

CHAPTER 2

Two Years in the Hell of Auschwitz

We drove for I am not sure how long until we came to a place with the words Arbeit Macht Frei on the entrance gate. We said to each other, “Maybe the guard was right and we will have a chance to live and work here.”

They told us that we were in Auschwitz, a name that meant nothing to us. But as we were going in we saw people coming back from work, five in a row, thin like skeletons and so weak they could hardly walk. And all the time classical music was playing over the loudspeaker. The combination of these broken people in rags and the classical music was unbelievable. All of a sudden we saw that these beaten-down people were trying to stand up straight and walk better and that an SS man was looking them over. Later we learned that the SS man was Mengele. None of this made any sense to us; we thought we were in a madhouse.

The ground was so limey it did not absorb water. It was almost like quicksand and it was hard to lift your feet out of the mud. Then we noticed the barbed wire. We did not know that it was electrified, but we saw that every few steps there was a booth with an SS man inside.

We started to cry and one of the SS men said, “Don’t cry yet; you haven’t seen everything yet.” As we were being taken into a building one of the women asked me if I wanted to give her my boots—beautiful boots from home—before they were taken away. I was smart enough to say yes, which the others did not do because they thought they were going to get their clothes back. After they took our clothes, they gave us showers and took us outside naked. This was February or March in 1943. An SS man pointed out our bruises to the other people coming in and said, “This is what happens when you don’t listen; you get beaten up like these girls.”

They shaved our heads with a razor and two SS women were arguing about who would get my beautiful blond braids. The woman doing the shaving cut them off separately and gave one braid to each of the women.

They put numbers on our arms with a needle and added triangles to our numbers as they were doing to the Poles, and this time we did not tell them that we were Jewish. We were given a dress and wooden shoes—no underwear—and were taken to Block 14, which was filled with Poles who recognized, as the Germans did not, that we were Jews and were always threatening to tell the Germans.

When I started working and complained to another Jewish woman who also had a triangle, she told me I should ask to be transferred to her location, a Jewish block, and that I would not be putting myself into any additional danger because Jews who came like us and like the Poles from jails were called *karteimässig*, which meant they were not to be taken to the gas chambers.

We had not known about the gas chambers when we arrived, but we saw the black soot and fires coming out of the chimneys and smelled the fat and bodies burning, which smelled like meat burning. When we got to the block we asked right away, “What are those chimneys?” The other prisoners told us that they were for burning the people who have been gassed because it does not take as much room to store ashes as to store bodies.

It felt good to be among Jews and we started talking Yiddish, and people began telling us how Auschwitz worked. They told us that when a transport came Mengele made his selections, putting those he wanted to be in camp on one side and those to be gassed on the other side. And they told us about the ovens, the burning, and that Jews were chosen by the SS to work there, and that if they refused they were shot and someone else was picked to do the work. These people in the ovens were the *Sonderkommando* who took out the gassed people and examined them to remove any gold teeth for the Germans. This was the most terrible kind of work. They sometimes recognized family members. There are no words to describe what these people must have felt but they had to do it because they wanted to survive.

I was sent to work with an *Aussenkommando*, which meant I was working outside the camp. The Germans were dynamiting the buildings around Auschwitz, partly because they did not want any witnesses to what they were doing and partly because they needed the space to build more barracks as more people were coming all the time. Our job was to pick out whatever the SS told us they wanted, things like pieces of iron or metal and unbroken bricks. We would put the iron and the bricks in separate wheelbarrows and wheel them over to freight cars where they were being sent back to Germany for the army. It was a terrible job.

The barracks we slept in had three levels of wooden shelves, each level for about fifteen people, covered with straw. We were so crowded we could not lie down, so we slept sitting up. If one person had to move because she was stiff, we all had to move with her. We were packed in like sardines, wearing the same dress we had worn all day and without any blankets. Body heat from our neighbors was what kept us warm. If it had been raining, we went to sleep in wet clothes that dried on us at night.

