

CHAPTER

6

A Closer Look at Hell

To us, remaining alive meant being mobile. My Aunt Elizabeth, Sari, and I did not remain in Auschwitz long. After approximately six weeks in Birkenau, in June we were sent with several hundred other girls and women to Cracow as part of a "work brigade." We were put on a train that was not nearly as congested as the one that had brought us to Auschwitz. We even felt a certain elation; after all, nothing could have been worse than what we had already experienced. Our spirits had been broken by the sudden and terrible losses we had endured. Although we knew nothing of our family's fate, we suspected the worst. But at least the three of us were together.

Once we arrived in Cracow, we were put on military trucks. We rode in the midst of wind and rain, with no covering over our heads. As we went through the town I observed "normal" people walking through the streets and seeing "real" houses with people living in them. I wondered if we were all living on the same planet. Finally, we arrived at a camp called Plaszow. There were mountains in the background and a circle of barracks surrounding a square. We did not know what to expect next. On the surface it appeared to be a better place than Auschwitz. How wrong we were!

I do not know exactly what purpose our labor in Plaszow served, except to heighten the level of sadism within our persecutors. Nevertheless, our barrack was more bearable. There, too, I remember that we were awakened when it was still dark outside, and we were forced to stand for two or three hours while we were counted and recounted. One thing that did not vary was the *Zahlappell!*

During the day our labor force was sent to a stone quarry. Our jobs consisted of chiseling stones out of a wall, lifting them, and putting them on a lorry, which we had to push from one end of the quarry to the other. If anyone dropped a stone or slowed down in work or failed to lift a heavy enough stone, she was assaulted mercilessly by the S.S. with bayonets or was attacked by police dogs. The police dogs would jump on the prisoner, tear at her clothes, and bite into her flesh.

While working up the mountainsides we could look down into the valley where the barracks were. Often we saw people assembled in the middle of the square where our barrack stood. These people were not dressed as prisoners. They wore street clothes and were, we assumed, political prisoners. As they stood in line, they were methodically machine-gunned. This sight recurred frequently during our time in Plaszow. Once the bodies were removed, what was left was a bloodbath. When we returned in the evening from our work detail, we were forced to clean up the dried blood in the square. We were given brushes with which to do the cleaning. The Germans sprayed the ground with water from a hose both before and after, and sometimes they even sprayed us while we were scrubbing.

The S.S. played a "hunting game" with us in Cracow. The game, known as "decimation," was used to terrify and desensitize us. We were lined up in rows every morning. As the Germans proceeded down the line, they counted from one to ten and shot every tenth person. I do not know how or why I

escaped being that tenth person, as did my aunt and Sari. Once I was right next to one who was shot, and the precariousness of the circumstance still sends a terrifying shiver up and down my spine. Some of us were actually praying, "Let me be next. Take me out of my misery. I've had enough!" Some would say that God had a mission for certain people, such as me, because we were still alive. Yet my doubts remain with me. What about the others? Did they deserve to suffer and die? I still ask myself why God turned away from His people to allow such a ruthless and capricious slaughter.

The person shot would fall down bleeding, and we were allowed to do nothing to help. One who has not experienced it cannot truly understand the torture and the horror of standing by, unable to do anything, fearing that one would be the next person killed, or of seeing someone else, perhaps a friend or a loved one, mercilessly shot down and feeling guilty to have survived. We simply watched, petrified and frozen.

After the "game" we had to pick up the bodies and load them onto trucks, and the Germans would dump them into mass trenches. Some of the women in the trenches were still alive and crying out as fresh bodies were dumped on top of them. Soil was shoveled in to cover them, and that was the end of it.

For that reason alone, I could not today visit a concentration camp. How could I walk on that soil? I would not know whose grave, whose blood, whose flesh I would be walking on. I could never go back to those camps! Never!

In Cracow, as in Birkenau, breakfast was made up of black water, which the S.S. called "coffee," and a piece of hard brown bread. Then our captors would take us to the quarry, where we worked all day. We were counted when we went out the gates; we were counted when we came back in. Then we'd get our dinner: watery soup with some hard bread. Also as at Birkenau, there were things in the soup, such as dirty cabbage leaves, with

green worms swimming around the leaves. Sometimes one even found batches of hair in the soup. But we ignored these things. We pushed them aside, and we ate. Why did we eat? Was it just to keep from starving? I can speak only for myself. Perhaps I ate because my aunt was forcing me, saying, "You must eat! You must eat!" Certainly if I had not eaten, I would have weakened and eventually died. I ask myself, "Could I have mentally sunk to the level where I, the once finicky child who often rejected her mother's food, would devour this gruesome mess?" I can't even rationalize this today, except in terms of an animal life force that simply propelled me away from the thought of suicide by starvation.

