The Journey of Dorka Berger: From Childhood in the Łódź Ghetto and Auschwitz to Incarceration at Atlit Detention Camp in Mandate Palestine

Note to Readers: This is a partial draft of a narrative non-fiction essay based on interviews and related research. Many sections are not yet written. Please do not cite or distribute without the author’s permission.

In the essay, The Journey of Dorka Berger: From Childhood in the Łódź Ghetto and Auschwitz to Incarceration at Atlit Detention Camp in Mandate Palestine, I will share the wartime experiences of this octogenarian. As one of a dwindling number of survivors still able to testify, Dorka Berger née Altman is frequently called upon to speak to visiting groups at Yad Vashem— The World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. In recent years, Dorka gave an official testimony in Hebrew to Yad Vashem; my essay, however, is based on oral history interviews that I have conducted with her over the last decade. In this draft, I have also included excerpts from Dorka’s 1945 diary.

Long forgotten, the “Diary of Dwojra Altman” recently surfaced in the archives of the Jewish Historical Commission in Warsaw. An Israeli Ph.D. student discovered a copy of it, while doing research in Poland. Recognizing the surname, he reached out to Dorka’s sons in Jerusalem. They contacted my husband, who is Dorka’s nephew.

Last June I presented Dorka with the book, Memory Unearthed: The Lodz Ghetto Photographs of Henryk Ross. Viewing this visual tome triggered Dorka’s memories of the ghetto and she revealed new stories about life under occupation. During the lunchtime lecture on March 19, I will project some of Ross’s most memorable photographs and share Dorka’s commentary about them.

This oral history project with Dorka is an outgrowth of my decade long visual arts and narrative project, “The Last Address.” As recollections of the Holocaust and the exodus of Jews from Arab and Islamic lands dim, I have sought out refugees and
survivors, including relatives and friends. I have interviewed them about their journeys of hope and flight. As a visual storyteller, I have composed still-life montages from the things they carried and passed down to their children and grandchildren. “The Last Address” reveals what these Jewish families looked like, what they carried, where they went, and in the end, even if they were empty-handed—like Dorka—what they remembered and conveyed to the next generation.

Throughout this process, Dorka—mindful of a near future when there will not be any Holocaust survivors alive to tell their poignant stories—has been forthcoming with me and eager to talk. As the interviewer, I have strived to be respectful and unobtrusive. In composing this narrative, my intent is to be as faithful to Dorka’s content and patterns of speech as possible. In certain passages, however, I have edited her dialogue to facilitate the reader’s comprehension. In other sections, I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing her spoken language to move the story forward. For consistency, I have changed Dorka’s intermittent use of the present tense, especially when she spoke English, her fourth language, to the past tense. In many conversations, Dorka switched back and forth between Hebrew and English. My husband served as the translator and helped transcribe the Hebrew sections of the audiotapes. I shared the “Diary of Dwojra Altman” with a native Polish speaker and she assisted with the translation.

Throughout this essay, I have included singular excerpts from the diary formatted in italics. These passages guide the reader on Dorka’s journey from pre-war Łódź to post-war Łódź. The final entries reveal Dorka’s aspiration to move to Mandate Palestine. In Hebrew, she refers to this geographic region as Eretz Yisrael—the land of Israel. In Polish, she refers to it as Ziemia Obiecana—the Promised Land. The surviving copy of
Dorka’s journal ends the month she began it—July 1945.

In one of our conversations, I asked Dorka why she didn’t bring the diary with her to Eretz Yisrael in 1946. “We were told [by Haganah emissaries leading the Bricha—the escape from Europe] that we would not be able to carry many things on the journey.” A representative of one of the Jewish agencies assisting survivors in Poland offered to take the journal from her and deposit it in a safe place in Warsaw. Throughout the journey across Europe, Dorka continued to write. Unfortunately, she lost the second diary in the mayhem that erupted onboard the ship she embarked for Mandate Palestine.

Reading the “Diary of Dwojra Altman” closely, I discovered chronological discrepancies between Dorka’s post-war accounts and her more current reminiscences. This draft essay is not meant to compare and contrast Dorka’s retelling of events over seven decades. Instead, the reader is free to contemplate how Dorka’s memory, especially of traumatic events, has shifted and transformed across space and time. In the final manuscript, one narrative scene composed from my interviews with Dorka will follow each one of the passages from the diary.
Introduction:

Diary

July 2, 1945

I am sad. I am looking for happiness staring into my only treasure, my one and only photo of my dearest parents, which, by accident, was found in the trash dump. Otherwise I would not have any other memento, which would remind me of these sainted, to me, individuals, victims of Auschwitz.

