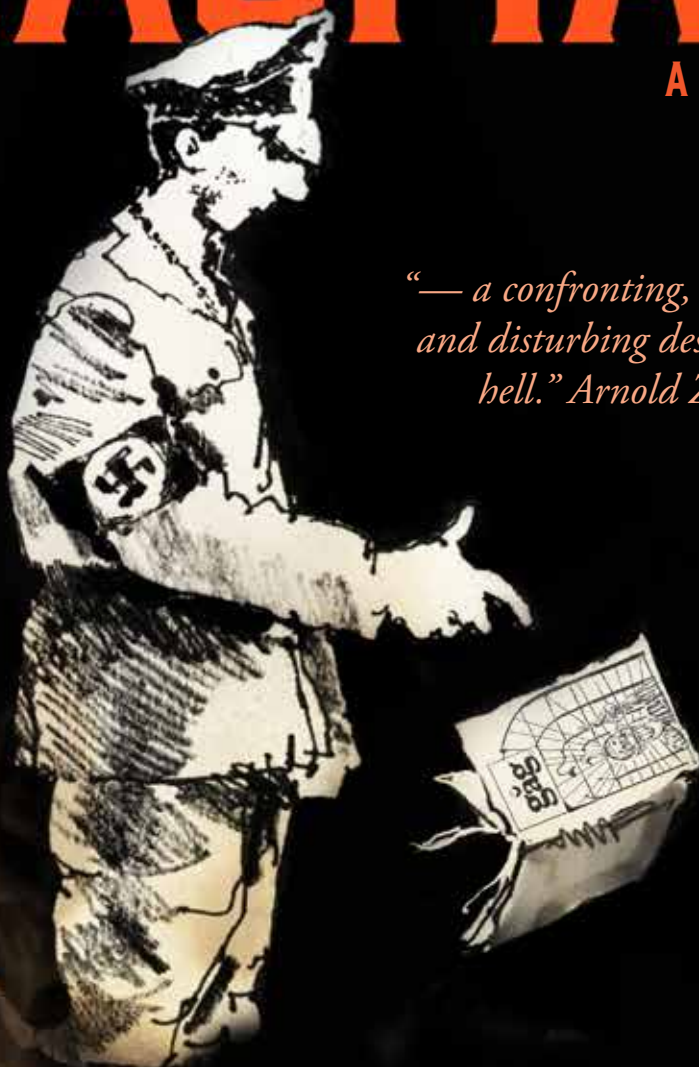


STAY FUNNY — OR DIE

# GAGMAN

A NOVEL



*“— a confronting, haunting,  
and disturbing descent into  
hell.” Arnold Zable*

# DOV FEDLER

AND JOANNE FEDLER

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ISBN 9781922598554 (print)

ISBN 9781761280092 (ebook)

Brio Books, an imprint of Booktopia Group Ltd  
Unit E1, 3-29 Birnie Avenue,  
Lidcombe, NSW 2141, Australia  
[briobooks.com.au](http://briobooks.com.au)

Printed and bound in Australia by SOS Print + Media Group



**Proudly Printed  
In Australia**

**[booktopia.com.au](http://booktopia.com.au)**

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*To my wife Dorrine  
who chose me when  
I was nothing  
and turned me  
into something else.*

*And to the survivors.*

# PART 1

The End

/end/

*noun*

*A final part of something, especially a period of time, an activity, or a story*



## COMEDIAN'S NOTES I: Anything For A Laugh

You think you're a tough audience?

I've died more times than you've belched.

Sorry, that was in bad taste.

But hey, I'll try anything. Flatulence, hiccups, ablutions - the body offers such great material for a laugh. Is there anything a kid loves more than a fart joke?

Any kids in the house?

None? Just as well.

Tonight we're going to some dark places and the *kinderlach* need this *tsorres* like a *loch in kop*, a hole in the head.

There's an old Yiddish proverb, 'What soap is to the body, laughter is to the soul.'

If you'd seen what I've seen, you may not find jokes about soap funny anymore. Lighten up, nothing is sacred or immune from comedy. Everything is up for grabs.

Dov and Joanne Fedler

All I have to do is keep you laughing.

You think that's easy?

Come stand in my shoes for a moment.

