

*(Vintage, 2004. First published by Ravan Press (PTY) Ltd, 1974.)*

‘Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it.’ (166).

This sentence sums up for me what the book is about. Michael K is an anomaly in a world of concentration camps, fences, soldiers and policemen, a world of war, war being an allegory for the way in which human beings live in societies. The camp doctor applies the word ‘allegory’ to Michael’s stay in the camp. What he should be examining is the allegory that he and the world in which he lives represent. Because of his cleft lip, Michael speaks incoherently and has always been an outsider. He lives by his instincts which drive him to find freedom from the confining world in which he is ‘a meaning...without becoming a term.’

Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre’s *Freedom at Midnight*, which I have just read, also deals with a man who will not eat. It is a coincidence that Michael K and MK Gandhi have the same initials. Both men live in situations of war; both men reduce their lives to the simplest essentials; both men adopt a passive stance against violence; both men starve themselves almost to death. But Gandhi is a meaning that has become a term in his society. All his actions: his return to a life of simple necessities, his fasts, his prayers, have reference to a desire for a more humane society. He accepts life in a society. Michael K wants to be free from the constraints of society. In the time that he lives on the farm, he is like Adam, a farmer, using his initiative to make his life meaningful. But afraid of the intrusion of warmongers into his space, he has to hide his existence from discovery. Other people bring with them forms of enslavement.

I am left wondering where freedom lies: within or without society?