

THE BELOVED OBJECTS that we had carried with us from place to place were now left behind in the wagon and, with them, finally, our illusions.

Every few yards, there stood an SS man, his machine gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the throng.

An SS came toward us wielding a club. He commanded:

"Men to the left! Women to the right!"

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight simple, short words. Yet that was the moment when I left my mother. There was no time to think, and I already felt my father's hand press against mine: we were alone. In a fraction of a second I could see my mother, my sisters, move to the right. Tzipora was holding Mother's hand. I saw them walking farther and farther away; Mother was stroking my sister's blond hair, as if to protect her. And I walked on with my father, with the men. I didn't know that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever. I kept walking, my father holding my hand.

Behind me, an old man fell to the ground. Nearby, an SS man replaced his revolver in its holster.

My hand tightened its grip on my father. All I could think of was not to lose him. Not to remain alone.

The SS officers gave the order.

"Form ranks of fives!"

There was a tumult. It was imperative to stay together.

"Hey, kid, how old are you?"

The man interrogating me was an inmate. I could not see his face, but his voice was weary and warm.

"Fifteen."

"No. You're eighteen."

"But I'm not," I said. "I'm fifteen."

"Fool. Listen to what I say."

Then he asked my father, who answered:

"I'm fifty."

"No." The man now sounded angry. "Not fifty. You're forty. Do you hear? Eighteen and forty."

He disappeared into the darkness. Another inmate appeared, unleashing a stream of invectives:

"Sons of bitches, why have you come here? Tell me, why?"

Someone dared to reply:

"What do you think? That we came here of our own free will? That we asked to come here?"

The other seemed ready to kill him:

"Shut up, you moron, or I'll tear you to pieces! You should have hanged yourselves rather than come here. Didn't you know what was in store for you here in Auschwitz? You didn't know? In 1944?"

True. We didn't know. Nobody had told us. He couldn't believe his ears. His tone became even harsher:

"Over there. Do you see the chimney over there? Do you see

it? And the flames, do you see them?" (Yes, we saw the flames.)
"Over there, that's where they will take you. Over there will be your grave. You still don't understand? You sons of bitches. Don't you understand anything? You will be burned! Burned to a cinder! Turned into ashes!"

His anger changed into fury. We stood stunned, petrified. Could this be just a nightmare? An unimaginable nightmare?

I heard whispers around me:

"We must do something. We can't let them kill us like that, like cattle in the slaughterhouse. We must revolt."

There were, among us, a few tough young men. They actually had knives and were urging us to attack the armed guards. One of them was muttering:

"Let the world learn about the existence of Auschwitz. Let everybody find out about it while they still have a chance to escape"

But the older men begged their sons not to be foolish:

"We mustn't give up hope, even now as the sword hangs over our heads. So taught our sages..."

The wind of revolt died down. We continued to walk until we came to a crossroads. Standing in the middle of it was, though I didn't know it then, Dr. Mengele, the notorious Dr. Mengele. He looked like the typical SS officer: a cruel, though not unintelligent, face, complete with monocle. He was holding a conductor's baton and was surrounded by officers. The baton was moving constantly, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left.

In no time, I stood before him.

"Your age?" he asked, perhaps trying to sound paternal.

"I'm eighteen." My voice was trembling.

"In good health?"

"Yes."

"Your profession?"

Tell him that I was a student?

"Farmer," I heard myself saying.

This conversation lasted no more than a few seconds. It seemed like an eternity.

The baton pointed to the left. I took half a step forward. I first wanted to see where they would send my father. Were he to have gone to the right, I would have run after him.

The baton, once more, moved to the left. A weight lifted from my heart.

We did not know, as yet, which was the better side, right or left, which road led to prison and which to the crematoria. Still, I was happy, I was near my father. Our procession continued slowly to move forward.

Another inmate came over to us:

"Satisfied?"

"Yes," someone answered.

"Poor devils, you are heading for the crematorium."

He seemed to be telling the truth. Not far from us, flames, huge flames, were rising from a ditch. Something was being burned there. A truck drew close and unloaded its hold: small children. Babies! Yes, I did see this, with my own eyes... children thrown into the flames. (Is it any wonder that ever since then, sleep tends to elude me?)

So that was where we were going. A little farther on, there was another, larger pit for adults.

I pinched myself: Was I still alive? Was I awake? How was it possible that men, women, and children were being burned and that the world kept silent? No. All this could not be real. A nightmare perhaps... Soon I would wake up with a start, my heart pounding, and find that I was back in the room of my childhood, with my books...