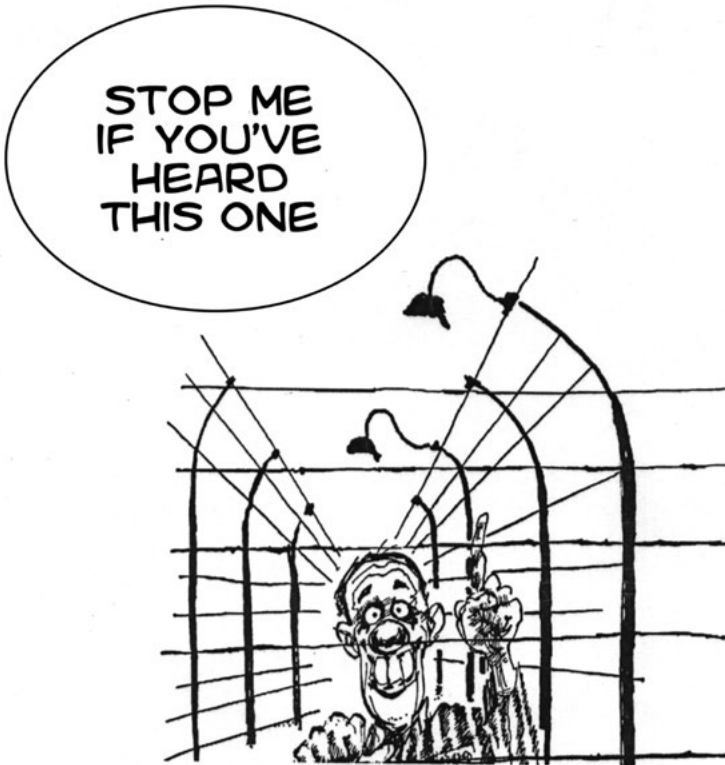
What have you got to lose?

Nothing.

Every time I come out here and fail, I die.  
Just like Jesus. I die for you - over and over  
again. My trick is to turn the tables on you.  
Land one that you didn't see coming.

Stop me if you've heard this one.

This one's gonna kill ya.



## The Original No-Name Brand

In the camp I was called ‘collaborator’ – a traitor to my own people. I didn’t have a people. This humourless bunch and I shared nothing in common except for the loss of our foreskins and our pathetic ambition to live through another day. They hated me for constantly mocking them and didn’t have enough names to call me. Now there’s a laugh. The first thing they took away from you at the first roll-call – the Appell – was your name. After we were tattooed with a number, a Kapo barked at us, ‘Forget your name! Here, all you are is a number.’

Even though it’s marked indelibly on my arm, I pretend it does not exist. It is as dead to me as my name. I avoid looking at it in the hope that it will disappear. I will wake up one morning, it will be gone, and I will find myself in the life beyond this nightmare.

But I am forever, at every awful awakening, at the morning Appell.

We have to stand stock-still wearing the thinnest rags. It is always cold. Wet. Or so it seems. We stand for hours on end as the block Kapo counts us. The tally he hands to the SS officer has to be correct otherwise he might end up standing with us. They are always so precise. The Kapo counts again. It takes hours. If the numbers don't match, they do it once more. If you drop to your knees or fall, you are taken away. You are dead. Later we will smell your scent in the smoke of the ovens as we work. The Appell is also used as a punishment. And they love to punish us. It is harder at the evening Appell. You are already exhausted at the morning roll-call and the evening Appell comes after a day of hard labour. You can barely stand. But you do. They know exactly who did what today.

'He didn't work hard enough.' Mark for punishment.

'This one resisted.' Mark for punishment.

'Here is one that actually tried to escape.' Punishment.

There is only one punishment.

We'd get the drift of you soon enough. You were done. Mostly overdone. Done and dusted. The ovens and the smoke never stopped.

'Alas, poor Yossel. I knew him well. Just this morning he shat beside me in the toilets. I'd know his stench anywhere.'

Each of us was an example to the next that it was pointless to resist.

The Kapos were our kings. They thrashed us, whipped us, killed us in an effort to ingratiate themselves with their masters.

You know how that thing worked? They appointed prisoners – a 'yellow star brigade' – to supervise the labour. They also called it

‘prisoner self-administration’. It was a neat way of turning victim on victim. And a neat way of saving costs.