One morning in early August, instead of going to work we stayed longer at *Zahlappell*. Suddenly we saw army trucks. They stopped, and we were ordered to board them. Our caravan started out of Plaszow. We were brought to the railroad station in Cracow, where we had to wait for several hours. The sun was beating down on us. I was remembering the day nearly two months before when we had arrived in Cracow in a chilly rain. Now the summer heat was unbearable. There we stood, sickly, broken in body, starved, parched from thirst, and exposed to the relentless August sun.

Finally the freight train arrived, and we were ordered to board. "One hundred to a car!" the S.S. man shouted. One hundred to a car that could not hold half that number! We nearly suffocated from the heat and the smell of one another. I felt my Aunt Elizabeth becoming more and more faint. I kept looking in vain for a place in the corner of the cattle car where she could find some air. The train remained stationary for an eternity. Other trucks arrived, and more women were pushed into our car. We were so packed together that we could not move our arms or legs. People kept falling against each other. Some were even knocked to the floor.

Suddenly I panicked. My aunt and Sari had disappeared from my view! Where were they? It took several long minutes of trying to stretch in the limited space I had before I could find them again. We had been pushed a distance from each other.

By nightfall the train had not yet moved. Finally, to our relief, the train began to jerk forward. One cannot know what our terror was like. We felt much more vulnerable in a fixed position, as when the train was still. As long as the train was in motion, we felt we could cling to life. None of us knew where we were being taken, but at this point did it matter?

So our stay in Plaszow was over, leaving us much more "enlightened" about sudden death and the vulnerability of our lives. Now just fifteen, I had seen people tortured, arbitrarily shot. And it had changed me. I had learned that one could exist amid fear, hunger, abuse. I had learned to eat worms, and I had grown calluses on my young hands. I was far thinner when I left Plaszow than when I had left Auschwitz a few weeks earlier. It no longer mattered how I lived; it mattered only *that* I lived. My last remnant of sheltered youth evaporated in Plaszow.

The train took us back to Auschwitz. I was only four months older than the healthy and active young girl who had been driven into the ghetto with her family, but I was like an automaton. I followed orders and did what the S.S. told me to do every day. I no longer worried about the consequences of things. But I was already wiser, less innocent. I knew exactly what the smoke meant, what the chimneys were for. I knew that the Germans were burning human flesh, that people were being turned into ashes. The odor of burning flesh was unmistakable and unbearable. It entered us through our nostrils and burned our eyes. I knew that the people who were being turned into charcoal were transports, as I had been in what seemed

like centuries ago. Now the realization of what had happened to my parents, my grandmothers, my aunts and uncles, and my younger cousins assaulted me vividly.

I also received my tattoo during my second time in Auschwitz. My number is A22029 (the "A" stands for Auschwitz). I call it one of Hitler's footsteps on my body. Many of my fellow survivors have removed theirs, but I have decided that I am going to die with mine.

I was given a job during this period of time in Auschwitz: working in the kitchen. Actually one could hardly have called it a kitchen. It was a huge room that resembled a canvass-covered tent. There was a gigantic kettle under which we lit a fire. That was where the "cooks" made their so-called soups and coffees, where they threw everything, clean or unclean, that they could find, whatever "vegetable," edible or inedible. Sometimes I found a brush or a comb in there. My job was to clean the kettle. I was given a damp cloth with which to wipe it. To keep the kettle clean, I needed a faucet and running water. But I never had access to those. However, I had one advantage over the other prisoners: I could pick the remnants from the kettle with my fingers. This provided me with added "nourishment" and strength. Had I been caught, I would surely have been beaten or killed. However, like all surviving prisoners, I had reached a level at which survival in nearly any form had become acceptable and worth any risk.

One day my Aunt Elizabeth and I received a brutal beating and had to kneel on hard corn kernels for hours because she had sneaked back into the line at my urging in order to get a little extra nourishment for herself. Though my intention had been to help her sustain what little strength she had, I felt terribly guilty because her suffering was a result of my prompting her. However, she said nothing, refusing in any way to blame me.

The few tranquil moments we were able to seize in Auschwitz came from the recollections we nurtured of an earlier and happier time, particularly the memories of the meals we had shared outdoors during harvest time in Tolcsva. Ironically, though, that which made life momentarily bearable was what was no longer attainable: the simple pleasures of the bucolic life we had once enjoyed amid the beauty of nature and the serene presence of loved ones.

At every moment I was forcibly reminded of the fragility of life and of the need to hold onto it by whatever means possible, disregarding how temporary that life might be. I saw what happened to girls I knew. At one point, I recall, a friend of mine recognized her mother on the other side of the barbed wire. Simultaneously, her mother recognized her. They naturally ran toward each other. As each one touched the electrified fence in her zeal to reach the other, both were instantly electrocuted.

I realized during my second stay in Auschwitz that most of the good-looking Hungarian girls and women were no longer with us because they had been taken away forcibly upon arrival to serve as camp prostitutes. What happened to them, how many survived and how, I shall never know. I knew some of them from the ghetto. I can imagine what they went through and how they were treated. More than likely, the Germans did not want the nature of that treatment to be exposed to the outside world.