July 17, 1945

Good day friend. You are angry with me, is that true? But, in reality, I just could not come any sooner. You know that well. Although I wasn’t with you, I talk to you all the time. That’s why now I will tell you everything you would like to hear. But before I start I will look at Ima and Aba. Ima is not changing at all in this picture. She is always smiling sweetly, Aba also, but he’s looking at us with sadness in his eyes, although when this picture was taken everything was still good with us. Aba couldn’t even have imagined our sad future. The photo was taken still in 1938, one year before the start of the war... On one of those beautiful summer days on Góra Wiśni, the Mountain of Cherries. At that time, I was still young and I was so happy. My friends, my dear sisters and I would chase butterflies, pick blueberries, strawberries, flowers, pinecones, leaves and whatever else fell into our hands in the woods. With each finding I would run to my parents, laughing... My parents always accepted my meager gifts...with happiness and kisses. But Ima and Aba weren’t happy with the flowers and the berries, they were happy because their child was growing...joyful...pretty...surely a happy future was awaiting her. It was on such a day when Ima and Aba were reclining on chaise lounges that uncle snapped a picture of them. I enjoyed the picture as I did many others. [I] did not realize then that this modest photograph will become my most precious memento, my treasure. My friend, I showed you a picture. I described for you one single day from my childhood. All other days through 1938 were similar to that one.

Part I:

What Can I Tell A Five-Year-Old?

Good evening.... So, you already know that I am a Jew. You also know that the war started on September 1st, 1939 and that after 3 days of battle the Germans crossed over into Poland. From the very first day of the German rule, our misery started.... In the spring they created a ghetto. All the Jews from the city of Łódź were settled in Baluty. The ghetto was surrounded by barbed wire and every few meters stood a German. Crossing over the wires meant death.

“What can I tell a five-year-old?” Dorka exclaimed in 2009, as she stretched her
mother Sheindle’s gold chain—luminous in the light—between her two index fingers. There were only six links left. Not enough to wrap around her wrist or fashion a bracelet for her granddaughter, Ayala.

“Not to tell her anything is a pity,” Dorka remarked to me, “because we have to begin when children are young. We need to know what to tell them.”

“It was the night before Yom Ha-Shoah when Ayala telephoned. ‘Safta,’ she said, today in school the teacher asked, ‘Who in the class had someone in the Shoah?’ I raised my hand.”

Dorka searched her memory for an age appropriate account to share with Ayala.

“I remembered something [that] I hadn’t thought about for years...No one had a new dress in the ghetto, but I had a new dress [one] Shabbat.”

The Shabbat, Ayala—a child of Jerusalem—understands, but the notion of a ghetto? No, Ayala wouldn’t understand that concept. “In the ghetto, there were no notebooks, no pencils, no tzaazueem [toys],” Dorka explained to her granddaughter. “There were no stores for clothes, shoes, or chocolates. There were no stores for ice cream.” Dorka paused. “I didn’t tell her there wasn’t any food, just that there wasn’t any stores. And then I told her about my new dress.”

When the war broke out in September 1939, Dorka’s father, Yeshayahu Altman whose own childhood had been marred by the First World War, immediately began hoarding fabric from his textile store. The family patriarch surmised that cloth would be valuable currency during the war. “People remembered the first war,” Dorka said. “It was four years. It was not like in Israel, six days. They were very, very worried.”

Yeshayahu Altman prepared. After hours, his two older daughters stole into the
storeroom at #4 Ogrodowa and unwound the bolts meter by meter. Tola and Hannah
coiled the cloth around their bodies and then they slipped their garments over the textiles.
So slender were they that the material barely padded their midriffs. Silently, the sisters
navigated their way home to #5 Mielczarskiego. Yeshayahu concealed the goods in a
vault he constructed under the parquet floor in their salon. He also stored some
merchandise nearby in his uncle’s garret.

His prudence paid off. Shortly thereafter, the Nazis took over his business. The
German official encouraged Yeshayahu to help himself to a few bolts. Dorka mimicked
the Nazi. “Please take it,” they said to my father, ‘and go out.’ Then they gave him a
paper stating that they were the new owners.”

Despondent, Yeshayahu Altman left the storeroom for the last time. Clasped
under his arm were yards of the very fabric that had caught the eye of his youngest child.
“Before the war, my father’s factory had designed a new cloth. It was black with red
triangles. My mother said, ‘Oh, it is very beautiful.’ So my father said, ‘We will do a new
dress for Dorka.’ Then, when we went to the ghetto, we took the fabric with us, and my
mother put it in the closet. A year passed; another year passed.”