Oh, they were diligent. Once a Kapo, you didn’t want to go back. To become one, you had to be a big *macher*. Every accredited shit, bully or gangster with a criminal record was pulled from the ranks and thrown in like a mangy cat among us pigeons. They watched us closely and selected those with a talent for violence, a taste for blood. Once elevated to a *Lagerpolizist*, you had perks, near decent meals, barracks, cigarettes, Schnapps. You could have a life; if you could call this living. You had to be on your toes, or on ours, to keep your gig. Kill us a little every day, but not quite. There was a lot of work to be done and you worked to the credo that *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Work liberates. The Kapos worked us harder than the SS. The SS mostly just watched our dog-eat-dog world.

But they reserved the right to kill.

## 2

# Unmensch

They called us *Schweinehund*.

How they love their pork and dogs. People? Not so much.

It is impossible to record what we witnessed – the brutality, the casual taking of human life. I tell you of a soldier picking up a baby by its feet, smashing its head on a rock and tossing it onto heap of others, performing this action over and over, as nonchalantly as a builder tossing bricks. But do you really get it? Impossible. It's a you-had-to-be-there story.

Let's not go there.

There are enough stories about all that. Mine would be just another to add to the tally. The literature, the documentation, is as high as the piles of corpses. It's enough, and yet never enough. Maybe, like prayer, it needs the constant repetition to keep its memory alive. Let it live with someone else. Whoever it may be, he or she, is welcome to the gig, thank you. I pray to forget it all.

That I am a survivor is evident. All our stories converge into one litany of suffering. The arrest, the endless, awful train journey, our journeyman lessons of what was to come. The lucky ones died on the trains. We went on to greater deprivations. Write 'hunger' but you cannot imagine it. A thousand Yom Kippur days is not enough.

I am grateful that I, with others, was billeted separately from the women and children for reasons never explained. It is difficult to resist the hunger of little ones or to steal a crust from a tiny hand, endure the wails of a pleading mother. Would I have done that given the opportunity? No doubt. Here you meet parts of yourself you'd have sworn belonged to monsters, not men.

We were, I presume, part of some unexplained experiment. Was it to gauge the limits of endurance? The brave ones killed themselves. They ran to the electrified fence like a mother running towards a child who has gone missing. The guards would cheer. Less work for them. Those bastards loved to watch us do that. When it happened, as it so often did, they never tired or failed to call out, 'Stupid Jew. Can't you tell the time? Today's not *Fry-day!*'

I had done nothing remotely that cruel. Well, that's my defence. My tribe thought differently. It was me they cursed, called traitor, *Unmensch*. Now they were a hostile audience. My fellow inmates hated the way I constantly mocked the way they clung to the idea of a God. All they wanted was to forget our plight and pray for some divine intervention but I just wouldn't let that pass. I wanted to stand up close to God and spit in His face. They judged me for speaking the unspeakable. Such was the justice in that hell. In my world, everything is speakable. Everything is sayable. Words,

after all, are the fountainhead of civilisation. In the beginning was the word, right? I am descended from The People of the Book and when I last looked, books were full of words. I stand as living proof that the word is indeed mightier than the sword.

My big mouth has always landed me in trouble. It's the story of my life.

There, I could not endure the constant references to God.

'It is the will of *Hashem*.' The Name.

Even here they were too timid to mention His name in case there might rain down more awful punishment. What more, could He, or they, do to us?

'Who are we to question the will of the Master of the Universe?'

*Who? Us?* Who else? Who better qualified? We were all graduates of the University of Life and Life was shit.

'God gives and takes away.' Master of the Shittyverse, you should have come to the Lager – the Deutsche would have given you lessons in give and take.

That one didn't go down well.

I couldn't listen to their *kvetching*. We needed to scream out at the injustice of this world instead of gathering as a group to form a *minyán*, a quorum of ten, to pray. I would have rooted for a group that gathered to curse. I would have led them. But like everyone else, I was an abject coward, bowing to the oppressor. How magnificent it would have been to go out with a bang. Had we all just once rushed the guards and died proud. No one had the balls – including me. I had decided on suicide yet didn't have the courage to throw myself on the wire. Secretly I prayed to God-knows-who for death. The wire was the only promise of any glory. To my damnation I secretly cheered whoever did that.



### 3

## The Night of the Gourmets

We lost any connection to being called people. We were reduced to mindless creatures who had but one thought: food. Nothing else. Esau sold his inheritance for a mess of potage. We would have settled for a lick of the spoon. Hunger was everything. There was no salvation or point in living. Oh, to be brave enough to call 'Enough.' All I wanted was for it to come to an end. Every day was about getting through the sheer dread of a gnawing in the gut as if it were a cellar of panicked rats.

