

The Literature of Destruction

Jewish Responses to Catastrophe

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93 The Czech Transport: A Chronicle of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*

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Introduction

Dear reader, I write these words in the moments of my greatest despair. I do not know, I do not believe, that I myself will live to read these lines "after the storm." Who knows if I will have the good fortune to unfold the secret I carry deep in my heart to the world? Who knows if I will ever again behold a "free" man and be able to speak with him? It may be that these, the lines that I am now writing, will be the sole witnesses to what was my life. But I shall be happy if only my writings should reach you, citizen of the free world. Perhaps a spark of my inner fire will ignite in you, and even should you sense only part of what we lived for, you will be compelled to avenge us—avenge our deaths!

Dear discoverer of these writings!

I have a request of you: this is the real reason why I write, that my doomed life may attain some meaning, that my hellish days and hopeless tomorrows may find a purpose in the future.

I pass on to you only a small part of what took place in the hell of Birkenau-Auschwitz. It is for you to comprehend the reality. I have written a great deal besides this. I am certain that you will come upon these remnants, and from them you will be able to construct a picture of how our people were killed.

I also ask a personal favor, dear finder and publisher of these writings. Using the address I give here, find out who I am. Then ask my relatives for the portrait of my family, as well as that of my wife and me and, using your discretion, print them in this book. In this way I hope to immortalize the dear, beloved names of those for whom, at this moment, I cannot even expend a tear! For I live in an inferno of death, where it is impossible to measure my great losses. And, of course, I too am condemned to die. Can the dead mourn the dead? But you, unknown "free" citizen of the world, I beg you to shed a tear for them when you have their pictures before your eyes. I dedicate all my writings to them—this is my tear, my lament for my family and people.

Here I wish to list the names of my martyred family:

My mother—Sarah
 My sister—Libe
 My sister—Esther Rokhl
 My wife—Sonia (Sarah)
 My father-in-law—Raphael
 My brother-in-law—Wolf

They were killed on December 8, 1942—gassed and incinerated.

I also make mention of my father, Shmuel, who was seized on Yom Kippur 1942, and about whom I have heard nothing since. Two brothers, Eber and Moyshl, were captured in Lithuania, my sister Feygeleh in Otwock. This is my entire family.

I doubt that any of them are still alive. I ask you—this is my last request—to print under our photographs the dates on which we were killed.

My own fate is evident from the present situation. I know the day approaches—the day before which my heart and soul tremble, though not from love of life, for this life is a torment. Yet, in the moment left me I cannot rest: Live, live for revenge! And immortalize the names of my loved ones. I have friends in America and in the Land of Israel. I give the address of one below, and from him you can find out about me and my family.

J. Joffe
27 East Broadway, N.Y.
America

Everything described here I experienced myself during my sixteen months of *Sonderarbeit*, and my accumulated grief and pain, my terrible suffering, could have found no other expression under these “conditions” than through this writing.

The Authorities Prepare

Three days earlier, on Monday the sixth of March 1944, the three of them arrived: the Camp Commandant, the cold-blooded murderer Oberscharführer [Johann] Schwarzhuber^o; the Überreferat-führer Oberscharführer . . . ; and our Oberscharführer Voss,^o the head of all four crematoria. Together they circled the entire area of the crematorium and devised a “strategic” plan for the military placement of the guards, of the fortified sentinel, on the day of their great celebration.

This caused a great stir among us, for it was the first time in our sixteen months of harrowing *Sonderarbeit*^o that the authorities had taken such security precautions. Hundreds of thousands of strong, young people had already passed before our eyes—many in transports of Russians, Poles and Gypsies. They knew they had been brought here to die, but none of them ever tried to revolt or to go down resisting; like sheep to slaughter they passed. There had been only two exceptions in these sixteen months. A courageous young man from a Bialystok transport had attacked some guards with knives, wounded several of them severely and was shot trying to flee. The other exception, before which I bow my head in deep respect, was the incident of the “Warsaw Transport.” This was a group of Jews from Warsaw who had become American citizens, some of them American born. All were to be sent from a German internment camp to Switzerland, where they would be put under the protection of the Swiss Red Cross; however, the “civilized” authorities brought these American citizens not to Switzerland but to the fires of the crematorium. And then something heroic happened: a splendid young woman, a dancer from Warsaw, snatched a revolver from [Walter] Quackernack, the Oberscharführer of the “Political Section” in Auschwitz and shot the Referat-führer, the notorious Unterscharführer [Josef] Schillinger.^o

Her deed bolstered the courage of other brave women, who in turn slapped and threw vials and other such things into the faces of those vicious, uniformed beasts—the SS.