My father's voice tore me from my daydreams:

"What a shame, a shame that you did not go with your mother... I saw many children your age go with their mothers..."

His voice was terribly sad. I understood that he did not wish to see what they would do to me. He did not wish to see his only son go up in flames.

My forehead was covered with cold sweat. Still, I told him that I could not believe that human beings were being burned in our times; the world would never tolerate such crimes...

"The world? The world is not interested in us. Today, everything is possible, even the crematoria... His voice broke.

"Father," I said. "If that is true, then I don't want to wait. I'll run into the electrified barbed wire. That would be easier than a slow death in the flames."

He didn't answer. He was weeping. His body was shaking. Everybody around us was weeping. Someone began to recite Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. I don't know whether, during the history of the Jewish people, men have ever before recited Kaddish for themselves.

"Yisgadal, veyiskadash, shmey raba... May His name be celebrated and sanctified..." whispered my father.

For the first time, I felt anger rising within me. Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for?

We continued our march. We were coming closer and closer to the pit, from which an infernal heat was rising. Twenty more steps. If I was going to kill myself, this was the time. Our column had only some fifteen steps to go. I bit my lips so that my father would not hear my teeth chattering. Ten more steps. Eight. Seven. We were walking slowly, as one follows a hearse, our own funeral procession. Only four more steps. Three. There it was now, very close to us, the pit and its flames. I gathered all that re-

mained of my strength in order to break rank and throw myself onto the barbed wire. Deep down, I was saying good-bye to my father, to the whole universe, and, against my will, I found myself whispering the words: "*Yisgadal, veyiskadash, shmey raba...* May His name be exalted and sanctified..." My heart was about to burst. There. I was face-to-face with the Angel of Death...

No. Two steps from the pit, we were ordered to turn left and herded into barracks.

I squeezed my father's hand. He said:

"Do you remember Mrs. Schächter, in the train?"

NEVER SHALL I FORGET that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.

Never.

THE BARRACK we had been assigned to was very long. On the roof, a few bluish skylights. I thought: This is what the antechamber of hell must look like. So many crazed men, so much shouting, so much brutality.

Dozens of inmates were there to receive us, sticks in hand, striking anywhere, anyone, without reason. The orders came:

"Strip! Hurry up! *Raus!* Hold on only to your belt and your shoes..."

Our clothes were to be thrown on the floor at the back of the barrack. There was a pile there already. New suits, old ones, torn overcoats, rags. For us it meant true equality: nakedness. We trembled in the cold.

A few SS officers wandered through the room, looking for strong men. If vigor was that appreciated, perhaps one should try to appear sturdy? My father thought the opposite. Better not to draw attention. (We later found out that he had been right. Those who were selected that day were incorporated into the Sonder-Kommando, the Kommando working in the crematoria. Béla Katz, the son of an important merchant of my town, had arrived in Birkenau with the first transport, one week ahead of us. When he found out that we were there, he succeeded in slipping us a note. He told us that having been chosen because of his strength, he had been forced to place his own father's body into the furnace.)

The blows continued to rain on us:

"To the barber!"

Belt and shoes in hand, I let myself be dragged along to the barbers. Their clippers tore out our hair, shaved every hair on our bodies. My head was buzzing; the same thought surfacing over and over: not to be separated from my father.

Freed from the barbers' clutches, we began to wander about the crowd, finding friends, acquaintances. Every encounter filled us with joy—yes, joy: Thank God! You are still alive!

Some were crying. They used whatever strength they had left to cry. Why had they let themselves be brought here? Why didn't they die in their beds? Their words were interspersed with sobs.

Suddenly someone threw his arms around me in a hug: Yehiel, the Sigheter rebbe's brother. He was weeping bitterly. I thought he was crying with joy at still being alive.

"Don't cry, Yehiel," I said. "Don't waste your tears..."

"Not cry? We're on the threshold of death. Soon, we shall be inside... Do you understand? Inside. How could I not cry?"

I watched darkness fade through the bluish skylights in the roof. I no longer was afraid. I was overcome by fatigue.

The absent no longer entered our thoughts. One spoke of them—who knows what happened to them?—but their fate was not on our minds. We were incapable of thinking. Our senses were numbed, everything was fading into a fog. We no longer clung to anything. The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had all deserted us. In one terrifying moment of lucidity, I thought of us as damned souls wandering through the void, souls condemned to wander through space until the end of time, seeking redemption, seeking oblivion, without any hope of finding either.

AROUND FIVE O'CLOCK in the morning, we were expelled from the barrack. The Kapos were beating us again, but I no longer felt the pain. A glacial wind was enveloping us. We were naked, holding our shoes and belts. An order:

"Run!" And we ran. After a few minutes of running, a new barrack.

