

## *Life as Hope*

**By Halina Birenbaum**

**(Published with the authorization of the author Mrs. Halina Birenbaum. Translated from Polish to English by Josef Holender & Andrew M. Kobos -owner of the web site "SHOAH")**

**H**aving survived many tragedies during the years of the Holocaust I met my freedom with an empty heart. I saw the vastness of orphanhood and ruins and ashes in the post-war Warsaw, Poland, but nothing around me or inside me. At last, I held a whole loaf of bread in my hands and could slice off it as much as I wanted to, but I felt hemmed in by the four walls of my home and within myself. I did not want to be alike my mother before the war, and be only taking care of home, cooking and cleaning. I was so much older than she had been, with all my fifteen years of age! In the years of the war and German occupation I had traveled a huge distance from my childhood to an old age and to death. So many times had I stared at the eyes of death, while petrified by fear and tension of the penultimate moment; so many people were burned alive in front of my eyes! How with all that can you enter the ordinary everydayness of freedom, while at the same time you have been imprisoned by those images and voices? I always dreamed that if I survived this hell, I would settle on an uninhabited island. If I survived... which in my case was highly improbable since Hitler's laws condemned the entire Jewish nation to the Holocaust, starting from the elderly, the sick and the children.... Even in death camps I stayed illegally as in there they kept alive only the young and the healthy, and even that depended on how many of them they actually needed for slave labour. The rest was sent to gas chambers. My life and my survival turned out to have been a series of chances... And it has remained so till today.



*Halina Birenbaum, Holocaust survivor, a poet and a writer*

**M**y family name was Balin. In September 1939 I was to turn ten and to advance to the third grade of my elementary school. I had loving parents, two older brothers, grandparents on my mother's and my father's sides and a lot of relatives. We were a rather poor family. Marek, my brother, eleven years older than me, studied medicine, and was an exceptionally gifted and hard-working student, while Hilek, who was seven years my senior, studied at a secondary craft school. My father was a commercial representative; my mother took care of our home and helped the household by earning money with crocheting. That year, upon the rumours of the approaching war, my mother's parents and sisters came to Warsaw. They thought it would be easier to survive in the capital rather than in their small town of Zelechow. My parental family stayed in Biala Podlaska, about 200 kilometers east of Warsaw.



*Mother Pola Perl Kijewska Grynsztejn from Zelechów*

On September 1, 1939, alarm sirens wailed in Warsaw and I never went to school again. The sky over Warsaw was covered with squadrons of German Messerschmitt aircraft raining down destruction by dropping firebombs and strafing people. Huge fires broke out and there was next to nothing to extinguish them with. Houses collapsed, burying people in their thousands. Such an inferno lasted for more than three weeks. There was nothing to eat, no water... People pulled out canned cucumbers and preserves from the burning shops and drew polluted water from the Vistula River - succumbing on their way to bombs, shells, and shrapnel. Exploding bombs by day and night, the glow of fires, the stench of burning houses, and the stink of corpses decaying under the rubbles, the terrifying roars of sirens and the loudspeaker warnings: "Attention, attention, coming, all clear, coming, coming"! ...

On the most solemn of the Jewish holidays, Yom Kippur - the Atonement Day, the Germans bombed most of the Warsaw's quarter inhabited mostly by Jews and our street too began to burn. We ran out from our burning apartment building, having grasped anything we could carry. We sheltered in an acquaintance's cellar. It was terribly crowded and stank with mould, reeked with human exhalations and projected around an indescribable depression. Some people lost their minds from this horror and mumbled incomprehensibly. As I watched the adults and read from the faces and agitation of every one of them, I rapidly matured to face the inconceivable reality of the world that was just collapsing all around us.

At last, silence ensued. The silence of defeat, devastation and mourning. On the streets, people walked with big bundles on their shoulders. We also were in the wave of those seeking a shelter. It was the first time we saw Germans. They marched arrogantly through the streets of Warsaw in ruins, seemingly like an invincible curtain of death that now had fallen perhaps for centuries to come. People jostled for bread. German soldiers pulled out Jews from the line-ups and beat them mercilessly.

We found a room in an apartment of a dentist, Fania Geszychter, who was paralyzed as the result of her shock during the bombing. Her husband, Izydor, also a dentist, had died before the war. She, her two daughters, Bela (24), Elusia (15), and her son Tadek (22), a dental technician, now all lived in one room, while four other rooms and the kitchen were being rented out. The youngest of her children, Elusia, two years my senior, and Erna Zajdman, a girl one year younger than me, who lived with her parents, Fajge and Benjamin, in the adjacent room, befriended me. We continued to live in this apartment until the deportation.

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Soon, the Germans ordered all Jews over twelve years of age to wear on their right arms white armbands with blue Stars of David, to discern and separate them from other people. They rounded-up Jews, and executed them on a slightest pretext. Jews were forbidden to travel by train or tram, to study, to pray in synagogues, or gather in larger groups. The curfew from 7 p.m. till dawn was imposed on Jews as well as an unconditional ban on being outside their homes in the curfew hours. During the day, huge crowds filled the streets. People sold their clothes, bedding, and underwear in order to be able to buy bread (that each day grew more expensive and worse), frozen potatoes, porridge oats, and damp firewood. Just to survive one more day - in the hope that the war would soon end with a German defeat and that everything would then return to normal.

The horror, however, grew with each passing day. Illness and hunger spread quickly. Time after time terrifying screams were heard from the streets: "Germans!" - and triumphant trucks roared the crowded streets, SS-men jumped down, shooting at those running away, stopping men with hand waving and shouts "Halt!", beating them up and loading on the trucks. SS-men entered Jewish apartments, pulled out and took furniture and more valuable items and looted goods from shops, dragged away fathers and sons, the shop-owners, and shot them dead.

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*Warsaw, Muranowska Street*

**R**umours that a ghetto would be made for the Jews of Warsaw came true as our worst nightmare. In the late autumn of 1940 a tall wall enclosed us completely to separate us from the "Aryan" side of the city. One day, the Germans ordered all Jews to leave their flats across Warsaw within one hour and gather in a small area in the poorest part of Warsaw. Subsequently, they forced Jews from other towns and shtetls in the Warsaw area to walk to the Warsaw Ghetto, killing the sick persons in their beds and the weak on their way to Warsaw.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews became homeless and destitute. Cramped in impossibly overcrowded schools and former public buildings, now called the "Points", they were dying en

masse from hunger, filth, and epidemics. At the *Points* there was not enough room for all the exiles, so they were laying on the streets, in yards, on staircases. All of them begging, being hunger swollen and frostbitten. It was not possible to keep pace with the number of corpses to be removed from the sidewalks. Those were laid where they had died, covered with newspapers, until a cart came to pick them up to throw into a common grave.

I was part of this crowd, growing up within it, and learning about life amongst the total devastation. I played with other children, pushing people on the overcrowded streets, beside the newspaper-covered corpses. Some time later, our house committee engaged us to collect money for the beggars and the starving neighbours. We fastened paper ribbons on passer-by's lapels, to entice them to give us a few *grosze* (cents). Sometimes, we would perform at evening parties in the homes of wealthier Jewish families, reciting poems and singing pre-war and Ghetto songs. Obviously, only children and youngsters who were not yet starved or debilitated participated in these charitable activities.

At that time our family was not yet starving. Marek worked at a Jewish hospital, earning little money by performing minor medical procedures. Mr. Stanislaw Strojwas, an engineer, the Polish owner of the canned food factory "Maggi", for whom my father had worked before the war at delivering raw products from southern Poland, occasionally managed to send to us, into the Ghetto, beans, brown sugar, and canned food rather than money, because money would not buy very much as the prices rocketed by the hour. Mr. Strojwas' factory was situated just at the Ghetto's perimeter, which made such transfers possible from time to time. We mostly sold the goods he gave us in order to be able to buy bread, potatoes and firewood.