I woke from a bad dream one morning, resolved in what I would do. My nightmare had been so vivid. Just before sleep had claimed me, I watched a boy called Bak, who bunked close to me, whose first name I forget, hold his father in his arms as he died. I drifted into the awful account of how I came to be here: the

sudden arrest; being separated from family; marched onto a cattle car; the stench; the wailing; the confusion about what was happening; the arrival at the camp; the guards; the dogs; the two lines left and right – life and death. So utterly simple: fit for labour; fit for soap.

Where the boy had acquired a knife, I don't know. He had some balls. He sat wide-eyed the whole night cradling his father's body, fending off the predators, those starved beyond reason, who would gladly have eaten flesh before the morning inspection. My four bunkmates, like a gathering of crows and vultures, hovered close by, whispering. Ours was the top bunk of the three. We shared a blanket and they shared quiet obscenities. I had watched scavengers just nights before tear into a body. Or maybe that was just another bad dream.

'How are we supposed to be civilised in a rat-eat-rat universe?' asked a crow.

'To survive one has to eat,' said another, a Talmudic scholar.

'The best cut is under the arm, is good place to bite,' said the butcher bird. 'Up near the shoulder. Tasty and easy to hide from the guards.'

I felt my body and soul strip away as they guzzled on my flesh. I dreamt of wafers and wine.

'Wouldn't it be a treat to eat one who got fried on the wire?' said a vulture, a gourmet, between bites.

'Mmm, yes – with an onion braised in sweat,' mused another.

Until after one unforgettable night such as this, I woke from the nightmare and with that after-dream clarity of the futility of hope, I decided, on such an enlightened morning, to die.

The morning Appell would be my funeral.

## 4

# The Fingertip Test

The parade began as it always did. The commandant, ever punctilious, came swaggering past, expressing satisfaction with the state of our deterioration and humiliation by the gesture of slapping his boot with a riding crop. In the great scheme of this awful enterprise, he was small fry, but he conducted himself as if he were the ultimate authority.

I had decided he would be the first to throw a shovelful of ash on my grave.

The inspection followed the same, unvarying routine. He strutted past our straggly lines followed by his four dogs whom he pretended to placate.

‘Don’t be alarmed by the smell, lads, it’s just the *Schweinehunde*.’

He addressed his four hounds as equals – a species higher than us. They were named, unoriginally, after some of Santa Claus’s

reindeer – Donner, Blitz, Dascher and Komet. Though they had heard the same crack over and over, every day, without variation, the guards would laugh uproariously, as if it was the grandest display of wit they had ever witnessed.

At least while they were laughing, no one died.

The commandant would swagger through our ranks selecting a victim, like our mothers would choose a fat chicken for slaughter. We had to be near shadows for this selection, a whisper away from oblivion.

You always trembled as he made his way towards you.

We tried to avoid looking into his eyes, like one is supposed not to make eye contact with a baboon or gorilla for fear that it might provoke an act of aggression. He strolled, always at his leisure, drawing it out, understanding that timing is everything. It was an exquisite torture. He grunted and beamed, slapping the crop to his thigh as he made his selection.

But today I chose him.

As he reached me, I met his eye and mimicked his grin and stance as if it were me doing the inspection. He stopped dead in his tracks and took a step backwards, mildly startled – like having found a fly in his soup. I might just have been a fly in his soup but for one brief moment what a fly was I! The bullet to my head had to be quick to follow.

It was a flash of sublime victory for me, but my gut betrayed me – my bravado expelled in a fearful fart. It was a raspy, thunderous one, the kind that young boys are so proud of producing – a smelly rite of passage. But this was not a joyous release, rather my voice of terror. It was that which saved me.

The guard called Schwammberg had been quick to cock his

rifle, ready to grant my wish, mete out the punishment for the impertinence. I wanted to thank him. But the commandant stopped him with the same casual finger that, on the day we arrived, determined our fates. Women, left; men, right. Death to the north, life to the south. I forget which was which.

He remained frozen in a moment of uncertainty, his finger still raised, as he examined me minutely and my knees trembled. When the finger dropped, the blessed bullet would come. The moment stretched to eternity. Then the impossible happened.

‘Not so fast, Schwammberg, the Jew is about to shit himself. I believe that was his last wish. Let us have the courtesy to allow him to finish.’