They woke us up at 4:00 in the morning and we took turns going to the kitchen to pick up iron kettles of black water they called "tea." We held our noses closed when we drank this liquid, because it smelled so bad, but nevertheless everyone drank it. I was so hungry that I did not turn down this stuff. I knew that if I did not drink it I would have nothing to drink all day.

The day began with the *Appell* (roll call). We stood outside in rows and they counted and recounted until it became light outside. They did not want to send us to work when it was still dark.

The worst time for my kind of work was in the winter because then the snow accumulated on our backs and shoulders and when we straightened up for even a few seconds, the SS saw the snowfall from our shoulders and knew that we had stopped and set the dogs on us. That happened to me once. I knew I had to stand up straight for a few seconds and they set the dogs on me with a big smile. (I ask myself often, "Am I dreaming?" "Did this really happen?"). People who were bitten on the neck bled to death, but I was lucky because the dog bit me on the thigh and somehow it healed. My dress was full of blood and when I got back to the camp I washed it off with black snow filthy from the chimneys where they were burning people.

They brought lunch in trucks to where we were working. Each of us had a metal bowl and spoon, which was the most important thing in our lives because if we lost it, or if we pushed or talked, we did not eat. We held it continually and even slept with it. We never let those things out of our sight. Can you imagine it? It was crazy. As we marched in rows of five to our work, we put the bowls and spoons down before we began working. At lunchtime we quietly retrieved our bowls because if we made any noise they hit us over the head really hard. Lunch was soup that was made from all the scraps from the SS dinner that should have gone into the garbage. It was mainly potato peels and hot water with an occasional bit of potato or piece of meat.

Before it got dark they took us back to camp where Beethoven's beautiful music was playing and Mengele was making his selections. Then we had the *Appell* again, just like in the morning. They would count us over and over again. We were so exhausted we were praying they would stop. Finally they did, gave us a piece of bread, and let us into the barracks.

People died during the night and rats and mice ate parts of their bodies. The rats also went after the living people but we could push them away. We were always being eaten by the enormous lice that lodged in the seams of our dresses. It would keep us up all night, picking at and killing lice, which is one reason we were so tired when they woke us up for the *Appell*.

In the morning we took out the dead bodies, which had to be counted. We would put them on the ground, a truck would collect them, and the bodies would be taken to the ovens. It was so horrible and yet we could not even cry; there were no more tears.

The air in Auschwitz was so terrible from the soot from the burning bodies that our saliva was black, and this burning was endless.

On our way to work we passed the *Sonderkommando*. These were Jews who had the

job of taking the bodies from the gas chambers and putting them in the ovens to be burned. But before the bodies were burned these Jews had to remove any gold teeth. We would see them pulling the gold teeth out of the bodies and if they stopped for a minute they were shot and replaced by other people from the camp. I cannot imagine how they felt because sometimes they discovered that the bodies they were working on were members of their own family.

It is impossible to describe the inhuman conditions in Auschwitz. The hard labor without rest, the hours standing at the *Appell*, the lack of food, working to exhaustion, being beaten like mules, the rats and lice. Yet despite these inhuman conditions, the will to survive and to see Hitler defeated was strong.

We talked about getting out, being free, surviving. We would cry as we thought about our parents and families, hoping that they were alive somewhere, fighting to survive the way we were. We would pray together, making up prayers, asking God for certain things. Many people said to us, "What are you praying for? There is no God." But we answered, "There has to be a God because we're alive. We're still here."

We even managed to observe the holidays a little. We found out when it was Passover and did not eat our bread on the first day, but we could not survive without that bread so we ate it the following day, but that first day was a small reminder of Passover.

I thought especially of my brother's and sister's children. After seeing what went on in Auschwitz, I did not think they were still alive but I kept hoping. When we passed by the gas chambers I saw the way they were tearing children from their mother's arms and not even waiting to get them into the gas chambers before they killed them on the spot. We could hear the mothers screaming. I really already knew in my heart that they were not alive and I thought about them a lot.

Every time you saw another transport come in you prayed that when your family got to wherever they were going they were chosen to work. I was pretty sure my mother and father would not have been selected for work, but I was always hoping that work somehow was saving my sisters and brothers. Hoping to see our families when all this was over was what kept us alive; otherwise, there was no reason to want to live the way we lived in Auschwitz.