In such conditions I did continue my learning. Under the supervision and quite rigorous instructions of my oldest brother, Marek, in three years I managed to work through the curriculum from the third grade of elementary school up to the first grade of grammar-school. Marek also taught me French. The latter was clearly intended as a break from the harsh reality, or perhaps in the hope of living through to see the end of the war and then avoiding finding myself being behind in my education. I read a lot, even poetry, which I learned by heart very quickly. I found this to be an escape from the prevailing horrors and from the constant flux of horrifying news about German victories in all war fronts, and rumours of mass-murdering all Jews and constructing steam or gas chambers for mass extermination in Chelmno, Belzec - and at the most horrible place of all - Auschwitz. I was eleven when I began to write about things that were happening around us, about my inability to cope with this immense terror, with the more and more bad news and adults' hope-dashing comments.

Two windows of our room were shuttered permanently with plywood sheets and the only light came from the flame of a gas burner, and later on from a smelly carbide lamp. We slept on the floor: my parents and brothers on two mattresses, and I, as the youngest, on a quilt spread on the floor (for my mother had always taught me to relinquish comfort to my elders, against which I used to rebel). After all the Jews had been forced into the Ghetto, our acquaintance gave us a couch, a table and four chairs. Again, I had to give up a chair, as there was no fifth one. However, I now had a mattress as my brothers slept on the couch.

Luckily, our street was located inside the Ghetto and, unlike the majority of Jews, we did not have to find another accommodation. Several times, the Germans reduced the size of the Ghetto and people were forced to simply stay on the streets, dying there by their dozens from hunger and exposure. The dentist's family was starving too almost from the very beginning because no tenants paid their rents and nobody cared anymore about his or her teeth.

Two more years had passed in the Ghetto. I frequently dreamed that one morning I would wake up to find that the Germans are gone from Warsaw and have totally disappeared from our life. As suddenly as they had burst into it.

In July 1942, wall posters in Polish and German announced that all Jews would be relocated to work in the East. Only few would be allowed remain in the Ghetto, i.e. those needed by the Germans as workers in factories that produced uniforms and boots for the German army and several factories on the "Aryan" side. The Jews who were "employed" would receive their work permits. The latter soon turned out to be the only way to secure one's right to life. Consequently, large bribes were paid for such documents. Panic and despair pervaded the entire Ghetto. The horror was deepened by the news of the suicide of Mr. Adam Czerniakow, the chairman of the Jewish Community Council, who had always been obedient to Germans, but finally he refused to sign the order to deport people from the Ghetto. His suicidal death gave rise to the most horrific suspicions. All food disappeared immediately. Words like raid, action, round-up, blockade, deportation, wagons (railcars), Umschlag (the loading zone to Treblinka) have now become our only reality, the only reality of our lives. At first, we knew nothing about Treblinka. The loading zone was a long, enclosed site at the Stawki Square, in front of a school. My brother, Hilek, had attended this school until the war broke out. Every day, empty cattle railcars were being rolled in there. Into these wagons the Germans loaded Jews they rounded-up for deportation. Initially, they deported to Treblinka the exiles from the "*Points*", beggars from the streets, the sick, the disabled, and people who were visibly swollen from hunger and frostbites.

I did ask no questions, made no remarks and nothing surprised me any longer - everything could be smelled out in the air or read from people's faces, from the ever-present breath of death and fear of dying. Even small children understood the necessity of silence, of burying themselves in a thick darkness of their own forbidden existence, of silencing their breaths and heartbeats and thus to avoid being discovered and deported to that enigmatic yet horrible "East"...

We put on our best clothes and shoes: a several layers of the underwear, frocks, sweaters – in case they would catch us and deport to some terrible camp, so that we might barter there our clothes for some food. Mother put a little bit of flour, cereal, sugar cubes and a bottle of cooking oil in her basket and we bade farewell to our neighbours. What we did not know then was that it was a farewell forever

Aunt Fela Moszkowicz, my mother's younger sister, lived in an apartment at another street, on the fifth floor. We thought it was so high up that they would not come there to drag us along to the Umschlag... My mother also wanted to be together with her beloved sister at this horrible time. Earlier, my uncle, Majorek Moszkowicz, was dragged by the Germans from a train with a group of Jews and they all were shot dead, despite their valid passes. Kuba Moszkowicz, my cousin, who was at Hilek's age, was deported to work at Starachowice, south of Warsaw, where he disappeared without a trace. All that happened before the deportations to Treblinka commenced... Only my aunt and her daughter Halina, two years my senior, remained alive. From that moment on, we kept together.



*Pola Perl and her sister in Zelechow*

The round-ups usually began about 8 o'clock in the morning and lasted till the evening. Each day the streets of the Ghetto were blocked, and thousands of Jews in columns were dragged along to the Umschlag. The Germans broke into all buildings and apartments on each floor, meticulously sniffed out all well masked hideouts, every nooks and crannies in cellars and lofts. With crowbars they smashed the doors and barricades with crowbars, and, beating and shooting, they rushed people outside into the columns set up in the middle of the street, where from they dragged them along to the cattle railcars under the guard of armed SS-men. Each day fifteen to seventeen thousand Jews, as many as the wagons could possibly hold, were taken away. Such raids continually intensified and more and more people were deported. Streets emptied, pavements and roads became stained with blood. Ghostly buildings and flats were left abandoned, filled only with scattered belongings, letters, photos, and feathers flying everywhere from pillows and quilts ripped apart during the searches. Locomotives' whistles pierced my heart like knives: it is there you will go too, this is what awaits you - some horrible terminal station, the end of everything!

My father got a job at a shoe-making workshop thanks to a relative of ours, for we had no money to bribe. He received a certificate that would also cover his wife and child (i.e. my mother and me) as those of a "productive" Jew. The Jewish shop manager was the pre-war owner of this shoe factory but it turned out that such a promising and profitable position did not save him, his wife and their three children from their death in Treblinka. No Jew could escape the German omnipotent sentence of extermination.

Marek stayed at the hospital, which was still functioning. It created an illusion that not everybody would be deported, and that some selected individuals would be allowed to continue to live. Marek had an *Ausweis*, a valid identity document with a work permit stamped in.

Hilek was taken to work at the Umschlag. He wore a metal tag with a number to indicate that he was productive and should not be deported. He had to remove the bodies of those shot or beaten to death while forcibly loaded into the cattle railcars. The horror that showed in his eyes when he returned from work first time immediately advanced me to a new level of my maturity.

I forgot my endless, gut-gnawing hunger, my longing for just another spoonful of dumplings, which Mother cooked in the evening over feeble candles in a neighbouring flat emptied by a deportation; about snatching from her basket an extra lump of sugar that in the hideouts she divided between us

every a few hours, so it serve as a medicine. I still do not know, where this small and physically weak woman got the courage and strength from to cook those dumplings.

At that very moment the expression of Hilek's face revealed to me the abyss of human tragedy, in which everything that we had been taught about or what had been handed down onto us through the ages, no longer mattered and was left far behind us. Suddenly, I have had grown in my inner being by generations, as if I would have penetrated the contents of the greatest books of the world, those that were written not by a human hand. I had at once understood the inconceivable and the secret of enduring it - everything else became insignificant and absurdly pitiful. My brother was holding his head in his hands and mumbled: "*Do not ask me anything about what they are doing there to human beings!*"

I cuddled to my mother in this overcrowded, moulded hiding place of ours. Many times, I tightly clasped her hand, and tensely held my breath, when the drumming of SS-men's boots were heard nearby and their blood-chilling yelling pervaded all around: "Halt Jude!" And then a groan full of pain and echoes of shoots somewhere nearby, but like in me already. Mother's calm, self-control and her stubborn will to live were for me the foundation and framework upon which I could rapidly mature and develop my alertness and the sharpness of my intuition. I have traveled with those through my long and unimaginable journey, through the universal death - to life.

**M**ore weeks had passed, more and more difficult ones, spent in cellars and attics, under the uninterrupted uncertainty and fear, without food, with no possibility to wash, change clothes, take off shoes, with a constant preparedness for the worst to come - the deportation to the East. Hundreds of thousands of Jews had already been sent there, among them all our relatives. The helplessness increased with every passing day.

One day at the dusk we came down from the attic to get some fresh air. At such a late hour they were never doing round-ups. My father had just returned from the workshop, Hilek too, after a whole day at the Umschlagplatz, and we all stood together, exhausted after the day long like eternity.

