
A Number for My Name

Once again my father bribed the SS—this time to get us *off* the Auschwitz list—but it didn't matter. A month later the Germans closed the labor camp. The SS came to our house and told us to pack. We were going to Auschwitz anyway.

My mother—always the realist—said, “We’re going to be killed.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my father said. “Would they tell us to take our possessions along if we were going to be killed?”

My parents each packed a suitcase; that was all they were allowed. I had one dress packed with my mother’s things. My other dress I wore to the train with a woolen coat that was getting too small for me.

It was June 1944. When we arrived at the train station I was sweating under my coat. Mama told me to keep it on. If I took it off, someone else might grab it and run off.

When the train pulled up, a hundred people or more were waiting on the platform. Except for a passenger car in the front, the train was all cattle cars with big sliding doors in the middle and barred windows at the ends. SS guards stood all around keeping their eyes on us. A man and woman broke from the crowd and disappeared behind the station. Seconds later I heard gunshots.

I held on to my parents while they grappled with their suitcases. We were in the last group to leave the labor camp; I saw no other children on the platform. A few minutes later a second train pulled up, and someone



Tova's mother, Raizl (seated right), with young Zionist friends in Tomaszów Mazowiecki. Taken when she was a teenager, this was the only photograph of her to survive the war.

barked over the loudspeaker: "All women on board the first train, all men on board the second!"

Mama and Papa hugged and kissed each other, and then Papa picked me up and kissed me. I was to go with my mother on the first train. A guard yanked my father away and told him to go on the train behind ours. Mama turned and lifted me into the cattle car, tossed her suitcase up, and

climbed in after me. It was pitch dark inside; at first it looked as if the car was empty. Then I heard a voice call out from the corner. I looked over and saw a woman sitting on the floor. She was alone. The woman looked up at my mother and said in a bewildered voice, "You still have a child with you! Why don't you sit with me?" Mama sat down beside her, and I sat on Mama's lap.

Others followed us into the car, each carrying a suitcase. I looked for other children but didn't find any. When there was only room enough to stand, the sliding door roared shut and we were on our way. I thought of my father in the train behind ours and wondered if he was in a cattle car, too. Worse, I wondered if we would see him again.

The trip to Auschwitz took three days. The stench of the urinal buckets, filled to overflowing, made the air unbreathable. It was stifling hot, and I would have given anything for a drink of water. When the door roared open again, I was blinded by the light. Mama lifted me down from the car and said, "Watch the suitcase. I'm going to look for your father. Whatever you do, don't leave that suitcase."

I held on to it as tightly as I could; I knew Mama would be angry if I lost it. I craned to see her as she ran back to the other train to look for my father. More and more people were getting off the cattle cars now and crowding onto the platform, far more than the hundred or so who had gotten on at the labor camp. I caught a glimpse of Mama and Papa hugging, then talking and hugging some more, then kissing and hugging again. Then Papa got back on his train.

Mama returned, crying. "Your father isn't staying at Auschwitz," she said. "They're separating the families. He's going to Dachau." I had never heard of the place. Then she said, "He has boils all over his body because some disease broke out in his car."

That wasn't the only bad news she brought back: Rutka Greenspan's father was dead. Rutka was one of my friends from Tomaszów, but I hadn't seen her since the children's selection at the labor camp. I looked back at my father's train. Some men were lifting a body down from the car. The woman we had sat with said, "That man is lucky because he died without having to suffer very much."

A few minutes later my father's train started backing up. Before it passed through the gate, I tried in vain to catch one last glimpse of him through a barred window. I started to cry. Mama held my hand; she was crying too. When our own train backed through the gate, I wiped my tears and looked up: across the railroad tracks stood a line of SS guards with German shepherds.

My heart froze. The dogs bared their teeth and looked straight into my eyes. We were the same height. Mama sensed my fear. "Do only what you're told and the dogs won't bother you," she said.

Dog leashes in hand, the SS herded us into a building and ordered us to undress. I asked my mother, "Why are they making us take our clothes off?"

"They're checking us. They want to see if there's anything wrong with our bodies. Anybody who isn't perfect will be killed."

"Are we perfect?"

"Yes, we're perfect. Don't worry."

I was still the only child around. By all reckoning I should have been killed back at the labor camp. But now I was surrounded by grown-ups, all women, standing naked in a double line waiting to be checked while SS guards glared at us. Some of the older women were slapping themselves on their faces. I asked my mother, "Why are they doing that?"

"That makes their cheeks red so they look young and healthy. Do you think they want to die?"

Ahead of us, two female guards were checking the women from head to toe.

"What are they doing that for?" I asked.

"They're looking for weapons," Mama said.

"What's a weapon?"

"In this place, even a bobby pin is a weapon."