These were the only transports in which people, realizing they had nothing more to lose, offered resistance. Hundreds of thousands knowingly went to the slaughter like sheep. That was why the current preparations surprised us so. We figured that “they” had heard rumors that the Czech Jews, having already spent

Commander of the Men's Camp in Auschwitz II; executed at Nuremberg.

The printed version reads “Fast” or “Fost.”

Literally, special duty.

Josef Schillinger was shot in October 1943; this celebrated case is widely documented.

*I.e., in the twin
camp of Birkenau.*

seven months in the camp^o with their families and knowing very well what went on here . . . would not be so submissive. And so they took all the necessary precautions against those who would have the "chutzpah" to resist going to their deaths, who would dare stage an uprising against their "blameless" transgressors.

Monday at noon we were sent into the block to rest, so that we would be able to approach our work with renewed strength. One hundred and forty men—almost the entire block (two hundred had already been "removed")—would meet the transport this day, for both crematoria 1 and 2 would be operating at full capacity.

The plan was executed with the utmost military precision. We, the most wretched victims of all, were drafted into the camp's ranks against our own sisters and brothers. We had to form the front line, that which the doomed prisoners would eventually attack, while behind us the "heroes and warriors of the Great Regime" would stand with automatics, grenades and rifles poised and ready to fire.

A day passed, and then a second and a third. Wednesday came, the ultimate deadline for the transport's arrival. There were two obvious reasons for the delay. First, it appeared that in addition to strategic preparations, moral assurances were demanded. The other reason was that the "authorities" made special efforts to carry out their major massacres on Jewish festivals, and so they had planned this slaughter for Wednesday night, the night of Purim. During those three days, the authorities—murderers and criminals schooled in bloodshed and cynicism—resorted to all kinds of deception in order to disguise the true, barbarous nature of their masquerade and to confound minds that might otherwise "catch on" and penetrate the dark machinations behind the "cultured," smiling facade of the regime.

And so the swindle began.

First, they spread the fiction that the five thousand Czech Jews were to be sent to another "work" camp and had to submit their personal data—all men and women under the age of forty, according to trade and profession. The remaining, older people, unseparated by gender, would remain together for the time being, along with women who had young children; families were not to be broken up. This was the first opiate used to stupefy the frightened crowd and blind it to the terrible reality.^o

*The immediate
separation of the
sexes and of the
weak from the
strong was the
norm at
Auschwitz.*

The second was that everyone should take his belongings on the journey, and the authorities, for their part, specially distributed double rations to the departing crowd.

And yet a third sadistic deception was devised. A report was released that, due to certain circumstances, correspondence to Czechoslovakia would be delayed until March 30; those who wanted to request parcels from friends should postdate their letters between now and the thirtieth of the month and hand them over to the authorities, who would send them on and hold the incoming packages until they could be properly distributed. None of the prisoners could imagine that a "regime" could have become so debased and insidious as to employ such subterfuge. And against whom? Against a defenseless crowd, whose only strength lay in its will, in its bare, unarmed hands.

This elaborate swindle was the best means of numbing the minds of the more clear-thinking and perceptive prisoners. All, regardless of gender or age, let themselves be trapped by the illusion that they were being led to work. Only when

their deceivers felt that this “chloroform” had taken its full effect did the extermination process begin.