Suddenly, from all four corners of the street rickshaws materialized from which armed Germans, Lithuanians, Latvians jumped off. Our hiding place under the parching roof instantly became an unreachable paradise of the past epoch...

Their yelling: "HALT!" transfers us immediately to a new and exclusive reality. The four of us have already become the first row of a column instantly swelling with those who just returned from their factories on the Aryan side. It is an ambush for those who work in the "placowka's" - the Aryan side factories, those who have had the best possible passes.

Potatoes, onions, and sugar, just smuggled into the Ghetto all spill on the road. On both sides of the column our executioners with heavy blows, shooting at us on a slightest forbidden move. I have again advanced in my maturity by a hundred of years. Mother calms us down telling that we are going to an agricultural work; that we are young and healthy, that we are quite safe. I only have to keep telling everybody that I am 17 years old! She pinches my cheeks to make them blush - a proof of my health, and she quickly arranges my braids in a topknot to make me look taller. In a sense all it flatters me and makes me curious...

I feel like a small particle in this large column of people, tense to insanity in a concentrated mill of thoughts and strained nerves. Never before did Mother devote so much attention to me. She is now staring at me as if trying to guess my fate and defend me from it.

They lead us to Umschlagplatz. Thousands of Jews caught during the whole day of the Action. Pushing through the crowd, squeezed throngs, shouts all around. Desperate searching for a hiding

place, for water, and for lost children and relatives, so that at least families leave together in the same railcar.

Suddenly, the Germans bring out a machine gun and mount it in the middle of the square, aiming at the crowd. A dead silence slinks – the moment before the ultimate one... Four of us embrace strongly and we look deeply into our eyes, as one does just before departing forever. In a moment, we shall not be anymore. Hilek might leave, since it will be necessary to clean up the square of the corpses, but he stays with us. Father embraces us tightly. Mother steps away a bit, she is looking at me with concentration and love: "everybody has to die once" – she says – "*now we will die together, don't be afraid, it will not be terrible*"...

Now, I am beyond fear; even death seems to me to be something small and unimportant, compared to the power of the feeling of this last embrace - the fullest possible realization of our humanity that exceeds everything else.

The whistle of a train rolling in pierces the air. Now the machine gun becomes redundant. They run on us with riffle butts, truncheons, and clubs. They shot at this mad crowd being forcibly pushed into the cattle cars: German gendarmes, SS-men, Polish and Jewish policemen. Terrible screams, curses, cry all around. Father says that he will show them his *Ausweis* at the railcar hatch, and they will certainly release us. Hilek has an Umschlagplatz worker's tag, and he is safe. Mother does not believe in any papers, she grasps me and Hilek by our hands and drags us away as far as possible from the train. Father attempts to convince her to stay, but eventually he follows us not to lose us in the crowd. Now it is of utmost importance that we hold together!

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a pack of Jewish policemen encircles Father. From every direction they jump on him with clubs. For a moment, Father tries with his hands to shield himself from the blows, then he bends down, the clubs striking his back, and he disappears in the human wave. Forever. Such is the last image of him I have had in my eyes for the remainder of my life. I even do not have a picture of my Father.

Hilek starts screaming and begging Mother that we go to the train: "Let that what will happen to all Jews, happen to us too! The Germans know of all the hideouts here, they will kill all of you and then they will order me to carry away your bodies. I do not want to live through such a moment!"

I also have enough of hiding and tension. And I draw my strength from this mass of human beings. But Mother is not listening though: "stupid children", she whispers calmly, "*this train means death, we will always have time for it...*" Finally everything becomes silent. The three of us remain somewhere in a corner of the zone. Bags on the ground, things scattered and abandoned all around, shoes lost. A terrifying, cemetery-like stillness and emptiness.

Hilek hid us in a sewer canal, where we nearly get suffocated. Not once had he pulled corpses from there. Luckily, it quickly turned out that there was not enough space in the cattle railcars and a handful of the Jews who remained were locked in the police building at the square. We were to wait there until another train arrives next morning. However, at night Mother managed to bribe a Jewish policeman who agreed to lead us out to "freedom" in exchange for her wedding ring, two kilograms of rice, and Father's suit that was left in our hideout in the attic. Quite cheap! The standard price tag for leading somebody out from Umschlagplatz was 10,000 per capita.

Further weeks of round-ups, hiding and suffering followed. Then there came a big round-up and selection on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), called "The Mila Street Trap" ('Kociol'<sup>1</sup>) that lasted several days, and in which the Germans took thousands of people from the Ghetto. By then, everybody knew that the deportations to the East, the wagons, the Umschlagplatz - simply meant death in the gas chambers of Treblinka! From half a million of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, only several thousands were left alive. We still were among them. But Father no longer.



Nothing but orphanhood, ruins, emptiness. Everywhere only tatters of families, tatters of lives. Mother worked in a "shop", sewing uniforms for the German army and I, crouching under her sewing machine, stitched buttons, to get my right to live too. The Ghetto was now reduced but to a few isolated streets and changed into a labour camp. Hilek and Marek now worked at a "placowka" in the Aryan side. They used to bring in food obtained for the belongings smuggled out from flats whose former inhabitants had been deported to Treblinka. The Ghetto Jews were forbidden to remain outdoors at all except for one hour in the morning while going to work under guard and one hour in the evening while coming back.

All the time, SS-men roamed the Ghetto, ravaging, shooting at random, and setting ambushes in attics where people arranged secret passages to other streets.

Hilek married. The parents of his wife Hela (who came from Bydgoszcz) were taken in the September selection on Mila Street. During that selection we hid in the attic, since Mother had lost her *Ausweis*. It was a stroke of luck, because, when her "shop's" turn came, the Germans stopped selecting, and just rushed everybody to the wagons... After the September selection, her *Ausweis* was found among things scattered in our flat.

Rumours spread that the Germans would finally liquidate the Ghetto in the spring of 1943. Warsaw was finally to become Judenrein - clean of Jews! The surviving Jews started eagerly building underground bunkers in a hope that now, after the German defeat at Stalingrad, the war would not last much longer and it would be possible to survive therein. The bunkers were equipped with bunks, food supply, water, ventilators, and iron crowbars to break away from the railcars. At some places weapons and poison were stashed. Anything but Treblinka! A Jewish uprising in the Ghetto was being prepared at the earnest. Single surviving members of murdered families had nothing to lose, and there was no one anymore to be endangered because of their resistance.

Before the Passover of 1943, we moved to the so-called "Small Ghetto", on Mila Street, where Mother managed to get a place in a bunker. She had to pay for it.

The German guards at the *placowka*, where we planned to mix into people to get to Mila Street (where our bunker was) in the evening were especially brutal and Marek decided that we would not take with us the food supply we had prepared. He would bring it on the next day... Mother took only her small basket with flour, sugar cubes, and a bottle of cooking oil, which did attract no attention. On Mila Street, we suddenly bumped into Erna and her mother. The living ghosts from the near yet so distant past just like us. They both tried to persuade me to stay with them overnight as we had so much to talk about! But Marek sternly opposed: "*we must not stay away from each other, as we do not know what the next hour brings*"... And then Marek went back to our former flat to bring the food we left there.

**P**assover, 19th April 1943, "*Leil Haseder*" - Passover Seder Night. Mother woke us up urgently: "You get up at once, the Germans have encircled the Ghetto. We're getting down to the bunker, quick!" Tension, haste, paralyzing fear, yet a hope that we will be safe in the darkness of the underground bunker, the darkness that would protect us from the outside world. A dimmed, weak, small light, heat, sultriness. Agitation, irritation, shouts and arguing in the narrow passages and on the overcrowded bunks in the bunker.

Right from the beginning, there were more people gathered there than there was room for them. It was only possible to crawl on the bunks and only in a flat, lying position.

The Germans did not walk any longer through the Ghetto from house to house, breaking in the doors and driving out the Jews, as they did before. Now, they were simply setting house after house in fire, street after street. People suffocated by smoke, or were burnt alive. Those few who managed to escape the fires were shot on the spot by the Germans or herded onto the Umschlagplatz. The

Germans flooded bunkers that were not reached by fire. Dozens of people hiding in Erna's bunker at Nalewki Street were drowned this way.