A barrel of foul-smelling liquid stood by the door. Disinfection. Everybody soaked in it. Then came a hot shower. All very fast. As we left the showers, we were chased outside. And ordered to run some more. Another barrack: the storeroom. Very long tables. Mountains of prison garb. As we ran, they threw the clothes at us: pants, jackets, shirts...

In a few seconds, we had ceased to be men. Had the situation not been so tragic, we might have laughed. We looked pretty strange! Meir Katz, a colossus, wore a child's pants, and Stern, a skinny little fellow, was floundering in a huge jacket. We immediately started to switch.

I glanced over at my father. How changed he looked! His eyes were veiled. I wanted to tell him something, but I didn't know what.

The night had passed completely. The morning star shone in the sky. I too had become a different person. The student of Talmud, the child I was, had been consumed by the flames. All that was left was a shape that resembled me. My soul had been invaded—and devoured—by a black flame.

So many events had taken place in just a few hours that I had completely lost all notion of time. When had we left our homes? And the ghetto? And the train? Only a week ago? One night? *One single night?*

How long had we been standing in the freezing wind? One hour? A single hour? Sixty minutes?

Surely it was a dream.

NOT FAR FROM US, prisoners were at work. Some were digging holes, others were carrying sand. None as much as glanced at us. We were withered trees in the heart of the desert. Behind me, people were talking. I had no desire to listen to what they were saying, or to know who was speaking and what about. Nobody dared raise his voice, even though there was no guard around. We whispered. Perhaps because of the thick smoke that poisoned the air and stung the throat.

We were herded into yet another barrack, inside the Gypsy camp. We fell into ranks of five.

"And now, stop moving!"

There was no floor. A roof and four walls. Our feet sank into the mud.

Again, the waiting. I fell asleep standing up. I dreamed of a bed, of my mother's hand on my face. I woke: I was standing, my feet in the mud. Some people collapsed, sliding into the mud. Others shouted:

"Are you crazy? We were told to stand. Do you want to get us all in trouble?"

As if all the troubles in the world were not already upon us.

Little by little, we all sat down in the mud. But we had to get up whenever a Kapo came in to check if, by chance, somebody had a new pair of shoes. If so, we had to hand them over. No use protesting; the blows multiplied and, in the end, one still had to hand them over.

I had new shoes myself. But as they were covered with a thick coat of mud, they had not been noticed. I thanked God, in an improvised prayer, for having created mud in His infinite and wondrous universe.

Suddenly, the silence became more oppressive. An SS officer had come in and, with him, the smell of the Angel of Death. We stared at his fleshy lips. He harangued us from the center of the barrack:

"You are in a concentration camp. In Auschwitz..."

A pause. He was observing the effect his words had produced. His face remains in my memory to this day. A tall man, in his thirties, crime written all over his forehead and his gaze. He looked at us as one would a pack of leprous dogs clinging to life.

"Remember," he went on. "Remember it always, let it be graven in your memories. You are in Auschwitz. And Auschwitz is not a convalescent home. It is a concentration camp. Here, you

must work. If you don't you will go straight to the chimney. To the crematorium. Work or crematorium—the choice is yours."

We had already lived through a lot that night. We thought that nothing could frighten us anymore. But his harsh words sent shivers through us. The word "chimney" here was not an abstraction; it floated in the air, mingled with the smoke. It was, perhaps, the only word that had a real meaning in this place. He left the barrack. The Kapos arrived, shouting:

"All specialists—locksmiths, carpenters, electricians, watchmakers—one step forward!"

The rest of us were transferred to yet another barrack, this one of stone. We had permission to sit down. A Gypsy inmate was in charge.

My father suddenly had a colic attack. He got up and asked politely, in German, "Excuse me ... Could you tell me where the toilets are located?"

The Gypsy stared at him for a long time, from head to toe. As if he wished to ascertain that the person addressing him was actually a creature of flesh and bone, a human being with a body and a belly. Then, as if waking from a deep sleep, he slapped my father with such force that he fell down and then crawled back to his place on all fours.

I stood petrified. What had happened to me? My father had just been struck, in front of me, and I had not even blinked. I had watched and kept silent. Only yesterday, I would have dug my nails into this criminal's flesh. Had I changed that much? So fast? Remorse began to gnaw at me. All I could think was: I shall never forgive them for this. My father must have guessed my thoughts, because he whispered in my ear:

"It doesn't hurt." His cheek still bore the red mark of the hand.