From time to time, Dorka would open the closet door and eye the cloth, as she felt
her mother’s watchful gaze upon her. “From when I was very little, I was very coquettish.
I was also very spoiled. My mother knew I wanted a new dress.”

Down the hall from the Altmans lived Mrs. Rosenberg, a renowned dressmaker in
Łódź. “She made the most elegant, stylish clothing. And from time to time, we ordered
clothes from her for Rosh Hashanah or Pesach. So my mother asked her, ‘Perhaps Mrs.
Rosenberg, you will make a new dress for Dorka?’”
Before the war, Mrs. Rosenberg had had a staff of seamstresses sewing for her as she sketched the latest European fashions for her upper class clientele. Now, she threaded her machine herself. Like many Łódź Jews, she had carted the tools of her trade with her to the ghetto. So she agreed to design the child’s dress. Delighted, Dorka went for a fitting. “Twice I went to her to check the size. After the dress was finished, she told me that we needed buttons. ‘It will be very beautiful, with three large red buttons and two little red buttons to match the cloth.’” Dorka returned home and announced, “I have a new dress. But it needs five buttons.”

The family searched for buttons. Dorka peppered every visitor who knocked on their door at #48 Limanowskiego with the same question: “Do you have any red buttons?” No one had buttons. Then Avraham Beckerman, Dorka’s favorite uncle, stopped in for a visit. Married but childless, Avraham treated the Altman girls like his own daughters. Before the war, he never came for a visit without his 35mm camera. Tola, Hannah and Dorka often found themselves the subject matter for his inquisitive portraits.

“Once, my uncle made close-up portraits of the three of us,” Dorka said, “framing our faces with leaves.” As Dorka spoke, she fingered the leaves on a household plant, and then bundled the foliage into an emerald bouquet, careful not to damage the stems. “It was in the summertime, when he made the pictures. Each one of us had our own solo picture.” Dorka suspects that these idyllic black-and-white portraits were among the stacks of pictures her parents brought with them to the Łódź ghetto.

On this visit, Avraham observed that Dorka was “so sad. He asked me, ‘What’s wrong?’ I explained to him that I needed five red buttons. Three big buttons and two little buttons. I told him that I had asked everyone. No one had buttons. He said, ‘Maybe I can
find you buttons.””

Dorka didn’t have much hope, but a few weeks later, her uncle returned. He reached into his pocket and took out a “little white paper. Inside were the buttons. Very beautiful red buttons. Three were a little larger, and two were a little smaller—just as they had to be. I jumped on him, I was so happy. My mother was happy. Everyone was happy.”

With the red buttons firmly clasped in the palm of her hand, Dorka ran down the hall to Mrs. Rosenberg’s room. “She finished my dress. For Shabbat, I had a new dress. Everyone asked, ‘How do you have a new dress?’ I was so proud. Until today, I remember exactly what it looked like…long sleeves, buttons, a round collar, and a sash.”

Dorka sketched the outfit in the air with her index finger. Then she drew a triangle on a pad of paper. “If a little girl of five years old hadn’t asked me about the Shoah, I wouldn’t have thought about the dress. It was the perfect story for Ayala. She told her class about the buttons. That was the most interesting to her.”

Satisfied, Dorka halted. Then her voice broke. As she withdrew inward, tears drizzled down her cheeks. Dorka whispered, “What I didn’t tell my granddaughter was that this was the dress I wore to Auschwitz, because it was my best dress. And they took it from me in one moment.”

As she spoke, Dorka’s eyes glistened a chocolate-brown. “I prayed that a Jewish child would receive it. It was a dress that was coming from my heart. The one dress I got in four and a half years in the ghetto. No one had a new dress. I hadn’t gotten anything new—shoes, nothing. After all the other things that happened to us, it was nothing. But you see, after so many years, I remembered the dress.”
Part II:

No one cared for the sick, no one cried for the dead

We didn’t eat until we were full anymore. Hunger increased.... Hunger especially led to death and death from hunger is horrible. Whole families died in this fashion. No one cared for the sick, no one cried for the dead. Because who could shed a tear for others when they were crying for themselves.

Part III:

Szpera
September 1942

Something hangs in the air. New tragedy.... SZPERA. What horror. I get chills even now when I remember Szpera. Only 8 days. It was like 8 years. The main purpose of this raid was to tear away children, newborns, from their mothers. These innocent little ones were taken by force; they [also] took the elderly. And when that was not enough for them, they took healthy young people. Oh, how empty the streets of the ghetto became after this 8-day long raid. And where are they all? They went with the smoke.