Was it yesterday or a century ago when Marek did not allow me to stay with a friend of mine? Now, was cut off from us.

In our hideout, day was changed into night and vice versa in order to prevent the Jew hunters and various traitors - their helpers, from hearing and catching us. At nights they usually stopped their searches for Jews.

We were passing out of hunger. Every a few hours Mother divided among us a sugar cube, or a teaspoon of marmalade, and a gulp of water. She was unable to push herself to the oven to cook flour dumplings for us as that could be reached only by the strongest. People were lying on the bunks almost naked or nervously tottering next to them. The bunker was filled beyond its capacity since the escapees from the burning houses continued to arrive. Smoke was penetrating the bunker and it soon became impossible to even light a match for the lack of oxygen.

Many people collapsed wheezing. Above us fires were raging, indiscriminate shooting was heard, tanks and armoured carriers set against a handful of the Jewish insurgents and against us, the helpless ones, hiding under the ground... Those stronger soaked their towels in water and waved them to create an illusion of a refreshing chill... Some began to share the last drop of their medications. On the threshold of death one needs not much, it is only the flicker of life that needs much to prevail until finally it too is extinguished.

I was lying on the bunk, half-fainted, when Mother pulled my arm forcefully: - dress up, quickly, they've discovered us,, they are already banging on the entrance door!

How can one measure the sudden defeat of hope, how much time is needed to realize it and to begin another race with death?

A grenade is thrown into the bunker, a ladder lowered. Silhouettes in green uniforms and high boots instantly toss us to a different realm: "*Alles heraus!* Get out, you all! You will be safe, you're going to work, but obey the orders! "*Schneller!*"! Move! Quick!" - Maybe it all is true?

The daylight again. After full three weeks! They even help us on the ladder to get outside. They are afraid someone may have a weapon and would shoot. It so happened before. On the street, they stack us into a marching column - for the last time.

It is the beginning of May. All over there are remnants of street battles, tanks, and armoured carriers. Not a single intact building remained in the Ghetto. They have blown up even the skeletons of the burned out houses, so that nobody could hide inside them. On the other side of the Wall, somebody plays piano...



*Halina with members of Kibbutz "Shichrur" ("Freedom") in a remembrance assembly near the bunker of Mordechai Anilewicz, April 1946*

**Umschlagplatz** For the second time! Mother, Hilek, Hela, Halina, and I.

Again we were rushed into the same police building as before, the former school. They herded us on the floor in one of the classrooms. Here, we were to wait for a train for the whole night, fully conscious of what "going to work in the East" meant. This fact did not decrease our helplessness, but even such a near and indisputable future was still far away compared to the nightmare we had gone through prior to this train to be. With the threats of being shot dead on the spot, we were forbidden to move at all.

Time to time, a German showed up and then the one he would have chosen must give to him money, gold, or jewelry! One of the Germans came in with empty bottles in his hands. I sank my head into Mother's knees and plugged my ears with my fingers. Mother bent over to shield me. - "Has it lasted the eternity or have I already died, and am not seeing and not hearing anymore?" Suddenly, above me, I felt Mother's body shake in a spasm. Never before had Mother broken down, never cried. I unplugged my ears. Blows of a whip were interrupting a dead silence. I lifted my head. My brother! I saw Hilek's face, beaten, bleeding, his eyes narrowed with pain behind his smashed glasses. Not even once did he groan, when a German was beating him. Then he sat quietly down next to Hela and Mother. He asked for water, but in her basket Mother had nothing but a bottle of cooking oil...

Next morning, they burst into the building like enraged, savage, bloodthirsty beasts. With blows and shots they rushed us towards the cattle railcars. On the steps I pushed through the people trampling each other. I was desperately clinging to Mother in order not to get lost. A short distance from the building's exit to the train, while stepping on dead bodies, lasted an entire lifetime. I will never be able to describe from which circle of the epochs subsequent one to the other it started.

We ended up in a wagon. No miracle was able to change it. The Germans did not become less powerful or less brutal after their defeats in the Eastern front; heaven and earth did not rupture with grief, mercy or even compassion over the mass murder of my entire nation. But who would think about all that now? There was no place to put the legs, to protect the body against the pushing crowd and to avoid being crushed. The SS-men kept hitting people squashed in the wagon's door with rifle butts until they fell down on others already inside or glued each to the other to make more room for next ones... Finally, wagon doors were shut and latched from the outside, but only when even a needle would not fit in.

The train started to move. The strongest plugged the narrow wagon windows with their bodies thus blocking the airflow. People fought for every centimeter of space, they argued, were trampling and suffocating each other with their sheer weights. Bottles of water, sometimes on the way tossed in by Poles from near the rails, were being ripped away from hands, from mouths - until the strongest have conquered them.

I stood on all this pile, cuddled up to my mother, looking in despair at the dreadful bottle of oil in her small basket - liquid, but not a drinkable one!!! I had already known about Treblinka but Mother kept reassuring me that we were going somewhere else to work. I was grateful to her for any lie, only not to hear this horrible station name. And later, I was not bothered by anything simply because I could not stand it anymore. I fell down. Others fell on me. I sank into darkness. I did not feel anything anymore.

Suddenly, somebody fell on my face, on my nose. I could not breathe! I began to struggle with a superhuman force until I freed myself from under this suffocating heap of human flesh and released from my own, laced shoes that painfully hurt and bloodied my feet. I stripped away almost all my clothes and - atop the pile of the dying and the dead -- I reached one of the small windows. I put out my head at the window. The rattle barrel of an SS-man who was standing on the wagon's steps touched my throat. But I could breathe! I was breathing with all my being!

**T**hen the train came to a stop at a station. It was night and it was raining. Blows and yelling: *Raus!!!* Out! We moved in a big column of people, wading in the mud. I wanted to lick this mud out of the terrible thirst. I had on me only a man's overcoat that I had found in the darkness the wagon. But I was together with Mother, my brother, my sister-in-law and my cousin, and we did not lose each other in this pressing crowd! It turned out that we were in Lublin. Rejoicing, we kissed each other - it was not Treblinka...

Leaning on Hilek, I waded barefoot in the mud. The Germans shot dead all those unable to walk. On the way, Mother picked up high-heeled shoes of a dead woman that was just killed. I had to look as a 17 year old! Hilek broke off the heel of one shoe because I was unable to walk, but he did not have time to do it with the other one as we have reached a place where men were forcibly separated from women, with blows and shooting. People said that the children and the elderly would be taken away. I told Mother not to follow me should they take me away. Mother looked deeply into my eyes and asked me if I really believed she would leave me. Hilek managed to embrace us before an SS-man whipped him and broke him off from us forever. In the last moment, warned me lean on Mother because this could make her collapse. Later, in Birkenau, I learned that he was gassed in Auschwitz. I even do not have a picture of him.

Cold wind was blowing. Mother covered me with her coat amidst the female crowd on the square. She said that soon we would go to a bathroom, would be given different clothes, and then would warm up and nourish in a barrack. I listened to her impatiently. A nail left from the broken heel and the high heel of the other shoe were killing me.

Yet, I did not know that soon these shoes would save my life during a selection in Majdanek. There, SS-women ("*Aufseherinnen*") while herding female prisoners for a roll call, pushed the sick ones and those with injured legs out and onto a truck that took them straight to the gas chamber. One of the SS-women indeed stopped me at the barrack door with a rifle, but seeing that I had one heel missing she apparently thought it was the reason for my limping, and she let me through. Luckily enough she neither did nor see my trampled, painful feet and the nail-injured heel, covered with pus... But it all was to happen later on.

Now, women were still being picked from the group brought here from the train and then led away. Unavoidably, our turn came. Remembering Hilek's warning, I leaned on my cousin Halina; Mother and Hela (my sister-in-law) walked behind me. The pain in my foot made me blunt to everything

else. I was only thinking how to make the next step. Suddenly, I found myself inside a huge barrack, full of clothes, where we were ordered to take all our clothes except for shoes. And finally a bath!

