

Auschwitz

As I recall today our departure from the ghetto, I feel a terrible bitterness. I ask myself the question, "Where was the free world, and why did they not do something to prevent or limit the deportation and mass slaughter of human beings?" Since the Hungarian Jews were the last to be taken to the death camps of Poland, could not the United States and the Allies have done something to prevent the machinery of death from grinding away? Were they so helpless or so ignorant, by this time, of the barbarities that they could not bomb the railroad tracks to Auschwitz? The Allied military was undoubtedly well briefed by now on the Final Solution. I doubt that I will ever understand the failure of the Allies to respond to the evil perpetrated at this time.

The Germans were now taking over from the Hungarians. We heard shouts, "*Macht schnell! Raus! Raus!*" (Go fast! Beat it! Scram!) Police dogs were used to spur us on into the cattle cars in which we were to spend the next several miserable days. There were eighty to one hundred men, women, and children packed into each car.

Four transports left Satoraljaujhely that day; we were on the third. The Hungarian gendarmes were callous to the end, humiliating, mocking, and abusing us. People were attacked

with truncheons and bullwhips for any minor infraction or slow movement. Although it did not happen to us personally, other eyewitnesses claimed that people leaving Satoraljaujhely were degraded by means of body searches and that many had all personal documents and means of identification taken from them, thus turning them immediately into "nonpersons," as they were shoved onto the trains. Ironically, the Nazis made a film documentary in which they attempted to show Hungarian brutality toward Jewish deportees, in contrast to their own "civility."

From the region of Zemplen Megye fifteen thousand Jews were deported, and only two hundred and fifty survived. From my own family sixty-eight were deported, and only two survived.

I can hardly begin to describe the horror of the train ride to our destination. The railroad car into which we were herded was normally used for cattle or freight. At least eighty people were thrown together in my car with no regard for age or infirmity. There was nowhere for us to sit. We had two pails, one at either end of each car, to be used as bathroom facilities. We were expected to empty out the pails at each station stop. At each stop there was someone who ladled water to those on the train who were fortunate enough to be close to the door, where they could get some. I was not lucky enough to be that close. If anyone in our family was able to get ahold of the ladle with the water, that person shared the contents with other family members, so that each one got a drop of water.

It wasn't long before whatever food any of us possessed ran out. None of us had enough to sustain us. Each time we stopped in a new town we took on a new engineer, and tolls had to be paid to get through. The voyage was agonizingly slow and lengthy. I remember infants screaming, usually from hunger and thirst. Their mothers were without the resources to feed

them, not even a bit of milk, and in desperation some strangled their babies to quiet them and free themselves of the unbearable torment of being able to do nothing.

I heard and saw a lot of crying, a lot of praying. I heard people screaming, "Blood is spilling all over!" Some people had taken their lives on the train. Once in a while I saw blood gushing in the cattle car as people committed suicide, using a knife or a razor blade. When something like this happened, my mother or father tried to protect me, to shield me from the horror. "Stay in the corner. Everything is all right. Everything is all right!" they would say to soothe my terror. I held onto my mother and father and grandmother for dear life. I was still only fourteen. With their gentle voices they tried to relax me and make me go to sleep, even though there was no place to sit or squat. I am certain I fell asleep here or there, even in a standing position. One gets used to certain noises, and simply dozes off.

The dead were not taken from the train. The ones who were bleeding simply lay there. The smells of blood and corpses and waste matter went into our nostrils. All kinds of smells mingled through those cattle cars.

It was well into the month of May. Summer was already on the horizon. Sometimes I would try to make my way to the narrow slits through which I hoped to glimpse a fragment of light. From time to time we wondered where we were. Were we out of Hungary yet? Where were they taking us? I would see only fragments of sunlight and greenery. The trees were by now adorned with leaves, and flowers were pushing through the spring soil, signs of a world flourishing with life. At the same time, our world seemed to be approaching its desperate and bitter end.

We were finally arriving at our destination: Auschwitz.

One had to marvel at the ingenious and demonic planning of the Nazis, at their ability to deceive all of us. Most of us were

not yet at the stage of dehumanization where we could conceive of being totally separated from our families and from every connection to the world we had known. Just before the train stopped for the last time, signifying our arrival at the camp, we passed small rows of houses that I could observe through the slits in the freight car. I glimpsed a benign scene of flowers growing, children playing, and members of family units interacting. This sight made me feel, as it would probably have made anyone feel, that our life was to be like this. A deceptive ray of hope! I am certain that if the International Red Cross had ever visited Auschwitz, these scenes are what they would have seen on the way. Had they gone past the iron gate with its deceptive inscription, "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" (Work will free you), they would have seen a different world: a hell beyond the human powers of depiction.