And with that he exploded with a laugh that a comedian dreams of hearing from his audience. Except it was his own joke that carried him away. It was that rich uproarious belly laugh that is always triggered by farce. Absurdity is the heart of everything funny and this situation was off the charts. He slapped his thigh with the crop repeatedly as greater peals of laughter erupted from him, wave after rolling wave. The guards started to laugh as well, for such laughter is infectious. Even some prisoners’ faces cracked into strange grimaces. Moishel der Meshuggenne laughed louder than anyone.

How he had survived this long was among the few miracles I have experienced. Moishel laughed at anything. He was a giant and inured to any deprivation. Cruel manual labour and starvation seemed to agree with his constitution and disposition. I have no doubt that his childhood had in some way prepared him for this ordeal. That he was truly simple and had evaded selection for extermination was a wonder to us all. He made the guards

laugh constantly. Perhaps they spared him because in laughter there is the promise of hope. In what I thought were to be my last moments all I could think of was Moishel's laughter.

How was I to keep the commandant laughing?

What could I do for an encore?

I panicked back into life. As decisive as I had been of ending it all, I barely realised I now wanted to survive.

I had no sense of direction, just purpose. The show had to go on. I danced out of line, barking like a dog, rooting in the mud, playing dead, barking again, wiggling my arse like a happy porker, finally, sitting up like a dog, begging for a bone. Moishel's laughter hovered over it all, like a soundtrack.

If I could only keep the commandant laughing, I might find a way out of here. Survive like Moishel. Wasn't that the key to it all? How bizarre that hope is so easily born. The commandant stopped laughing as if a switch had been turned off. But still he held his finger high, suspense invisibly balanced on its tip. Surely, he must drop it now?

Instead, still smiling, he moved to stand face to face with Moishel. He then casually drew his Luger from its holster and shot him in the head. The suddenness, the cruelty and finality, rendered us all frozen.

Then he dropped his finger.

As he holstered the smoking gun, he turned to me, chuckling. 'Tonight, at Appell, you make us laugh again, ja?' It was a ploy worthy of Machiavelli. And my execution was forgotten by all but me.

We knew that Moishel had taken the bullet for me, and that the price for disrupting the routine had been met.

‘Routine *über alles*,’ was the unspoken rule that had just been underlined. Laughter? Not on the Appell list. Underline ‘Not for prisoners!’

In that moment, my role in the camp changed to being above a Kapo. I became the executioner’s assistant. Only time would reveal that fact and make me so hated.

‘Tonight at Appell, you make us laugh again, ja?’

The words, like the pistol shot, rang in my ears all day. The bullet in my head was that single word, ‘Again.’ How was I to top my morning show? How could I be thinking in this way? Show? It was like dreaming up a *schtick* when I did comedy at the club. How would I make him laugh again and, if I did, what was to be the consequence of that? Someone would die. Of that there was no doubt. The evening Appell would now be my execution. And my stomach rumbled in protest the entire day.

*Gagman* is a touching and unique tale of survival through unimaginable horror.

A prisoner in a WWII concentration camp discovers a superpower that could keep him alive – he can make the commandant laugh by telling jokes. He must stay funny – or die.

Pushed to the ends of his wit and humanity, *Gagman* is propelled into a spiralling madness in which he would sell his soul for a gag, simply to live another day.

Evoking themes from *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Fedler weaves the story of a Faustian bargain brokered in hell, where redemption comes in the form of a punchline.

Swapping his yellow star for a tattered comic book, *Gagman* roams the new world and zeitgeist determined to find answers to the deepest questions about loss, hope and belonging.

Illuminated by Fedler's haunting cartoons, *Gagman* juxtaposes humour and pathos and explores survivor guilt, desperation and the search for meaning in the wake of the Holocaust.

Dov Fedler, a legendary political cartoonist, has been working on this story for 35 years. His earliest dream was to work for Walt Disney, but he ended up working as a cartoonist at The Star newspaper for half a century. *Gagman* is his fourth book. His previous titles include *If You Can Write You Can Draw*, *Starlite Memories* and his memoir, *Out of Line*.

Joanne Fedler is a speaker, publisher and the bestselling author of 14 books, including *Secret Mothers' Business*, *Things Without a Name* and *Unbecoming*. She is Dov's writing mentor, editor and middle daughter.



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