There were dozens of naked women under the showers - among them Halina and Hela. "Mother was right - they have not killed us, we shall all live and work!" - I thought. I wanted to embrace and hug her... With the increasing panic I searched for her amongst the naked women. I could not take my eyes from the door. - "She will come in at a while, she's got to come!" I could still feel the warmth of her body under her coat with which she was covering me just minutes ago. She did not enter though!

I was afraid to ask my sister-in-law about her since I did not want to hear the answer. Suddenly, I sank into a huge and endless emptiness, with no exit, and with no meaning. "Mother is no more". Then, the incomprehensible Hela's voice said, "Now, I am your mother"... I did not comprehend her words. I kept walking in the room in rounds repeating in dullness - "Mother is no more, no Mother!" My mind refused to accept it.

They pushed us into another unheated room, hitting us all over our naked and wet bodies, swearing at us vulgarly. In there, they threw at us some clothes, too large, or too small - like in a circus. I happened to get an elegant, long, black gown with lace... Hela put it on me and tied it up around my waist to make it shorter so that I could walk. While doing that she begged me: "Halina, please, don't look at me. I fear your eyes!"... What eyes did I have at that moment? Why were they so terrifying? And who was I then?



*Hela Grynsztejn ne'e Herszberg from Bydgoszcz*

Hela fought for a scrap of space for me and for her on the floor in the overcrowded barrack, for a soup bowl of which less were available than there were female prisoners who all were mad with hunger and thirst; she pushed to the big pot containing a thin nettle soup or to get a small chunk of bread. The two of us did not separate even for a moment. But in short time Hela was turning thinner and thinner, weaker and weaker and it seemed like she was vanishing before my eyes. It was then when I staged a battle not to lose her.

Many times I gave her my soup, when I had managed to get but one bowl. I swore to her I could not swallow it, so that she would accept it. I covered her body with mine to protect her from cold, shielded her from the kapos who rushed us to carry heavy rocks.

We cuddled up together on the floor during the short hours of rest, drawing the courage one from the other. We shared every crumb of bread, every draught of soup, every remark and thought - even if conveyed only with a glance when we had no strength to emit a sound from within ourselves.

Several months had passed, the months of hunger, sickness, beating and slave labour, of ceaseless selections, and with no possibility to wash our bodies or change our clothes. The baths the Germans sometimes herded us to under escort, could easily turn into a gas chamber, and we never knew where this would take us.

In July 1943, the Germans started selecting transports of the healthiest and strongest young female prisoners to be sent to labour camps - for here, in Majdanek, it was a concentration and extermination camp.

We did not fit to the first transport. They chose me to the second one but I managed to run away since Hela had not passed the selection, as she was too skinny. However, we were both chosen to the third transport. They wrote all our data down, distributed soup and then locked us up in the barrack.

Cuddled up together as usual on the floor, we were daydreaming of that better camp to come. In the middle of the night the Germans burst into the barrack and, hitting us with rifle butts, yelling, and setting dogs on us, they dragged us along outside.

They formed us into a column. Confused, they counted us several times, and... marched us to the gas chamber - our entire transport! Inside it looked like a bath hall equipped with rows of showers. Stripped naked, we waited inside for endless hours, we waited for death. I held Hela's hand, and kept watching the showerheads. "It is here the gas will come from. How will it feel to die? What is death? Or, perhaps, all that will suddenly disappear, and the war will suddenly end?"

Next morning it turned out that that night the Germans had run out of the poison gas! We have outlived our own deaths!

The SS-men counted us again; the prisoner orderlies gave us bread rations that we devoured immediately. Then, they hurried us into a train. Cattle cars again, but this time each with doors open in which two *Wehrmacht* soldiers settled themselves comfortably.

The soldiers ordered us to sit in rows, each between the straddled legs of another, so that every centimeter of space could be used. Threatening to shoot us dead on the spot, they forbade us to change this position at all. At last, we could sit, but who could then predict that it would last unaltered for two long days?

The July heat, thirst, hunger and feelings of pins poking all over your body stiff from immobility! A newly experienced pain - sitting. At one point, a woman in the row next to mine, who was embracing a teenaged daughter with her legs, rose a little bit and began to beg soldier's permission to straighten up for a moment.

Calmly, the middle-aged soldier got up, took the rifle off his shoulder and aimed. We all died within ourselves. I just thought he was only intimidating her when the bullet hit the woman's temple. Rapidly, she became more and more pale and then fell down on her daughter's shoulders.

The soldier hanged the rifle back on his shoulder, visibly satisfied sat down and barked an order to throw out the corpse, and said that the little girl had to be quiet (as she was sobbing silently). "She will die too, after all she's Jewish!" Finally, the train rolled into a station. Auschwitz. In a column, brutally pushed and beaten, we marched from the station to Birkenau. A gate appeared with a large inscription: "*Arbeit macht frei*" - F K L (Frauenkonzentrationslager).

Grynstejn Hala	geb.?
Staatsangehörigkeit:	eh. Polen - jüd.
Nr. 48693	
Beschäftigt gewesen als:	
Bürstenmacherin	
Im Lager verwendet als:	
Kommando:	
Arbeitsmäßige Veranlagung:	
Berichtigungen:	
Entlassen:	
Überstellung:	

**Halina, Auschwitz prisoner number 48693**

**R**ows of brick barracks and fences of barbed wires charged with electricity, turrets with machine guns sticking out of the watchtowers - just like in Majdanek. In the barrack windows shapes dissimilar either to men or women. Neither old people nor children. Their heads shaven, their faces indifferent. Their clothing unusual and colorless, the shoes on their feet wooden and muddy. The endless evil present everywhere around.

- "I will never come out from here", I thought, becoming more and more broken down.

But there was no time to contemplate. We had to act fast according to the rules of this new hell: not to lose Hela in this increasingly wild and stunned crowd of women, to grasp which of the Aufseherins (female SS guards) was less brutal, to decide what kind of occupation to declare that might be regarded useful in the camp and thus would give us a chance to survive – and last but not least where to find a gulp of water!

By the time the evening fell, we looked alike all other prisoners who were tormented here. Our heads were shaved, our left forearms tattooed with numbers. We were given similarly strange, flimsy clothes, with a large cross, painted on the back with a red oil paint, as well as heavy wooden shoes, which were almost impossible to be moved in the mud. We had already been standing for several hours on a roll call in front of a block, in a stinky marsh, having been beaten and abused verbally.

Soon after we arrived in Birkenau, on Sundays, Hela and I were taken to work at putting rail tracks to Birkenau. We called it "our Auschwitz day off". In our early days at Birkenau, at nights the Germans drove people from there to the crematoria in Auschwitz in covered trucks and gassed them on the way in the so called "Little White House". While on night shifts at the Birkenau sewing shop that was located close to the ramp, Hela and I saw such trucks, usually preceded by a "komandker" with a red cross, like an ambulance! We heard people's loud wailings and prayers "Sh'ma Israel".

The hunger, the minute once a day rations of watery turnip soup and bread, the ceaseless beating, verbal abuse, filth, lice, and sickness of all kinds for which they usually take you to the gas chamber. The impossibility to wash, to change your clothes - wet, rotten, and soiled with human excrements.

The hostility among the women on the bunks, in the latrines, and in the vicinity of the soup kettles. The workload beyond human endurance. And above all, the ever present stink of burning human flesh. I had to breathe it days and nights for almost two years. Many times I came across people being led to the gas chambers while on my way to my "good" job in the "*Kanada*" commando, amid the abundance of food and clothing left behind by the people who had just been murdered.

On the rail ramp there always were thousands of people just brought here from the whole Europe to the gas chambers that worked round o'clock. It was quite impossible to get through: masses of human beings being rushed to gas - and we - moving in the opposite direction, to "*Kanada*" to sort their belongings just taken from them to be sent to Germany.

One time, our commando was stopped near a couple carrying a small child in their arms. And they simply asked us how far it was to the Jewish colony, because their baby needed to be fed... We fell silent. They had only a few dozen meters walk to the terminal colony of their lives - in the sky, as the chimney smoke...