Never in our wildest dreams did we think we were going into a camp to be slaughtered. Never! I cannot forgive the free world for not allowing the Hungarian Jews to know what was going on. We weren't privy to anything. There had been no reports, not even leaflets dropped from the sky. Yes, some underground people had tried to warn the Jews of Budapest, but they were not believed. They were not believed because the Jews had had no prior exposure to what was truly taking place. Had information been available before the Jews were deported and taken to their slaughter, I am almost certain there would have been some kind of protest, some kind of resistance, some attempt to hide, even some effort on the part of the Hungarian non-Jewish population to help us. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I have to have some faith in the human race!

When we arrived at the camp, the doors of the train were quickly slid open, and we were driven out by *kapos* (camp foremen), all Polish, and many of them Jews. The German S.S. didn't "soil"

their hands with this flotsam and jetsam of humanity; they merely barked out orders: "*Schnell! Schnell! Raus! Raus!*" The *kapos* were usually physically more powerful than the Germans. Some were truly brutal, but others showed a touch of compassion.

The cattle cars were high off the ground. There was no stepladder for us to get down on. One had to jump down, whether old or young, ill or well. Those who couldn't jump were pulled or dragged by the *kapos*. The *kapos* had to do this; they could not do otherwise or they would have been beaten or killed. Some apologized while they were doing it; some even had tears in their eyes. I saw my elderly grandmothers pulled off the train right before my eyes. We were forced to leave our few remaining belongings in the cattle car. The *kapos* tried to reassure us with the lie that we would soon see our belongings.

The moment we got off the train, we knew we had entered hell. Immediately the Germans began screaming: "Get in line! Men and women separate, then march forward in rows of five!" We marched forward. We were now moving toward what was known as Auschwitz II: Birkenau (Birch Grove), whose name was deceptively pleasant for a killing center. When it had first been built in the winter of 1941-42, Jews had had to debark from the trains a distance from Birkenau and walk or be trucked to the place where they would be "selected" for life or death. In the few months before our arrival, in anticipation of a huge influx of Hungarian Jews, the rail line had been extended to Birkenau so that the process of human disposal could be achieved more quickly and efficiently.

When the men were ordered to stand on one side and the women on the other, my father stood with his two brothers, his brother-in-law, and several cousins. I stood with my mother, grandmother, aunts, and young female cousins. I was holding on tightly to my mother's hand. At one point, my father broke

out of the line of men and ran over to me. I never expected him to do such a thing. I was in a state of shock. I will not forget this moment as long as I live. His face was snow-white, and he put his hands on either side of my head. As he did this, he uttered a blessing in Hebrew, in the same manner as he did on every Sabbath eve: "May God give you the blessings of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah." He cautioned me to look after myself, whatever happened, and to be "a good girl." For this he was seized by German soldiers and beaten mercilessly before my eyes, and then pulled back in line while the beating continued. He never had the chance to say goodbye to his wife or his female relatives! Soon he, like so many others, was to be taken away. My last sight of him was as he stood in line, bent over from the blows he had received, blood streaming down his face.

I continued holding onto my mother's hand as we walked along a ramp. Suddenly, there loomed before me a huge figure. The image burned itself into my brain. As I later learned, it belonged to Dr. Josef Mengele, known to the prisoners as "the angel of death." He stood before us—tall and handsome, wearing shiny leather boots, leather trousers, a leather jacket, and immaculate white gloves. I shivered in absolute terror as I looked at him. He brandished a stick as might an orchestra conductor wielding a baton. A huge dog stood at his side.

With his stick, Mengele played God. He pointed either to the left or to the right, thus determining who would live and who would die. We were to find out, all too soon, that if he pointed to the left one went to the work camp. If he pointed to the right, one's ultimate fate was the crematorium. Suddenly my mother's hand was torn away from mine. Eventually my mother, my grandmother, one of my mother's sisters-in-law, and my two young cousins were taken away to what, I later realized, was the gas chamber. The separation was so abrupt

that my mother was not able to hear my crying. We never said goodbye. That was the last time I saw my mother, grandmother, and those other relatives who had been so dear to me. I was sent to the left with my father's sister, Elizabeth, and her sister-in-law, Sarika Grunhut, whom I called Sari.

I became numb; I couldn't hear, couldn't see. My Aunt Elizabeth and Sari pulled me along. We were soon sent to the other side of the camp. As we were walking along, a chance meeting virtually decided my fate. Not far from the barbed wire, we saw a distant cousin from my father's family, who must have been in the previous transport, and she gestured to us. Speaking quietly enough that the *kapos* would not hear and pointing to me, she told my aunt, "When you're registered, lie about her age. Say that she is eighteen rather than fourteen, so that the Germans won't send her back to the crematorium." It was the first time I had heard "crematorium," and quite naturally I did not know to what it referred. From that point on, I was thought to be eighteen.