"EVERYBODY outside!"

A dozen or so Gypsies had come to join our guard. The clubs and whips were cracking around me. My feet were running on their own. I tried to protect myself from the blows by hiding behind others. It was spring. The sun was shining.

"Fall in, five by five!"

The prisoners I had glimpsed that morning were working nearby. No guard in sight, only the chimney's shadow... Lulled by the sunshine and my dreams, I felt someone pulling at my sleeve. It was my father: "Come on, son."

We marched. Gates opened and closed. We continued to march between the barbed wire. At every step, white signs with black skulls looked down on us. The inscription: WARNING! DANGER OF DEATH. What irony. Was there here a single place where one was *not* in danger of death?

The Gypsies had stopped next to a barrack. They were replaced by SS men, who encircled us with machine guns and police dogs.

The march had lasted half an hour. Looking around me, I noticed that the barbed wire was behind us. We had left the camp.

It was a beautiful day in May. The fragrances of spring were in the air. The sun was setting.

But no sooner had we taken a few more steps than we saw the barbed wire of another camp. This one had an iron gate with the overhead inscription: ARBEIT MACHT FREI. Work makes you free.

Auschwitz.

FIRST IMPRESSION: better than Birkenau. Cement buildings with two stories rather than wooden barracks. Little gardens here and there. We were led toward one of those "blocks." Seated on the ground by the entrance, we began to wait again. From time to time somebody was allowed to go in. These were the showers, a compulsory routine. Going from one camp to the other, several times a day, we had, each time, to go through them.

After the hot shower, we stood shivering in the darkness. Our clothes had been left behind; we had been promised other clothes.

Around midnight, we were told to run.

"Faster!" yelled our guards. "The faster you run, the faster you'll get to go to sleep."

After a few minutes of racing madly, we came to a new block. The man in charge was waiting. He was a young Pole, who was smiling at us. He began to talk to us and, despite our weariness, we listened attentively.

"Comrades, you are now in the concentration camp Auschwitz. Ahead of you lies a long road paved with suffering. Don't lose hope. You have already eluded the worst danger: the selection. Therefore, muster your strength and keep your faith. We shall all see the day of liberation. Have faith in life, a thousand times faith. By driving out despair, you will move away from death. Hell does not last forever... And now, here is a prayer, or rather a piece of advice: let there be camaraderie among you. We are all brothers and share the same fate. The same smoke hovers over all our heads. Help each other. That is the only way to survive. And now, enough said, you are tired. Listen: you are in Block 17; I am responsible for keeping order here. Anyone with a complaint may come to see me. That is all. Go to sleep. Two people to a bunk. Good night."

Those were the first human words.

NO SOONER HAD WE CLIMBED into our bunks than we fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, the "veteran" inmates treated us without brutality. We went to wash. We were given new clothing. They brought us black coffee.

We left the block around ten o'clock so it could be cleaned. Outside, the sun warmed us. Our morale was much improved. A good night's sleep had done its work. Friends met, exchanged a few sentences. We spoke of everything without ever mentioning those who had disappeared. The prevailing opinion was that the war was about to end.

At about noon, we were brought some soup, one bowl of thick soup for each of us. I was terribly hungry, yet I refused to touch it. I was still the spoiled child of long ago. My father swallowed my ration.

We then had a short nap in the shade of the block. That SS officer in the muddy barrack must have been lying: Auschwitz was, after all, a convalescent home...

In the afternoon, they made us line up. Three prisoners brought a table and some medical instruments. We were told to roll up our left sleeves and file past the table. The three "veteran" prisoners, needles in hand, tattooed numbers on our left arms. I became A-7713. From then on, I had no other name.

At dusk, a roll call. The work Kommandos had returned. The orchestra played military marches near the camp entrance. Tens of thousands of inmates stood in rows while the SS checked their numbers.

After the roll call, the prisoners from all the blocks dispersed, looking for friends, relatives, or neighbors among the arrivals of the latest convoy.

DAYS WENT BY. In the mornings: black coffee. At midday: soup. By the third day, I was eagerly eating any kind of soup ... At six o'clock in the afternoon: roll call. Followed by bread with something. At nine o'clock: bedtime.

We had already been in Auschwitz for eight days. It was after roll call. We stood waiting for the bell announcing its end. Suddenly I noticed someone passing between the rows. I heard him ask:

"Who among you is Wiesel from Sighet?"

The person looking for us was a small fellow with spectacles in a wizened face. My father answered:

"That's me. Wiesel from Sighet."

The fellow's eyes narrowed. He took a long look at my father.

