

## RICHARD COHEN

### Auschwitz Survivor Understands Jonestown

SHE SAID SAYING NOTHING, listening to our foolishness. She sat, sometimes, smoking, sometimes drinking her scotch with no ice and no mixer, and when we talked about it, about the murders and the suicides and how they could have happened, she said nothing. She did not want us to feel guilty, she later said, but she knew all along. Zet had seen it before.

She had come down from Boston with my sister and my niece. They had come down and my parents had joined them and the children were there and we built a fire and slipped our drinks and had the sort of Thanksgiving weekend Norman Rockwell painted and people said did not exist. Zet laughed with us and joked with us, but when we discussed the suicides, she had very little to say. She does not like to talk of such things.

It was me, of course, who kept bringing it up. I had been going to my study all weekend to write about Jonestown, to write something on how it happened and why it happened, and I would re-emerge from time to time, frustrated, unable to hit the proper typewriter keys to make the proper words. It is difficult to write about evil so gross, and so I tried many themes and when they did not

work I went out to the fire and I started more debates. Sometimes Zet would join in and sometimes she would not, but even when she did she did not say what she knew.

Once, Zet had been the bodies piled high herself. She had been in Auschwitz. She is Dutch-Belgian-French, but all of that is academic now. She knew Anne Frank in Holland and like Anne Frank she had been captured and taken with her parents to Auschwitz. Her parents died there, but Zet survived. She walked away from a line of march toward the end and met an American G.I. She remembers he was black and she remembers he gave her some bread and she remembers nothing more. She fainted.

She does not talk easily of the past and for a time she would not talk about it at all. She is

dark-haired, handsome, French in some indefinable way. When she talks of the past, she feels she must choose her moments, that it makes some people uncomfortable, others guilty. It is the ultimate trump, this past of hers. She uses it sparingly.

Anyway, she was over for the weekend and I was writing about Guyana. I had this theme for a while and it was that what happened in the jungle was not all that different from what had happened in the past. I thought of Masada and then I referred to something I had just read in Barbara Tuchman's new book on the 14th Century—"A Distant Mirror." She told how in 1349, some 2,000 Jews of Strasbourg died at the stake rather than accept conversion. They died because they chose to, because to them the choice they were given was no choice at all. This is what makes a martyr—this matter of choice.

It could have been the same in the jungle—not precisely the same, of course, but similar. You can appreciate how Jim Jones and his adherents might think that the botched assassination attempt would mean the end of their jungle commune, their jungle civilization, that soldiers would come

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