Families were broken up, men separated from women, young from old, and so they were caught in the trap, led to the nearby, still unoccupied camp. Unsuspecting, the victims were tricked into cold, wooden barracks, each group separately, and the doors were nailed up behind them with boards. The first phase had succeeded. People were maddened, perplexed; they could no longer think clearly. When they realized they had been trapped here to die, they lost hope and no longer possessed the strength to think about struggle and resistance, for every mind—even those that had dispelled all illusion—now faced a new anxiety. Strong young boys and girls thought only of their parents. Who knew what was happening to them there? And young men, full of courage and strength, sat there stunned by grief, thinking of the young wives and children from whom they had only just been parted. Every outburst of struggle or resistance was immediately overwhelmed by individual sorrows. Everyone was bound to his particular misfortune, and this paralyzed any thoughts about the general situation in which he found himself. The unshackled, energetic and rebellious crowd sat inert, resigned, shattered.

Unresisting, the five thousand victims took their first step to the grave.

This demonic deception, rehearsed so long in advance, had succeeded at last.

The Convoy

Wednesday, March 8, 1944, Purim Night, when those Jews lucky enough to be in countries that still allowed them to exist went to their synagogues, study houses and other places to celebrate the glorious festival of the national, eternal miracle of Purim and to pray that our new Haman might soon meet his end . . .

On that same night in Auschwitz-Birkenau 140 Jews of the *Sonderkommando* were also marching to a certain destination, but not to a synagogue, not with the intention of celebrating the festival and commemorating the Purim miracle.

They walked like mourners, with heads sunk deep in sorrow, and the profound sadness that emanated from them spread to all the Jews in the camp. For the road on which they marched was the road to the crematorium, to the hell of the Jewish people. And soon they would see not a celebration of the Jewish people’s past delivery from death to life, but festivities of another sort—of a nation of betrayers who on this night were carrying out the ancient Purim decree, which their god had revived with still greater brutality.

Soon we would bear witness. With our own eyes we would have to watch our own destruction, as five thousand Jews, five thousand vibrant, thriving souls, women and children, young and old, would pass under the truncheons of civilized brutes. At the authorities’ disposal would be rifles, grenades and automatics, as well as their constant four-footed companions, their vicious dogs; these would chase and savagely attack the Jews, who, distracted and confused, would run blindly into the arms of death.

And we, their own brothers, would have to help with this, help unload them from the trucks and lead them to the bunkers, help strip them mother-naked. And then, when all was ready, accompany them to the bunker—to the grave.

When we came to the site of crematorium 1, the representatives of the regime

were already there, spread out along the field. Several SS men were among them, ready for battle, with rifles loaded and grenades at their sides. These well-armed soldiers completely surrounded the Crematorium, so that if anything were to go wrong they could respond immediately. Cars with searchlights were set up in every corner to illuminate the battlefield. And there was also a special ammunition truck, in the event that they should run out of bullets to use against the enemy, the mighty one. . . .

If you, citizen of the free world, could have seen this, you would have been struck with wonder. You would have thought that in that enormous building with the towering chimneys were giantlike men who could fight like demons, so well-armed they must have been. They could have wiped out entire worlds, mighty armies, in an instant. You would have thought: these men must certainly be great heroes, preparing to do battle with an enemy that coveted their land, their people, their wealth.

Imagine your shock when, after waiting a while, you actually beheld this terrible enemy, the source of this great hatred, the target of this brutal force.

Against whom were they preparing to do battle? Against our people Israel. Soon Jewish mothers would arrive, pressing their babies to their breasts and leading the older children by the hand, and they would stare, frightened and helpless, at the chimneys. Vibrant young girls would leap from the trucks and wait for a mother or a sister to accompany them to the bunker. And men, too, young and old, fathers and sons, would arrive at this inferno and be driven to their deaths.

So this was the great enemy against whom the villain was prepared to conduct battle that night. They were afraid, these brutes; perhaps not every one of the thousands of victims would drop like flies, perhaps one would have the courage to take a stand before dying. And it was because of that one, the unknown hero, that they were so afraid and hid behind their civilized guns. All was ready. Seventy men from our squad were also assigned to guard the area of the fenced-in crematorium. And behind us, outside the fence, they stood with their rifles aimed at the doomed.