Part IV:

Arrived the year 1944

Days, weeks, months and years passed. Arrived the year 1944. The Red Army...were getting close to us. We waited each day to hear something new. Perhaps our suffering will end soon. Unfortunately, it only just started. When the liberators were still at some distance, again the relocations and the liquidation of the ghetto....

My dear friend, I left the ghetto at the very end.... By what miracle we were hidden to be the last ones, I will tell you briefly.

On the fifteenth of August 1944, Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski, the Chairman of the Ghetto, appealed emotionally in Yiddish to the remaining residents:

Jews of the ghetto, be sensible!!!
Report voluntarily to the transports!
You thereby make the departure easier on yourselves.
Only those reporting voluntarily have the certainty of traveling together with their family members and to take along baggage.¹
As they slogged through the eerie side streets, the Altmans gripped their baggage. Though fearful of patrols, they headed to Marysin at the eastern edge of the ghetto where Sheindle’s brother Avraham Rosen lived.

“When we entered their house, we saw the family standing with their belongings. [My uncle] had a wife named Ala and a…daughter named Rozinska. Ala didn’t know what to do [about the transport], because she knew what she had. A husband who was crippled, one leg doesn’t go, and a little child.”

Greeting the Altmans, Avraham proposed: “First let’s hide. When it [the search] is over, we can discuss what we are going to do.”

There were only two places to hide—a cellar half a meter deep, where they stored potatoes, and a garret. In the basement, there wasn’t enough space for eight people. To reach the loft, they had to climb an exterior ladder.

“We had no time to think, as we heard the Germans coming. We climbed up with our packages. If we left our belongings,” Dorka explained, “they would know that there were still people here. We found a bench [inside] and a long piece of plywood that someone had painted.”

They angled the board in such a way that they constructed a hidden room in the attic. Then the eight of them squeezed behind the panel and sat on the bench. It slopped. “We got organized. Ala had to take Rosa on her lap so she wouldn’t cry when she heard the Germans. Children in the ghetto knew when you could cry and when you could not. She didn’t cry…. We heard the Germans approaching, screaming, ‘Is there anyone here? Verflucten Juden, Yuden Raus, Jews out.’ They never said the word yuden without verflucten…. Dirty Jews, it came together.”
The Nazis tore through the room directly below them. “Nobody is here. The house is empty,” they shouted in German. “We heard the dogs bark. How, how, how! We heard everything, but we didn’t see anything.”

The soldiers prepared to move on, but the commander forbade them. “Maybe he didn’t catch any Jews that day,” Dorka quipped. He yelled, “The Jews are thieves and murderers and they know how to hide.” Eying the ladder on the ground, the commander set it upright and ordered the German shepherd to climb.

“We knew it was a dog. We didn’t breath. The hound arrived and he scratched on the door. He didn’t [push] it open. He was so quiet. He climbed down. The dog saved us.”

The soldiers shouted, “Nobody is here. Nobody is here. Let’s get out.” The commander pointed to one of the men—Hans or Franz, Dorka didn’t catch his name—and instructed him to go up and search. He protested.

“The soldier was very heavy. All the time he was cursing us; all the time I was praying that the ladder would break.”

As the soldier ascended, halting to breathe on every rung, the family patriarch started to pray. “I saw my father put his hand on his eyes. We understood. He didn’t pray out loud, but he was reciting Kriyat Sh’mar, Sh’mar Yisrael. Everyone began praying silently. Sh’mar Yisrael.”

Out of breath, the Nazi arrived at the entryway and pushed the door open. It flapped back and forth on its hinge. He shoved it towards the interior of the attic. The door now flanked the plywood—stabilizing it. “He was panting. He stuck out his head
and yelled, ‘There is no one here.’ He started to curse. ‘The Jews, the Jews are filthy. The Jews are thieves. Because of the Jews, I had to climb a ladder.’”

He descended. The Nazis stormed off.

“We were waiting. Only when we didn’t hear the dogs barking anymore, did we start to talk. Aba said, ‘God gave us a miracle, but we can’t count on miracles. Someone else with a better brain, more intuition, and logic will come and he will look and ask, ‘Why is this painting standing here?’”

