells men there are a thousand writhing shattering deaths  
Better to die one by one than to say yes yes yes  
When the answer is no no no and death is welcome and death comes soon  
And death is a quiet step into a sweet clean midnight

(When this tale of methodically inflicted agony was published in “The Chicago Times,” on August 23, 1942, it brought inquiries whether it was war propaganda or based on an actual incident. My informant was a Norwegian ski champion known as Lt. “Andreas” for the safety of his home kinfolk. He gave the incident, as he had it from the son of the main tragic figure. Among many other related points was one of German soldiers whose minds began to crack under the strain of the inhuman acts required of them by their superiors, such soldiers being returned to Germany as “mental cases” needing therapeutic treatment. “Andreas,” a sober and modest hero, was killed in a bomber flight over Berlin. Friends of “Andreas” say the story had translation into other languages and circulation by undergrounds.)