Cars and motorcycles raced back and forth. There was much activity to make sure that things were in order. A deathly silence reigned in the camp. Every living thing must have disappeared, escaped into the wooden graves. The silence was suddenly disturbed by footsteps. Soldiers in helmets, with weapons loaded, marched by as though they were coming onto a battlefield. Never before had military personnel entered the camp at night, when everything was sleeping behind the barbed wires. The camp was prepared for battle.

Now every living thing remained motionless, frozen in the cages, even though everyone knew that many times, and especially in the recent past, victims had gone to their deaths in broad daylight, for all to see. Only tonight, out of fear and dread, did the authorities operate in this way. Only the night sky with its stars and bright moon could not be deceived by the devil: They alone would bear witness to what the devil had carried out.

In the silence, the secret silence of the night, trucks were heard approaching. Already they were bringing victims into the camp. Dogs howled ferociously, eager to attack. The voices of drunken officers and soldiers rang out.

German and Polish prisoners also came, having freely offered to help with the

festivities, and all of them, this gang of devils and the murderers, went to meet the trucks, load the victims and send them on to the crematorium.

The victims were still in the barracks, stifled by the fear of death, their hearts pounding. The suspense was maddening as they listened to the activity outside the boarded-up doors. Through the crevices they could see the murderers, the robbers who were waiting in trucks to steal their lives. They knew that it could not last long, that they would not be allowed to remain even in this dismal place, where they wished they could stay forever. They would be dragged out forcibly and taken somewhere else—to hell.

A dreadful trembling suddenly seized the despairing crowd, and they remained silent, in paralyzing suspense. Like corpses, they turned to stone in their places. Now, as they heard the approaching footsteps, their hearts stopped beating. The board was torn from the door. This board, which had entombed them, had also protected them. As long as it was nailed in place it had set them apart from death, and they had secretly hoped that they could remain in this cage indefinitely—until they were freed.

And now the door burst open, and the victims, still motionless, nervously eyed their brutal oppressors and instinctively drew back, as from a ghost. They wanted to escape to a place where the barbaric eyes could not see them.

They were frightened, coming face to face with these who intended to take away their lives. But the angry dogs began to howl savagely and threw themselves on the nearest victims, and a club wielded by the hand of a brute—a Pole or German—came down on a young Jewish girl. And the crowd, which had clung together in a solid mass, poured out of the barracks in single file and gradually began to disperse—to fall apart. Hopeless, baffled, crushed, they began to run to the trucks, dodging the snapping of the dogs and the blows of the enraged brutes. And more than one fleeing woman fell with her child, so that the accursed earth already drank warm blood from young Jewish skulls.

The victims stood on the trucks, waiting to depart, looking around as if for something they had lost. It seemed to a young wife that her beloved husband might come to her out of nowhere. A mother peered into the tragic night; perhaps her young son would appear. And a girl looked around desperately; perhaps her lover was with the people in the trucks, over there.

They looked nervously at the beautiful world, at the sky with the stars and the moon moving majestically within it. They looked at the barracks, the tomb that they had just left. If only they could go back! They knew, they sensed that the truck—this precarious coach—would not hold them for long. Their eyes wandered over the wires to the camp where they had just been. The frightened Czech families were standing there, looking through the crevices at their brothers and sisters who were about to be taken away. In the glare of the lights their gazes met. Their hearts beat rhythmically, full of fear and foreboding. In the night silence hovered the farewells of the sisters and brothers, the friends and acquaintances who remained in the camp waiting for the end, to the sisters and brothers, the fathers and mothers about to be carried in trucks to their deaths.

And so the second stage had already succeeded; the devil had brought his victims to the second step of the grave.

They Are Here

They had already arrived, the unfortunate victims. The trucks pulled up. Their hearts froze as they stood stricken with terror, helpless and despondent, and looked toward the building in which their world, their young lives, their vibrant bodies, would soon vanish forever.

They could not understand what they wanted—all of these officers with their silver and gold epaulets, their shining revolvers and grenades hanging at their sides. And why were they, the victims, standing here like condemned thieves, watched by helmeted soldiers, while from between the trees and wire, gleaming in the light of the moon, the black barrels of rifles pointed at them? For what purpose? Why were all the searchlights shining? Was the night too dark? Was the moonlight too faint?