In "*Kanada*", in the main camp in Auschwitz, I usually stood on the mountains of clothing mixed with letters, photos, and food packages - and no more was I able to speak! Words had lost any of their sense. It seemed to me that they had herded here and stripped naked the entire mankind - and no more there was a world! And after we will have sorted this entire luggage, they will throw us too into the flames. "*Kanada*", or "*Keine da*", nobody here!

I was always telling the Germans that I was 17 years old, as my Mother had taught me in the Warsaw Ghetto. In Auschwitz, the Germans set up a special block for children. They fed them there with white bread, milk, and butter, and did not send them to work. Many young women, who, with their hair sheared close to skin and in improbable clothes, looked like children, applied to be admitted to that block. The good conditions in this children's paradise had enticed them. They jeered at me since I did not want to go there in order not to part from Hela. "You could be helping her from there," they reproached me... After a few weeks the Germans loaded everybody from the children's block up on the trucks and drove them straight to gas.

By then Hela had become a living skeleton. Her cheeks sunk, eyes became big and famished, her legs and arms looked as thin as match sticks... I tried to avoid looking in her eyes when she was imploring me to ask the orderly for another portion of soup for her.

I could not force myself into stretching my hand out, or taking the risk of getting beaten and abused for such a begging request. It was easier to me to give her my soup. I explained to her - and to myself - that if we ever get out of here we will have enough to eat, but if not, an additional bowl of soup will not satisfy our everlasting hunger anyway. Hela, however, did not have enough strength even to listen to such my "sophistries".

And all this was suddenly becoming unimportant at the sound of a whistle and the paralyzing shouts: "all Jewesses out for the assembly", or "the Jewesses not to disperse after the general roll call!"

At such moments we immediately forgot the hunger that was twisting our guts. The cold, the kneeling for hours in the mud, rain or snow - often barefoot, because our shoes had been stolen, or the Germans had ordered us to take them off as a punishment for our imaginary offences - all which did not matter.

And what did matter exclusively was awaiting the verdict - a movement of the hand of one of our German masters: to the left - to death, or to the right - to life, and with the latter - more suffering in the camp.



It was just like that on a bright autumn day. I walked behind Hela to the square in front of the baths. They made us stand in rows, undressed, naked. The sick, the skinny, the weak, or simply those whom they did not like for any reason, were ordered to move to the left.

I still looked not too bad but I was trembling with fear about Hela; she had no chance. While we were getting nearer to the sorting SS-men, I moved closer and closer to her, trying to hide her behind my body. I could hardly breathe because of the emotional tension. And then Mengele raised the hand and he pointed Hela to the left!

With all my strength I clasped her strongly, close to myself. "They are only humans - it was drilling through my mind - not some supernaturals, they could say "yes", and Hela would stay alive! This, indeed, is within the human power!"

The kapos struggled with me wanting to pull Hela away. "Who is she for you?" - a cold question thundered from Unterscharfuhrer Taube.

"She is my mother, my sister, my sister-in-law, I cannot live without her," I spoke eagerly, as to a human being... The master of life and death simply passed his judgment that I go along with her. The block overseer obediently scribbled my and Hela's numbers on the list of those to gas.

But by no means I let them to pull me away from the place that I wedged into and I did not release Hela from my arms. I shall not die now, in this brightness of the daylight, I told myself - and I shall not return without her. I felt in me the entire force of my life.

The deputy camp commandant, Hoessler, who was standing opposite to us in a group of high-ranking officers watching the selection like a theatre performance, called me closer with a wag of his finger.

- "*Shut up!*" - he interrupted my begging, "and if not, you'll go there." - pointing at the flame from the crematorium chimney. "But if you're quiet, I will free you and your *Schweigerin* (sister-in-law).

The officers burst devilishly in laugh, mocking my distrustful: "*Jaaa?!!*" Hoessler ordered the block overseer to cross our numbers from the list of the prisoners condemned to die.

A mighty slap in my face knocked me down to the ground, when, in an impulse of gratitude, I threw myself to hug Hoessler. I was reborn anew together with Hela.

But she was so just for a while. After the selection she said to me showing her legs and arms: "nothing but bare bones, I'm no longer alive, I only breathe with your breath..."

I tried to convince her that the war would soon be over and that she would recuperate and would again be like she used to be before.

But Hela did not better than that it was impossible to turn around the destiny.

On her legs, Hela was hardly able to trail me to the roll calls and to our workplace at a sewing workshop in the camp. As much as I could, I tried to unburden her during her numerous illnesses by making her life somewhat easier. I smuggled to the latrine small pots into which she had relieved herself, having been unable to reach the door of our barrack and to push herself through the mob of women, all sick with dysentery. There, at the barrack door, from among hundreds of these sick women, the orderlies were letting out bunches of 10-15 of them to walk under guard to the quite remote latrines that always were overcrowded. To relieve oneself into a meal pot was severely punished, sometimes by death.



*The latrine in Auschwitz*

I kept ignoring all the threats of punishments and was thinking only how to empty the pot very quickly since Hela needed it incessantly. Fortunately, the guards never caught me when I carried these pots.

The fever, the scurvy, and the unstoppable, bloodied diarrhea were devouring Hela irreversibly. The women from the neighbouring bunks urged me to abandon her, telling me she had contagious tuberculosis and thus she would infect me. They never comprehended what Hela meant to me, in her health or sickness!

And one morning Hela was no more able to slip down off the bunk - the spurring meaning of the roll call whistle did no longer reach her senses. The barrack orderlies carried her out on a stretcher and put her in the mud next to me.

For the first time, I stood alone on the roll call. Hela stared at me intensely as if she was saying goodbye to me and begging me for remembrance or perhaps forgiveness that she had to part from me. Her gaze in that very moment has remained in me for all my life thereafter!

In a group of sick female prisoners they led Hela to the *Revier*, i.e. the camp hospital. The block overseer promised me to take me there along with her when next time she would walk the sick prisoners to the *Revier*, so that I might see Hela. After this selection this woman started, for a while, to be a little bit better to the prisoners. From that day on I deprived myself my bread rations in order to save them and bring to Hela, in the hope the bread would strengthen her and thus she would return to me.

And there I went. Hela was lying in an upper bunk, looking like a ghost. Her face brightened however when she noticed me. She did not take her eyes off me, as if she wanted to absorb into herself all my being. She whispered: "Halinka, you have come to me! You've come!" She did not even glimpse at the bread I brought her. Bread she needed no more.

Almost immediately, with blows they threw me out of the *Revier*. A few days later I dared to ask the block overseer how Hela was in the hospital. She barked back that Hela was not there anymore.

But I had to know if they had sent her to gas - or if she had died in her bunk? It was of such an immense importance to me.

Suddenly, for a moment, the overseer stopped hitting and cursing the prisoners. With a human voice she told me that Hela had died in her bunk. This meant normal death... She was 20 years old.

**N**obody needed me anymore, not even myself. I felt as if I was shackled into armour of indifference.

Loneliness, alienation, and hostility were all around me. There was even not enough air to breathe. I had to push and fight for everything. Trains ceaselessly bringing loads of people to their death at Birkenau and unloading them at the ramp in front of my block, flames and smoke from the crematory chimney, stink of burning human flesh; mud everywhere, diseases, festering wounds all over my body that never healed, scabies, lice, typhoid, and above all, selections - became my daily realm.

I was going through all that and somehow did not turn into a living skeleton. The death continued avoiding me even though it always was so close to me. Surprisingly, my health improved without any medication. Negating all the laws of Nature, I did not even catch a cold after having stood naked and barefoot in rain or in freezing temperature. I kept succeeding in hiding my sickness and my prohibitively young age, for which alone I would have been sent to gas.

No longer did I know who I was or to whom I belonged. All those women with whom the Germans had brought me here, all those from the transports from the Warsaw Ghetto and Majdanek have had long since disappeared in the skies with the smoke from the crematorium. My female neighbours with whom I shared the bunk were being replaced one by one; as they kept arriving in different transports from different countries, but they all kept falling like flies.