**Part V:**

_The Cemetery_

_The cemetery got bigger on a daily basis. And the graves of the innocent victims were very meager, small and poor, just like their lives in the ghetto._

Not far from their hiding place was the New Lodz Jewish Cemetery on Bracka Street. People in the ghetto called it the “Cemetery at Marysin.” Over the years, the Nazis toppled some of the pre-war monuments in the graveyard—the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe—and hauled them away for pavement. Other headstones still stood aloft not far from the sites of mass executions.²

“We went to the cemetery. Ima wanted to say goodbye to her mother, Rosa, who died when I was six years old. My father was a Cohen, so he could not go inside.”

Sheindle entered alone and scanned the rows and rows of tombstones searching for an imposing mausoleum erected for a famous rabbi. Nearby laid Rosa’s burial site. Unable to locate the landmark, Sheindle returned to the entrance. By then other Jews had gathered and asked: “You didn’t find this rabbi? How come?” They volunteered to help her look. “They went inside again and they didn’t find the grave.” They returned. “My mother said, ‘If I can’t say goodbye to my mother, it is very bad sign.’”
More Jews arrived at the cemetery. They thought that they might be able to hunker down between the mausoleums and hide. No one knew then that the Nazis often went to the graveyard at dusk to hunt rabbits that grazed in the woods. “Everyone made the following calculation. Winter was coming very soon. Where were we going to get food, at a minimum, so we could survive? Worse than we are now in the ghetto, we cannot be. So after all this, we went to the station.”

Part VI:

_**On August 17, 1944, We Were Relocated**_

_On August 17, 1944, we were relocated. In closed wagons, previously used to transport cattle, we traveled for 24 hours to an unknown location._

“We were not the last of the last,” Dorka said. “We weren’t on the transport with Rumkowski.”

When the Altmans arrived at the Radogoszcz Station, no Jewish policemen stood on guard, only German soldiers. “They even helped Ima get up onto the platform from the ground.”

On the loading dock, a Nazi scooped jam onto square sheets of newspaper. “Everyone got a little loaf of bread—it was like a treasure that fell from the sky—and a spoon with a teaspoon of jam. Everyone said, ‘Even a drop should not fall. Even a drop gives you strength. It’s jam, it’s sugar.’ They licked the paper, so nothing would be lost.”

Afterwards, the Jews of the ghetto entered the cattle car.

“What is a mule train? No windows, only cracks. No chairs, no benches. No toilets. Nothing—[it is] a big box of wood. We went inside. Then another family came, and another family came, and another family came. Everybody was standing, thinking
how long was it going to take us to go to an agricultural farm, or some [other place to]
work?”

The Nazis brought in two buckets. One was filled with water and one was
empty—the receptacle for human waste. “They closed the door. Boom. We heard them
outside.” They were nailing planks of wood across the entrance to the boxcar. “If
somebody was already thinking about fleeing, they weren’t going to be thinking about
it.”

The train stood still on the tracks. More cars came, and more cars; finally they
started to move away from the station.

“People could not stand. Packed like this, they could not sleep. So they were
switching. One was sitting on the packages. One was standing. One time they opened [the
door]. They took out water. They brought in one more water. What is a bucket of water
for one hundred people?”

On route, people squinted through the cracks to discern where they were. “The
adults knew Poland. [But] all the names [signs] had been changed to German. Nothing
[was] in Polish, so no one knew where we were. Then we saw a sign for…a town near
Auschwitz. What’s Auschwitz? In Polish, it was Oświęcim. People thought it was the
same place. Aba said, “There were a lot of shops for textiles [near] there. If it’s this place,
it doesn’t mean anything!”

Part VII:

The Selection

The passage was horrible, but the arrival was one hundred times worse…. People
dressed in stripes were keeping order. From the horror and fear we didn’t realize…that
they were also Jews… They told us everything.
The men were separated immediately. And my beloved Aba had to part from us. I never saw him again... Our five became four.

Next was the selection of women. How happy were the mothers who were allowed to go together with their children. I went through the selection process with my sisters and mother.... After the selection, they arranged us by fives.... We were led by camp guards. They hurried us, yelling and pushing. We walked into one of the barracks, into the shower. Here they took our last possessions. All that we were wearing, all rings, watches, everything. We stood as if were just created. They shaved our hair and took our shoes. We were left barefoot and naked.... We got...one torn dress each. And that’s how, in one ripped dress, and no underwear or shoes, we spent six weeks in Auschwitz.

It was just after Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when their fate changed again.

Fearing the toll the fast would take on their emaciated mother, the three sisters had pleaded with Sheindle to break with ritual and consume the watery broth and morsel of bread. “A cousin of hers was there…Chaya,” Dorka recalled. “Tola and Hannah said to her, ‘Ima, Chaya is not fasting. It is dangerous.’ My mother answered, ‘Chaya has not for whom to fast. I have for whom to fast—three children.’ She fasts.”