I remember a song that was written in Auschwitz and became popular there called *Niewolnicze Tango* (Slaves' Tango). It was about dreaming of surviving and coming out of Auschwitz and what it would feel like to be free. These are the words: "We dream of the smell of green fields, not of smoke, and that the whole world will get together and sing the freedom song, and each country will play its own instrument, yet we're never going to forget the horrors of Auschwitz." Nobody ever wrote about this song, which was in Polish, not in Yiddish.

I often wonder how I managed to live through Auschwitz. I know one reason is that I had a friend who saved my life. She worked in the *Bekleidungskammer*, which was where they took and sorted the belongings from the suitcases of people who came to Auschwitz thinking they were going to be resettled someplace where they could actually use the possessions from their old lives. Her job was to sort through the clothes and open up seams to find the money and jewelry that people had sewn into their clothes. This is something I knew about as my mother's diamond had been hidden in the seam of my dress.

My friend's name was Roza Robota. She came from Ciechanów in Poland and risked her life to bring me pieces of clothing to cover my feet because I kept losing my wooden shoes and had to walk around barefoot because my feet were very small and the shoes very big. Once your feet touched the limey soil in Auschwitz you could get trapped, like in quicksand, and she saved me from that.

One day there was a big explosion in Auschwitz. The alarm went off and the SS men were running all over. At first we hoped that this meant we were about to be liberated; then we were afraid that they were going to empty the camp and put us all in the gas chambers. We had the *Appell* early that day and they kept us in the barracks.

The next day we found out that an oven had been blown up—it is still visible in Auschwitz if you take a tour—and that four girls, including Roza Robota, had been arrested.

The other three were Regina Safirsztajn, Ala Gertner and Ester Wajcblum. Ala, Regina and Ester worked in an ammunition factory not far from Auschwitz and smuggled in a little bit of dynamite every day. They gave the dynamite to Roza who left it in one spot near the *Sonderkommando* who picked it up and accumulated it until they could blow up one oven. They reckoned that if one oven was out of commission perhaps they would gas fewer people because they would not be able to burn them. One German was killed and about a dozen were wounded. The oven did not operate anymore, so maybe a few lives were saved or were left to live a little longer. These women were extremely brave; they knew that if they were caught they would not only be killed, but also tortured. Even with the torturing, the four women never revealed any names because there were no other arrests. They were hanged before the entire camp on January 6, and I light memorial candles and say the Kaddish prayer in their memory every year on that day. Roza Robotka was the most caring person who ever lived on this earth... and she had such a terrible death.

One day I had such a high fever that my tongue felt like black shoe leather and I could not move it from side to side. But even in those inhuman conditions people were so good to me. They tried to hold me up during the *Appell* when the SS woman was not watching. I am often asked why my experience during the war has not made me bitter, and my answer is that I learned about friendship in Auschwitz when people helped keep me warm by shielding me with their bodies, which was all they had. The day when I had the fever I bent down to pick up some black snow, so my mouth would not be so dry, and the SS man saw me do it and gave me such a terrible beating that I did not think I would survive.

But that same day something happened which made it possible for me to survive. When we were standing at the *Appell*, a high-ranking SS man came by and asked if any of us were seamstresses. Naturally everyone said they were, because we knew if we were going to do sewing it had to be an inside job with better conditions. And I was the one he chose. This was the biggest miracle that happened to me in Auschwitz because I could not take working outside one day longer. The sun burned through you, the rain drenched you, the wind dried you out, and in the winter you froze. Being chosen allowed me to survive Auschwitz. Every time that it was really very bad and I could not take anymore, something happened that made it seem as if an angel were watching over me and helping me to survive.

The next day I was put to work sewing on buttons by hand for German uniforms. Even now when I sew on a button it never falls off and my friends save their buttons for me to attach. As we worked we listened, and every time a bomber flew over us—we could tell the bombers because they made a heavier noise than other planes—we hoped that a bomb would hit the tracks so they could not bring in any more transports, but it never happened.