During our second sojourn in Auschwitz the barracks seemed different from those we had been in earlier. They were much larger and longer, more crowded with inmates. We were each given an army blanket, nothing else. Once more we slept on wooden planks, five in a row. When we went out for *Zahlappell*, we could see barracks like ours for miles on end. We saw many inmates, both men and women, walking on the roads, followed by S.S. guards. I assumed they were coming and going from their work assignments.

After a while we were deadened to everything but the effort to survive another day. We were so dehumanized that our powers of resistance virtually disappeared. We felt ourselves to be less than human. No one in my group thought of rebelling. We never knew for certain, but most of us suspected that something had been put in our food to keep us from menstruating. (We know now what we didn't know then: that menstruation stops when the body is subjected to stress.) It seemed as though the Nazis wanted nothing less than the authority to deprive us of our biological functions, our sense of womanliness, and our normal instincts and feelings.

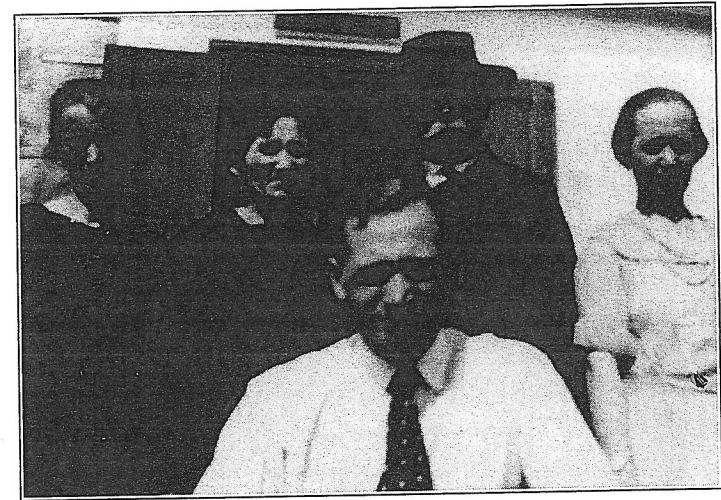
During my second stay in Auschwitz, I also became aware of the other things that were going on, things that involved the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele. We had heard of the twins into whose eyes he had injected dyes to change eye color, the surgical removal of fingers from one twin and the grafting of them to the other. We heard also of the torture of pregnant women and the ripping of fetuses from their bodies. As hardened as we had become to the bizarre and savage unreality of everyday life in Auschwitz, we still found the sadistically performed horrors we heard about revolting.

That we had not yet lost our sense of revulsion gave us a certain reassurance that we still retained a spark of life, however small. I am not sure about all the others, but some of my fellow inmates and I still continued to believe in a Divine Presence, which manifested itself amid the hell in which we were forced to live. We still remembered the Jewish holidays, and somehow, despite being deprived of calendars, we could track them and observe them to the best of our ability.

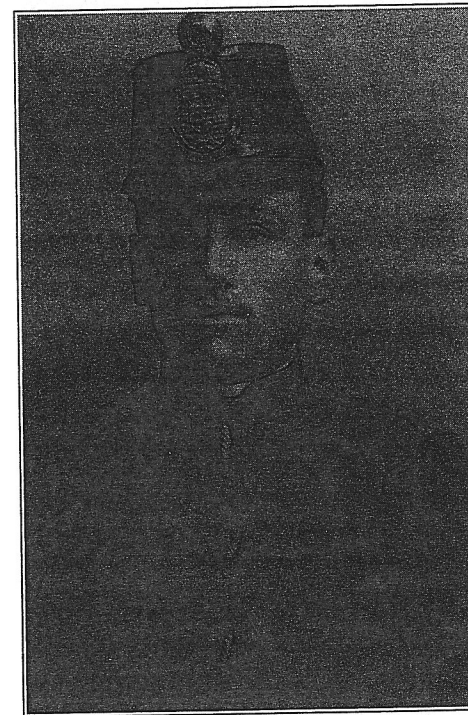
It was all inexplicable to us, yet I can still remember how we stood in line for food on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement on which Jews normally fast and pray. We resolved not to eat, despite the fact that on any "normal" day we subsisted on

less than a thousand calories and knew starvation and hunger intimately. Those who fasted still remembered the Biblical covenant with God, and they would not betray their faith though they lived with daily despair.

Why, then did we bother to stand in line? Perhaps so that we would have a little more food for the next day. Perhaps, even more significantly, so that the Germans would not assume that we were giving them permission to cut our rations even more because we had chosen to fast on this holiest of days.



The Granat family: left to right, Minna (Margit's aunt), Bertha (her grandmother), Danis (her uncle), Odon (her grandfather), and Theresa (her mother).



Joseph Buchhalter
(Margit's father)
during World War I.