On the morning of the selection the Altman women lined up. First Tola stood before Mengele, then Hannah, afterwards Sheindle, and finally Dorka. As she waited for Mengele to motion her forward, Dorka caught a glint of her face mirrored in the polish of his black boots. “A king. A real king. Everything has to be perfect, perfect when the king comes. He was so elegant. He looked like a sphinx from Egypt. With the glove, he was doing so, right, left, right, left with the glove.” Dorka continued,

I saw that my sister was going to the right, and my mother was going to the left. I needed to go one step forward so Mengele would get a good look at me. I don’t remember what I thought; I remember what I did. My mother went to the left and I ran after her.... I don’t know how I had the courage.

In the normal world, a child is running after her mother. Not here. Neither one of us understood what was happening to us.... I called my mother.... I touched her. She touched me. In this minute...we were very happy. I was still with my mother.... [she] didn’t say anything to me. She only hugged me.
Then unexpectedly, a fair-haired woman in a floral print dress appeared alongside them. “My mother cried, ‘It’s my daughter; it’s my little daughter. It’s my child.’ I cried, ‘It’s my mother, it’s my mother.’ We forgot where we were.”

Suddenly the blond screamed. “Half of Poland, half of the whole world heard her. She shouted. ‘You don’t understand where you are… [Here] It doesn’t exist a mother. It doesn’t exist a daughter. Everyone is for himself. You will go in this place when we order.’”

Seconds later, the Nazi lassoed Dorka’s neck with a cane, pulling her away from her mother. She threw Dorka towards the women on the right side. “I didn’t fall, as my sisters and other people grabbed me... I didn’t cry. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think anything…. My head was just empty. The blond said, ‘Tomorrow you shall go in this place.’ Meaning the left side. What is this place, we didn’t know.”

The three sisters replayed those final moments over and over again.

*Did Ima have to be alone in her last minutes—to die completely alone? I never got any answers to my pleadings; I only got a leather belt across my back.*

Decades later, Tola concluded that perhaps the blond wanted to save Dorka. “I can tell you one thing,” Dorka said. “I am here only because he [Mengele] punished me.”

Dorka paused. “His boots were so shiny, you could see your face. Well, only in my imagination. At that time I didn’t know that every Nazi had a Jewish boy who spent the whole day cleaning his boots.”

**Part VIII:**

*I Dreamed for Six Years About Freedom*

*We were left complete orphans. After two days they sent us out of Auschwitz...to Halberstadt in Sudetenland. I worked with one of my sisters in Szpinerei* and the other sister [worked] in an ammunition factory. *I worked with German women who liked me*
and supported me. Ima and Aba watched over us. I lived...in relatively good conditions... for nine months, not going anywhere beyond the wall. I knew all the political news, which I passed along in the camp. That always kept our spirits up. And it gave us some comfort.... I still lived with the hope of seeing my parents.

And finally came the day I longed for when I stopped being a prisoner, an automation for work marked with a number. I was now finally free.... I dreamed for six years about freedom.... you finally came to us...on May 8, 1945.

And so, as long as I live the day of the eighth of May will live in memory, one of the happiest days of my life. Imagine...even then I didn’t realize how great my tragedy was.

I felt like a bird released from a cage.

* Textile factory

**Part IX:**

_We Must Live, to Suffer, My Dear Friend_

July 2, 1945

I don’t have anything to occupy me. I don’t have any friends. They all fell victims of Majdanek and Auschwitz. I’m the only one from my class still here, possibly by accident, or saved by a miracle. That’s why I don’t have anyone to whom I [can] confess or lighten the heavy heart in moments of despair. That’s why, when I became so sad after looking at the picture of my loved ones I chose you as my friend. I will call you DIARY. I am confident we will live in harmony.... My...sisters will be here presently. I don’t want them to find me writing. No one will know about our friendship or about our conversations. Only Ima or Aba, for they know about everything, so they will know about every conversation we have. And so goodbye, my friend. If I have some time and will be alone, I will come again.

July 18, 1945

Good evening, I want to keep my word and only because of that I came for a moment, because I don’t have time for a conversation. I am going to the movies with my sister. Humans are egotists, I must admit. No matter what, no matter the horrible grief, we are still going to the movies, we eat, get dressed, and overall, live. However, we don’t feel the joy in it as we used to, we live normally to try and forget. But what happened cannot be undone. We must live, to suffer, my dear Friend.
Part X:

Are you crying my dear friend?