After we passed inspection, the SS, their dogs still in tow, directed us down a hallway to another room; we were naked the whole time. Piles of hair covered the floor. A woman lifted me onto a bench. She picked up her razor, looked at me, and murmured in Yiddish, "You poor child. You poor child." Then she cut off my braids and shaved my head.

Mama was next. I hardly recognized her without her hair. Another prisoner handed us dresses and told us to put them on.

Next we were taken to our barracks, a long wooden building that looked like a stable. It had three tiers of bunks along the walls and a guard room near the door. The female guards, the *Kapos*, and their supervisor, the *Blockälteste*, had their own flush toilet. The prisoners' toilet, outside, was a crude wooden platform like the one I had fallen into at the labor camp.

The *Blockälteste*, a heavyset woman with gaping nostrils, assigned my mother and me a middle bunk. Mama lifted me into it, but it was so low I couldn't sit up. She sat beside me, crouched over, and finally leaned back to get comfortable. Her feet stuck into the aisle. Seconds later the *Blockälteste* came back, smacked her in the face, and said, "You're in Auschwitz now. Pull your feet in."

When everyone had assembled, the roll call began. Mama shook me awake and told me to go outside. Others took their places in line as the *Blockälteste* barked her orders. I stood beside my mother. Then the guards went down the line with their clipboards and checked off our names. It lasted several hours. One woman fainted and a guard shot her.

The Germans called it the *Appell*. They constantly counted us and checked off our names, sometimes twice a day, as new prisoners were brought in. Each time it lasted for hours. A *Kapo* walked over to me as I fidgeted and slapped my face. But I didn't cry. Mama told me never to cry in front of a *Kapo* or SS guard. When the *Kapo* left, I cried.

When the *Appell* was completed, Mama reached into her dress and gave me a piece of bread. She was hungry, but she gave me her bread anyway. Many times she gave me her bread.

In time we got to know all the *Kapos*—which ones were good and which ones were bad. Sometimes the male guards would come by and join them in the guard room. When they closed the door, I knew I could use their toilet. Mama would say, "Hurry up! She's busy with somebody. Go before they come out!"

Once in a while a *Kapo* would give food to the children. She would tell them to stand in line and she would say, "Open your mouth," and drop in

a piece of bread, like a robin feeding a worm to a baby chick. I stayed in my bunk. It didn't matter how hungry I was; I refused to open my mouth like that. I just told my mother, "I don't want the food."

Soon I discovered I couldn't open my mouth even if I wanted to. My eyes were swelling shut. My body felt as if it were burning. The next thing I knew I woke up and saw women all around me on stretchers, moaning and scratching themselves. I looked around for Mama but couldn't find her. Someone wheeled me through a door.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"In the hospital," the voice behind me replied.

"Why?"

"The doctor says you have scarlet fever and diphtheria."

A few weeks later they let me out. A woman gave me a pair of white shoes and told me to put them on. I put the left shoe on my right foot and the right shoe on my left foot. The woman said impatiently, "You're five and a half years old. You should know how to put your shoes on." That's how I knew how old I was.

Back at the women's camp, my mother was outside warming herself by a fire. It was already dark. When she saw me, she threw her arms around me and sobbed. The flames reflected in her face. "I thought they killed you!" she cried. And she gave me a piece of her bread.

At the end of July 1944, the Germans liquidated the Gypsy camp at Auschwitz; the last three thousand Gypsies were taken out of their camp in the middle of the night. Most were gassed and cremated. Others were led to a wooded area where they were shot and dumped into pits. All the next day black ashes rained down from billowing red clouds. Prison crews swept up the ashes and spread them over the paths.

The remaining children at Auschwitz were transferred to a section of the Gypsy camp, which the Germans called the *Kinderlager*. Mama cried when I left. I followed a *Kapo* through a gate in the barbed wire fence and across the tracks. A few hundred yards later we entered a building.

I was surprised to see so many other children. One of them was Rutka,

my friend from Tomaszów whose father died in the cattle car. I didn't know if she knew about it, so I didn't say anything to her. We just sat on the floor until the guards told us to get up. We were to be given tattoos.

I wanted to be the first in line. So did Rutka. We got into a fight. But I was no match for her, since she was a year older and taller. I tried to look over her shoulder as a woman in a yellow dress tattooed a number on her arm.

When Rutka was finished, it was my turn. The woman looked at me and said in Polish, "You're very young. You're such a small child. Maybe you'll survive this. So I'm going to make you a very small number and write very carefully. That way it won't be so noticeable."

Then she said, "It's going to hurt, but it won't hurt for long."

I told myself, *I will not cry.*

The woman took her needle, reached for my left arm, and tattooed my number: A-27633. Afterward she said, "Take this rag, put some water on it, and keep it on. Don't rub it. That way the swelling won't be so bad."

Her words were the kindest I had heard from any stranger in that place. Then she said, "Memorize your number, because you no longer have a name."