Along with the other young women from our transport who had been deemed "fit" for labor, and thereby for at least temporary life, my aunt, Sari, and I were brought to an enormous room where we were ordered to disrobe. One could scarcely imagine the feeling that came from being one of thousands who, naked, were scarcely recognizable or distinguishable. Our clothes were stacked in piles; skirts, dresses, underclothes, sleepwear, all that was personal, disappeared from our possession in mountainous heaps. Then *kapos* began shaving our hair with huge clippers. Almost unconsciously, I began crying out for my mother. My aunt grabbed me, covered my mouth, quietly admonished me for crying, and finally succeeded in calming me down.

We were then completely shorn. For the first time, I broke down in terror. I was shocked as I saw myself reflected in the

other beings before me. We were nude and shaven. I gasped as I perceived how depersonalized we had become. We were now truly unrecognizable to each other!

Each of us was issued a prison uniform made from potato sack material, and a pair of wooden shoes, and marched outside. No attempt was made to issue clothing in accordance with one's shape or size. It was as though we were to be deprived of any semblance of identity or dignity.

Although I did not know it at the time, the room we had been in was a gassing center. I had noticed showerheads in the ceiling and had believed that indeed that was what they were. On my return to Auschwitz a few months later, I learned that the "showerheads" actually emitted Zyklon B, the poison gas developed by the Nazis that was used to murder so many human beings. If there were not too many transports, the new arrivals would be gassed in those rooms and then taken to the crematoria. I also later found peepholes in the wall through which the S.S. could watch the Jews being gassed.

After leaving this room we were made to stand for hours in line as we were counted and endlessly recounted. The Germans were notorious for keeping prisoners in line for hours at a time. This agonizing process would recur with monotonous regularity over the following weeks and months. It mattered not whether there was rain, heat, snow, or blistering cold. The *Zahlappell* (roll call) continued. Why we had to submit to the roll call I shall never know. Did the S.S. honestly believe we had even the remotest possibility of escaping? Any attempt at uprising would have met with violent retaliation. Any effort to escape would have been reciprocated with a bullet from an S.S. guard on the watchtower or with electrocution at the barbed wire fence. There was no hesitation about killing prisoners.

This was the wet season in Poland. Thus we were forced to endure exposure during hours of incessant rain. The prisoners stood there shivering, numb, praying for some help, but we got no relief. If one of us fell from hunger, exhaustion, or bodily weakness, that prisoner was pulled out of line. Whether she was sent to the infirmary or directly to execution we never knew. What we did come to know with absolute certainty was that we would never see her again.

We gradually lost all sense of time. We were assigned to our barracks. Each barrack was a long building on either side of which were planks on several levels that were serving as bunk beds. In the center of the barrack was a brick divider. We crawled into our bunks and waited for the next order. That order was to get down and stand in line for a piece of hard bread and watery soup which had dirty vegetation floating in it, if anything at all.

Later we had "lights out." As many prisoners as could be were placed alongside each other, and we slept five abreast. (Virtually everything we were ordered to do was done in groups of five.) No one could turn to one side or another, so congested was our sleeping space. When we were awakened, it was still dark. Outside the barrack was an ersatz "bathroom" in the style of an outhouse. The "bathroom facilities" consisted of wooden boards with holes cut in them. There were pipes with water dribbling out of them. One could never relieve oneself when the need was there. One had to wait for specific times, and then one could never go alone. We had to stand in a line of from thirty to fifty people. If a prisoner dawdled or stopped to talk to someone, she was whipped by one of the S.S. women who guarded us. The lines were required to be in constant motion.

The female S.S. in Auschwitz were even more brutal to us than the males, who "merely" kicked us or hit us with their

truncheons. The women showed their authority and cruelty far more regularly and enthusiastically than did the men, manhandling us at every opportunity. They degraded us regularly and dug their nails into our flesh, using phrases like "*Judenschwein*" (Jewish pig) and "Jewish whore" and spitting on us.

Following another interminable roll call and a meager breakfast of watery coffee and a hardened crust of bread, we were set to work cleaning the barrack or doing some other menial chores. At noontime we stood in line in rows of five for our "meal" of watery soup and a crust of hard black bread. Anyone attempting to go back for more was severely beaten.

When I say we lost all sense of time, I mean that for days on end, either life seemed utterly purposeless or my brain simply blotted out any sense of sequence or logical continuity. I can close my eyes and see what everything looked like, yet I can remember nothing that had meaning. That first time in Auschwitz, I remember a sense of numbness; it is probable that for many of us, it was simply a matter of waiting for the end. Many of us believed, and do to this day, that our captors gave us something in our food that dehumanized us by turning us into automatons. We were not functioning as normal beings. This was my induction into hell. I lost all sense of free will.