Are you crying my dear friend while listening to my experiences? I am not able to cry anymore. If I still knew how to cry, it would probably be easier for me. I have a heart of stone already.

Everyday at noon Tola lined up at a Łódź bakery to buy fresh bread. “Why did Tola go and not Hannah or me?” Dorka explained,

Tola was fair with blue eyes; she was very beautiful and she didn’t look exactly Jewish. When she went to the bakery, she always wore a kerchief like the Polish women. One day, three women were standing in line, and while they were waiting for the bread, Tola heard one woman say, “I think we have finished with the Jews. The city is clean.” The other woman responded, “They are like rats. They are jumping from holes in the ground. Now they are gone, but they will come again.”

Speechless, Tola awaited her turn in line. She purchased a loaf and returned to the lodging where her sisters remained. Straightaway, Dorka and Hannah noticed her pallor.

“She was really crying,” remembered Dorka. “We cried also. We were staying in Łódź. What for, we asked? What will become of us? So we began to discuss going out.”

Their uncle, Avraham Beckerman—the family photographer, had also returned to Łódź. He stood at the train station day after day, as his nieces had done when they first returned, and he waited. He surveyed the hollow faces disembarking, but gradually he swallowed the truth. His wife was not among the feeble passengers arriving daily. “We were hoping,” Dorka said. “Despite everything we knew [about the crematoriums], we prayed that our parents might be alive. In time, people who were returning from Auschwitz, people who knew the truth, started to tell the truth. We understood. Those who could return had returned.”
And over time, those survivors who had returned home could not wait to leave.

“The Escape—the Bricha, in Hebrew—began.”

**Part XI:**

**Possibly in the Promised Land It Will Be Better**

I will never see my beloved parents again. I know that all too well. But if it were possible to go to Ima’s grave, to Aba’s, to pray for their souls, or at least to cry my eyes, I would feel a lot better in my heart. I miss them terribly. I can’t speak of this to my sisters, so as not to remind them, although they are suffering as much as me. They think about our future existence. I would just like to leave this country, which created so much evil for me, such complete tragedy for me. Possibly in the Promised Land it will be better.

“From every corner of Europe, the Jews traveled west,” Howard Blum wrote in *The Brigade.* “They hiked through dense forests, trudged through snowy mountain passes, rode in inhumanly crowded trains. They were determined to make their way closer and closer to the coast. And to a ship that would take them illegally to Palestine.”

At first the escape was spontaneous and unorganized. Then Haganah emissaries, who had been sent secretly to Europe by the *Yishuv*—the Jewish community in Mandate Palestine, set up an underground network. Dorka and her sisters joined one of the collectives—*kibbutzim* they were called—preparing to depart Poland.

On June 22, 1946, Dorka arrived at a coastal inlet not far from the French Riviera. The *Akbel,* a Turkish freighter with a maximum capacity of 250 passengers, had anchored there. Before the ship set sail, four times that number of *ma’apilim,* illegal seagoing immigrants, had crowded on board. At sea, the crew hoisted the Star of David and the *Akbel* was christened the *Birya,* in honor of a Jewish settlement in the Galilee seized by the British earlier in 1946.
On the sixth day of the voyage, the ma’apilim stood at attention on the foredeck as a Haganah official spoke. He described how everyone should behave if they were to be captured and questioned by the British. Addressing the crowd, he said: “As far as we are concerned, you are already citizens of Eretz Israel, whatever the English say.”

Afterwards, the immigrants received entry permits issued by “representatives of the Yishuv.” To justify their “re-patriation to Erez-Israel,” the paper certificate quoted passages from Ezekiel and Isaiah in the Old Testament, Lord Balfour’s Declaration of 2nd November 1917, and the Mandate for Palestine.

Then the emissary warned them of the difficulties ahead: “For a while you may find that you have not gone to Eretz, but to a prison in Eretz…. There you’ll see barbed wire again.”

This section is not finished.

Part XII:

HaTikvah

My beloved Aba didn’t live to ‘Tzu Keyver Israel’ as every other good Jew.

On July 2, 1945, Dorka had penned that sentence on the opening page of her DIARY. 365 days later, she glimpsed the shores of Zion from the deck of the Birya. At that point in the journey, Dorka no longer notated her impressions in her travel log. It had vanished during the chaotic transfer of passengers and cargo on the open sea. From the freighter the ma’apilim and crew had climbed onto a Turkish cargo boat, half the length of the first vessel. “It was a raftsodo,” Dorka said. “A couple of times, we felt the ship sinking…. When we sent out an SOS, no one came to help us.”
The crews’ desperate pleas first went unanswered on July 1. “The British destroyer steamed off shortly after 7 A.M. without giving us food and water or the tow into Haifa for which we had asked,” reported I.F. Stone. Unbeknown to the British, the American journalist traveled onboard. “We were to the south of Cyprus, about 180 miles from Palestine. The sky was cloudless and the sea calm but the day was brutally hot.”