"You don't know me? ... You don't recognize me. I'm your relative, Stein. Already forgotten? Stein. Stein from Antwerp. Reizel's husband. Your wife was Reizel's aunt ... She often wrote to us ... and such letters!"

My father had not recognized him. He must have barely known him, always being up to his neck in communal affairs and not knowledgeable in family matters. He was always elsewhere, lost in thought. (Once, a cousin came to see us in Sighet. She had stayed at our house and eaten at our table for two weeks before my father noticed her presence for the first time.) No, he did not remember Stein. I recognized him right away. I had known Reizel, his wife, before she had left for Belgium.

He told us that he had been deported in 1942. He said, "I heard people say that a transport had arrived from your region and I came to look for you. I thought you might have some news of Reizel and my two small boys who stayed in Antwerp..."

I knew nothing about them... Since 1940, my mother had not received a single letter from them. But I lied:

"Yes, my mother did hear from them. Reizel is fine. So are the children..."

He was weeping with joy. He would have liked to stay longer, to learn more details, to soak up the good news, but an SS was heading in our direction and he had to go, telling us that he would come back the next day.

The bell announced that we were dismissed. We went to fetch the evening meal: bread and margarine. I was terribly hungry and swallowed my ration on the spot. My father told me, "You mustn't eat all at once. Tomorrow is another day ... "

But seeing that his advice had come too late, and that there was nothing left of my ration, he didn't even start his own.

"Me, I'm not hungry," he said.

WE REMAINED IN AUSCHWITZ for three weeks. We had nothing to do. We slept a lot. In the afternoon and at night.

Our one goal was to avoid the transports, to stay here as long as possible. It wasn't difficult; it was enough never to sign up as a skilled worker. The unskilled were kept until the end.

At the start of the third week, our *Blockälteste* was removed; he was judged too humane. The new one was ferocious and his aides were veritable monsters. The good days were over. We began to wonder whether it wouldn't be better to let ourselves be chosen for the next transport.

Stein, our relative from Antwerp, continued to visit us and, from time to time, he would bring a half portion of bread:

"Here, this is for you, Eliezer."

Every time he came, tears would roll down his icy cheeks. He would often say to my father:

"Take care of your son. He is very weak, very dehydrated. Take care of yourselves, you must avoid selection. Eat! Anything, anytime. Eat all you can. The weak don't last very long around here..."

And he himself was so thin, so withered, so weak...

"The only thing that keeps me alive," he kept saying, "is to know that Reizel and the little ones are still alive. Were it not for them, I would give up."

One evening, he came to see us, his face radiant.

"A transport just arrived from Antwerp. I shall go to see them tomorrow. Surely they will have news..."

He left.

We never saw him again. He had been given the news. The *real* news.

EVENINGS, AS WE LAY on our cots, we sometimes tried to sing a few Hasidic melodies. Akiba Drumer would break our hearts with his deep, grave voice.

Some of the men spoke of God: His mysterious ways, the sins of the Jewish people, and the redemption to come. As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice.

Akiba Drumer said:

"God is testing us. He wants to see whether we are capable of overcoming our base instincts, of killing the Satan within ourselves. We have no right to despair. And if He punishes us mercilessly, it is a sign that He loves us that much more..."

Hersh Genud, well versed in Kabbalah, spoke of the end of the world and the coming of the Messiah.

From time to time, in the middle of all that talk, a thought crossed my mind: Where is Mother right now... and Tzipora...

"Mother is still a young woman," my father once said. "She must be in a labor camp. And Tzipora, she is a big girl now. She too must be in a c a m p . . . "

How we would have liked to believe that. We pretended, for what if one of us still *did* believe?

ALL THE SKILLED WORKERS had already been sent to other camps. Only about a hundred of us, simple laborers, were left.

"Today, it's your turn," announced the block secretary. "You are leaving with the next transport."

At ten o'clock, we were handed our daily ration of bread. A dozen or so SS surrounded us. At the gate, the sign proclaimed that work meant freedom. We were counted. And there we were, in the countryside, on a sunny road. In the sky, a few small white clouds.

We were walking slowly. The guards were in no hurry. We were glad of it. As we were passing through some of the villages, many Germans watched us, showing no surprise. No doubt they had seen quite a few of these processions...

On the way, we saw some young German girls. The guards began to tease them. The girls giggled. They allowed themselves to be kissed and tickled, bursting with laughter. They all were laughing, joking, and passing love notes to one another. At least, during all that time, we endured neither shouting nor blows.

After four hours, we arrived at the new camp: Buna. The iron gate closed behind us.