*Auschwitz, Block 27, Upper bunk, 16 prisoners*

Twice I lived through Christmas at Birkenau. While on one side of the camp colourful candles were lit on a large, festively decorated Christmas tree, and the camp band played as we marched to and from work - on the camp's other side a pillar of flames from the chimney of the crematorium, where human bodies were continuously being burned, rose and reached up to the skies! The female prisoners were given a cream of wheat with milk instead of a soup made of wood-like turnip or kohlrabi - everything quite festively as it apparently suited our rulers who knew the traditions well and eagerly kept the old order within the new one, Hitler's.

In the time of "typhoid" selections, the colour of prisoner's tongue was the matter of life and death. A further life or immediate death of a prisoner was judged upon the colour of her tongue. Mine had not betrayed me - it changed into white only in the evening, after the selection. High fever for two

weeks, work without food, and severe beatings I was subjected to by the *Nachtwache* (night orderly) did not overcome me either. On the next selection my tongue already displayed the proper, red colour - meaning life... Yet, sorting SS-man ordered me to make a turn around in order to check if I could keep balance. When I did so successfully with an exaggerated speed, he asked me how old I was. Upon my desperate shout: "*siebzehn*" (seventeen), he quipped ironically: "your mug is like a forty's". Being forty was too old in Auschwitz while thirteen too young - both equally forbidden to continue to live.

The typhoid epidemic soon decimated the camp even without selections. Women fell unconscious on the roll calls, at work, in the sick bay; camp's blocks grew emptier and emptier by large numbers.

During the latest selection the Germans made only some marks on the prisoner list, but sent nobody to the gas chambers. Quickly, we forgot about it, faced with other nightmares of the concentration camp. Two weeks later, after a morning roll call, they hurried us back into the block. We were glad not to have to go to work so that we could warm up a little on the bunks... By now, after the typhoid epidemic, there were only three of us left. Fruma and I cuddled together under the blanket and she began telling me about her home, her late mother, and her mother's delicious dishes.

Suddenly chaos erupted inside the block. They started calling numbers. Sank in happy memories, we did not pay much attention to it. A furiously repeated number broke in between us like a thunderbolt: Fruma's!!!

She interrupted in the middle of a phrase and jumped off the bunk. The warmth of her body was left under the blanket and her voice still sounded in my ears...

All the women picked to die, had to undress and strip naked at the door of the block. Wrapped in rough, dark blankets, they were driven to gas. Fruma had just survived typhoid in the hard *Aussenkommando* - "outside commando", but her tongue failed to get approval from the German "specialists". Fruma was only 16 years old!

Sabina, the girl whose mother was shot dead on the train on the way to Auschwitz, was gassed earlier. Before that, she dragged on to roll calls and to her work, her eyes glowing with fever. She carried with her a small sack – a *bojtl* – with small portions of bread she saved, at all times begging with her fever-chapped lips for a gulp of water. Water!!

In the mornings when I got up, usually I was wet with the sweat of my feverish bunkmates. Initially, there were sixteen of us lying in one bunk, but fast it was getting more and emptier as the result of the typhoid epidemic and the savages of the unceasing selections.

A block orderly, Stasia, who was Polish, once let me run away from a selection during which the female prisoners had to parade outside, naked and barefoot in heavy frost, in front of an SS "tribunal". When Hela was still alive, Stasia sometimes poured into my mug a little bit more soup she was distributing among the prisoners, without my having begged for it.

On the Yom Kippur Day Stasia assigned only non-Jewish prisoners to do the block chores. (I did not know how she had learned it was Yom Kippur since we no longer knew any dates and no longer distinguished the calendar as human time had no meaning to us anymore.) In the evening, after we returned from work, she lit a candle on the upper bunk opposite to the door, and asked us not to disperse to the bunks but stay around and pray silently, every one in her own way, that we survive till the liberation. I was a never-to-be-forgotten and unspeakable experience.

Thanks to diminutive Polunia I was spared heavy punishments in the Weberei commando. She used to help me to fulfill my work quota of rope braiding from rags and also to secure enough material for my ropes. The female prisoners used to snatch it out of each other's hands. Also thanks to

Polunia and an orderly whom she befriended, I managed to get assigned to work at *Kanada*, where finally, for several weeks, I was spared starvation. However, at that place I had to look closely at the procedure of German robbery and mass murder of Jews.

Alwira, a kapo from the *Kartofelkomando* (Potato commando) assigned me to a lighter work at kraut pickling in a heated room with enough kraut and turnip to eat. I would have not survived in carrying the heavy crates full of potatoes to the ditches, in the dug, muddy ground. Later on, Alwira saved my life during the death march when I was about to fall down. The guards would have shot me on the spot. She dragged me behind her, fragile herself and scarcely being able to catch a breath. Alwira's father was a German, and her mother was Jewish.

After I lost Hela, Miriam Prajs and her daughter, who was one year my senior, took me in their care. They both acted as servants to the block overseer, a Slovak Jewess. Thanks to that they were getting more soup and had more room on their bunk. They also had access to shoes that were distributed in small quantities. They did not have to stay long on the roll calls or to show up at the selections.

I first met Mrs. Prajs and her daughter Rozka when I came to their block to swap with Ukrainian women my bread ration for a tar-ointment to heal my scabies. They brought the ointment from their work. I also wanted to see my cousin, Halina, who was this block's inmate too. But it turned out that earlier, in a selection, she had been taken away to gas, although she still looked well. I learned that her block overseer pushed Halina out of the prisoners' row: "And this one, Herr Unterscharfuhrer?" - she asked the German officer. He obliged.



*Miriam Prajsowa from Staszow*

In the autumn of 1944 transports to gas chambers were terminated. There were almost no more Jews left in Europe. Their ashes were left scattered here; their belongings and their luggage sorted out meticulously and shipped to Germany. And, among others, I also worked at this sorting and shipping, took part in it.

The Soviet Army was approaching Auschwitz from the East. The Germans demolished the gas chambers and the crematoria in order to wipe the traces of their crime. They sent many transports of prisoners to other death camps, mostly deep in Germany.

The end to the kingdom of Auschwitz desired for so long was beginning to befall. If the Germans do not kill us all a day or two before they leave the camp (according to their usual manners), we should be free soon!

I was already fifteen years old. For the smuggled potatoes and sauerkraut Mrs. Prajs arranged for me warm clothes, leather shoes, and an additional portion of bread every day.

It was January 1, 1945 - the New Year's Day - and they did not hurry us to work! It was sunny and snowy... I decided to come close to the barbed wires, which was allowed, in order to share with Celina, a school friend of my brother Marek, the good news about the improvement in my condition. Rozka went along with me despite her mother's warning, to which we both paid no attention, since we knew that a lot of female inmates used to exchange communications at that spot.

Celina, as a nurse, also was in favour with her block overseer, and she was helping me somewhat. Initially, the three of them, Celina, Mrs. Prajs and Rozka, shared the same bunk. Later on, Celina was transferred to another section of the camp, which bordered ours.

I started to shout: "Celina!" Suddenly, a shot banged loudly and simultaneously a feeling of heat and a terrible pain in my palm struck me. The sentry from the tower shot me!

I started to frantically run away following Rozka. The pain was bursting my palm out. More than anything else I wanted to tear off my hand from my body... Darkness flooded my eyes; I fell and got up again and again. It roared through my head: "now he's killed me? Now? A small step away from the liberation, after more than five years of suffering and death all around me? I shall not let my life run away from me! I shall not die!" I clenched my other fist and my teeth.

I managed to drag on behind Rozka up to the sickbay. The bullet had pierced my upper arm, passed near the heart and stuck between the spine and the lung. My left hand became immobile. No longer there were gas chambers, but there was an SS doctor who used to dispatch gravely ill people in their bunks. I kept watching the door with terror... "Now, he will come and finish me off", I thought.

It turned out, however, that he got interested in my case. He ordered to bring me to the middle of the barrack, under a lamp, examined my wounds and ordered to take me immediately to the hospital in the men's camp, so that the bullet be removed and the severed nerve connected... In my thoughts, I could not follow the chain of events, nor could I believe what was happening to me.

In the small hospital barrack, on three-story bunks several women were laid after their surgeries. They were not Jewish, since Jewish women were never treated here, they could only serve as guinea pigs for German "medical" experiments.