Twelve hours later, as the sun plunged into the Mediterranean and dusk brought relief from the sizzling rays, the barometer began to fall. “About eleven o’clock the captain became alarmed. He was afraid the boat would capsize in a storm,” Stone later wrote in *Underground to Palestine*.

The passengers panicked. The crew sent out another SOS on July 2. “About two in the morning a British destroyer came alongside. It turned floodlights on us and we saw the number R-75 on its sides, the same number as the boat which had refused us aid the previous morning.”

Stone came on deck and addressed the British crew through a megaphone. “Is that the *Virago*?” How far is Haifa, he asked.

“‘Thirty-five miles,’ was the reply.” Stone hollered, “The barometer’s falling…and our captain is afraid that we may go under in a storm. We’re terribly overloaded. Could you take some of our sick people on board and give us a tow to Haifa?”

Silence. Finally, for the third time, Stone shouted: “Won’t you please answer?”

Again silence. The Turkish pilot turned on the engine and headed eastward. The sea churned, but the old boat stayed afloat during the wee hours. Then dawn broke. “As the light increased and the sun rose, a cry ran over the ship. ‘It’s *Eretz Israel.*’”
It was the eleventh day at sea for the 999 ma’apilim. “We stood up like one person and together we started to sing HaTikvah from all of our hearts. Now when I hear HaTikva,” Dorka said, “I am used to it, but then it was very emotional. Even with confused words, a thousand people [were] singing from their hearts. The journalist took a megaphone and pointed it towards the British. He shouted to them in their language. ‘Whoever listens to such a HaTikva, knows that you cannot defeat these people.’”

This section is not finished.

Part XIII:

Again Barbed Wire?

In summertime, we went to resorts...where everyone and everything made us happy. Birds sang, flowers bloomed and smelled nice, butterflies fluttered, baby goats jumped, cows plodded, calves followed them, shepherds played on their pipes, cuckoos cuckooed, frogs jumped out of the water, others into the water, over there hopped a bunny rabbit, here a horsey, and on plowed fields mice were jumping and on other fields peasants were scything wheat. But I ran everywhere and was happy with everything because the whole world was alive, everything was smiling, everyone was singing.... And so my childhood flowed.

Although forewarned, Dorka felt a twinge of despair when she arrived at Atlit. Disembarking from a British army truck, she surveyed the detention camp. “Again, barbed wire? It was very hard to see.”

“The British soldiers were intense,” Dorka recalled, “but not threatening.” The ma’apilim taunted the British. “We would go very near to the soldiers, singing Kalaniot,” a Hebrew folksong about anemones ablaze in the valley. The bloom of the buttercups matched the red of the soldiers’ berets.

“We annoyed them. They were nervous…[perhaps] afraid. Because they were nervous, it was funny for us. We were young,” Dorka said. “We had no idea about [the
divisions between] *Etzel, Haganah, Lehi*, then. We were all Jews.” Nor did the immigrants know that *Kalaniot* had become the code song to alert fighters of *Etzel* and *Lehi* about the advance of British forces.  

Despite the barracks and the barbed wire, Atlit was not “tragic.” The British permitted kibbutz members to visit the camp. “We loved them very much,” Dorka said. “They taught us songs in Hebrew. It was just like a camp in summer.”

> The evening comes,  
> the sunset on the hill burns  
> I am dreaming and my eyes see:  
> the proud, young girl descends to the valley  
> and the vale blazes with a fire of anemones....

> Years passed, the sunset blazes in the hill.  
> The girl is a grandma already, friends.  
> Her granddaughter goes to the garden  
> and again anemones bloom in the vale.

> And when the girl calls to her:  
> “look Grandma what I brought you,”  
> from laughter and tears her eyes glow,  
> and she remembers a forgotten song melody....

This section is not finished.

Footnotes:


2 Jewish Record Indexing, Poland, http://jri-poland.org/cemetery/lodz_jewish_cemetery_records.htm


4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.


Note: Natan Alterman wrote the song in January 1945. Moshe Wilensky composed the music, and Shoshanna Damari and Chava Alberstein first sang *Kalaniot*. 