A young medic named Abram, a Polish Jew, received me. He clearly showed interest in my distress and was very kind to me. It encouraged me a lot for I was frightened to death.

He asked me about the details of my misfortune, where I was from and how long had I been in the camp? Such questions were quite characteristic of people who sought at all times their lost relatives, hoping those still stayed alive and perhaps someone had seen them somewhere...

I had no idea as to what they were going to do to me. I feared everybody and everything. Nevertheless, the comforting presence of this Polish Jew had a calming effect on me. I lost a lot of blood and had a high fever. For now, two surgeries awaited me: to remove the bullet from my back and to stitch my radial nerve. Here? In Auschwitz?! Shudders crept through my body at this very thought!

Two inmate doctors poked my hand up to the shoulder - I felt nothing, nor could I bend my palm, or move my fingers. "I will be crippled from my fifteenth year of age on! It would have been better had the sentry killed me", I was sometimes saying to Abram. But he objected to it. He taught me by heart his address in Krosniewice and assured me that the war was nearing its end and that we would stay together.

They successfully removed the bullet from my back with no anesthesia at all, but the nerve could not be repaired since my entire hand was covered with blisters full of pus. It turned, however, to have been my luck since in the first days after the liberation, when I started getting normal nourishment, my hand regained movements by itself! But that was yet to come. For now, for the next four months, until the liberation, I had to conceal my crippled hand from the eyes of the SS in Ravensbruck, the foreman, and the Hitler Jugend thugs at the aircraft factory at Neustadt-Glewe.

In that factory, I tightened screws in aircraft parts with my healthy hand while holding them with the disabled one. I hid my immobile hand inside a big sleeve of a man's coat that Abram found for me before the evacuation from Auschwitz.

**O**n January 18, 1945, in the evening, the Germans marched us out in a large column from the women's camp B2B in Birkenau. We saw bonfires in the snow - in which they were burning documents, but not people's bodies anymore! A woman inquired loudly about a Halina with a shot through hand - she had a small package for me that was thrown over the barbed wire. It was from Abram - his bread ration, the one that was given to the prisoners before the transport. His last farewell! Soon after the liberation, Abram fell sick and died. He could digest no food after years of starvation.

At some point of this march of no hope I saw Celina again. We were dragged along for days and nights until we reached the railway station in Loeslau (now Wodzisowice). They cramped us incredibly tight into open cattle railcars with no roof. The freezing cold and the wind slashed our skins and bodies like with knives. Half alive, we finally arrived in Ravensbruck.

After having kept us stand outside in the cold for hours, the Germans locked us in a punishments block that held German female criminals.

For two weeks, we crowded on the floor of a small confinement and were given but a small portion of soup or bread and even that not daily. The German female prisoners tormented us. Time to time, I managed to sneak outside and wash somewhat myself in the melting snow under the gutter.

After approximately two weeks the Germans counted us and marched us under escort to a train again. This time it was a passenger train, and even a heated one! But the lice came alive too in its warmth and molested us even more than before.

I sat at a window and contemplated the passing German countryside, towns, and villages. "So - I thought - it was here they came to us from to kill every one of us, to burn or take everything away from us! Are their mothers, wives, children living in these beautiful houses? Do they know anything about all the horror inflicted upon us? If I survive - I thought too - I would like to come here to tell them about all they've done..." And, indeed, in 1989 I did come to Berlin, as a free human being, with my book "*Hope is the last to die*"<sup>2)</sup> and with my movie "*Because of that war*".

But for now it was the beginning of February 1945 and months on the floor of a barrack in Neustadt-Glewe still would await me ahead. For the first ten days they gave us no food at all, and afterwards they distributed small portions of soup and one loaf of bread for ten women, all mad of hunger. We measured the bread portions with a string. Inside, the bread was green because of mould...

On the death march I ate and drank snow. At one instant, when I almost fell to the ground while exhausted bending to grasp a handful of snow. I heard only a German guard bark at me: "*was ist mir du?*" (what's going on with you?) and I found myself being held up by Alwira! By instantly so doing she certainly saved my life. The Germans used to kill everyone who stuck out from the marching column. The entire road was strewn with prisoners' corpses.

On May 3, 1945, the Germans dressed in civilian clothes loaded themselves on a truck, shot a salvo into the crowd of female prisoners pressing the food storage - and off they left. The camp gate was wide open!

I was not able to enjoy freedom while still being on the German soil and with my soul still imprisoned in the eternal Yesterday. I have not yet been reborn to rejoice, I rather was a burned out elderly woman.

**A**fter a few weeks of wandering, at the end of May 1945, Celina and I reached Warsaw in Poland. On my way to the Jewish Committee office, on the street I bumped into my brother, Marek!

It turned out that Marek had jumped from the window of a train moving to Majdanek. He was shot at and wounded from the railcar top by SS-men. He managed to drag himself to a country hut where someone dressed the wound in his back and let him stay overnight. Mr. Stanislaw Strojwas helped him to survive in a hideout in Warsaw. In January 1945 Marek was free again in the liberated Warsaw.



*Brother, Dr. Marek Balin, after liberation*

After approximately a year, a youth group to which I belonged, all Holocaust survivors and orphans as I was, started our journey to the Palestine by an illegal route. We sneaked through the borders of several countries: for one and a half years we stayed in Germany in an UNRRA refugee camp, and then for a few weeks in Southern France.

In November 1947, we sailed in a small fishing boat that literally became a sailing boat when its engine broke almost immediately after we set off. We were hidden under the deck to avoid detection by the British, who then ruled the Palestine, and who, upon catching us, would have forcefully returned us to a camp in Cyprus.

On December 3, 1947, after two weeks of peril and all kinds of misery on sea, we reached the Tel Aviv harbor. Ours was the first ship to arrive in the UN-recognized State of Israel.

**Halina Birenbaum, 2003**



## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>) **The trap on Mila Street in Warsaw.** In September 1942 on Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year's Day), already after they had deported the majority of the Warsaw Jews to Treblinka death camp, the Germans announced that they completed the deportations, and that all Jews who remained in the Ghetto should at once gather on Mila Street and on several adjacent streets, such as Niska, Ostrowska and Krochmalna. There, a selection would be done. Those Jews who had work certificates would be allowed to stay in the Ghetto and no more deportations would be made. (Earlier, many Jews were laid-off from their work anyway.) Huge crowds of Jews filled these narrow, impoverished streets. Once they all came there, strong and cruel German patrols encircled and closed these streets thus creating a trap with no exits. The Germans made selections and unleashed a hunt for the Jews still in hiding. The elderly and the children with their parents were pulled from the crowd, formed into columns and dragged along to Umschlag from where they were deported to Treblinka. Approximately 100,000 Jews were rounded up in these selections and sent to their deaths. No human words can describe the tragedy of those days of Mila Street Trap. After two weeks, the German military outposts were dismantled. The Ghetto was reduced but to several streets and converted into one big labour camp full of workshops and placowka's. In May 1943, after the Uprising, the Warsaw Ghetto was completely and finally liquidated.

<sup>2</sup>) My book in Polish entitled "*Nadzieja umiera ostatnia*" ("Hope is the last to die") and its two editions in English contain a more complete account of my years during the Holocaust:

1. Halina Birenbaum, *Nadzieja umiera ostatnia*. Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oswiecim, 2001. 276 pp. ISBN 83-85047-99-9
2. Halina Birenbaum, *Hope is the last to die*. Publishing House of the State Museum in Oswiecim, 1994. ISBN 83-85047-11-5
3. Halina Birenbaum, *Hope is the last to die. A coming of Age under Nazi Terror. A classic of Holocaust expanded with a new postscript*. M.E. Sharpe Armonk, New York, London, 1996



***The Birenbaum family, perished in Treblinka, mother Rozia ne'e Okuniew, father Biniamin Birenbaum from Lowicz and Dow (Bolek) standing to the left side. Chaim, the only survivor, stands to the right side.***



*Halina with her husband Chaim Birenbaum, Holocaust survivor, fighter in the PALM"CH, wounded, in one of the cease fire of the Independence war, walking in onr street of Tel Aviv*