They stood baffled, unarmed and resigned. They had already perceived the truth. The void gaped before their eyes; they were sinking in it already. They felt that everything, earth, life, fields, trees—everything that lives and exists—was vanishing and sinking with them right into the deep abyss. The stars went out, the sky darkened, the moon stopped shining, the world descended with them. And they, the unfortunates, wanted only to sink, to disappear quickly into the abyss.

They threw down their parcels—everything they had brought for the “journey.” They no longer wanted or needed anything. Passive, unresisting, they let themselves be removed from the trucks and fell, almost fainting, like cut stalks into our arms. Take me by the hand, brother, and lead me to the stretch of road that is all that remains of my life. We led them, our dear, beloved sisters; we held them under their arms, walking quietly step by step, our hearts beating together rhythmically. We suffered with them, bled with them, and we felt that each step we took was a step away from life, toward death. At the entrance to the sunken bunker, before they took the first step into the grave, they looked for the last time at the sky and the moon—and a moan escaped instinctively from deep in both our hearts. In the moonlight a tear would glisten in the eye of each sister who had been led here, and another would form in the eye of the brother who had led her.

In the Disrobing Room

In the center of the deep, vast room flooded by harsh electric light stood twelve posts that supported the weight of the building. Around the posts and against the walls, benches had been placed with hangers attached for the victims’ clothes. A placard fixed to the first post stated that this was the entrance to a “bathhouse,” and clothes had to be removed for disinfection.

We met them, looked at them with glazed eyes. They knew everything, understood everything, that this room was not a bathhouse, but the corridor that led to the grave.

The room filled with people. Trucks arrived with fresh victims, and the room swallowed them all. We stood as if confused, unable to speak to them. Even though this wasn’t the first time. We had already received many transports and witnessed many scenes like this one. But still we felt as weak as if we would faint together with these doomed women.

We were stunned. Their clothes, already old and tattered, covered bodies full of grace and charm. From heads covered with hair—black, brunette, blond, and

even gray—large, deep-set eyes looked bewitchingly at us. We saw before us fresh, lively women, all in their prime and full of vitality, all nurtured from the wellspring of life, like roses growing in the garden, satiated by rainwater and the morning dew. In the brilliant light the teardrops in their flowerlike eyes sparkled like pearls.

We didn't have the daring or brashness to tell them, our dear sisters, to strip themselves naked, for their clothing was the armor that shielded their lives. The moment they took off their clothes and stood mother-naked, they would lose their last foothold. And therefore it was impossible to tell them to hurry and undress. Let them remain just a moment, just an instant, in their armor, in the mantle of life.

The first question on their lips was if their men had already been there. Each wanted to know if her husband, father, brother or lover still lived, or if his corpse already was burning in flames that would leave no trace, and she herself a widow with an orphaned child. Perhaps she already had lost her father, brother or lover forever. Then why should she remain alive? "Tell me, brother," said one, who in her mind had long ago given up on life and the world forever—she asked frankly and boldly, "Say, brother, how long does it take to die? Is it easy or hard?"

They weren't let alone for long. The murderous beasts could not restrain themselves. The air was torn by the cries of the drunken criminals, who couldn't wait to satisfy their bestial, thirsting eyes with the nakedness of my dear, beautiful sisters. Clubs came down on shoulders and heads, and clothes quickly dropped from the bodies. Some of the women were embarrassed, wanted to disappear somewhere where their nakedness could not be seen. But there was no hiding place here, no room for shame. Morality and courtesy passed with life into the grave.

A few passionately threw themselves into our arms and asked us with bashful glances to strip them naked; they wanted to forget everything now, to think of nothing. They had given up all thought of their previous life, with its moral principles and ethical considerations, when they took the first step into the grave. Now, on the threshold of doom, they thought only about the basic needs of life and of the body—the body alone still felt and sensed and desired. They wanted to give it everything, everything, to satisfy the last pleasure that life still offered the body before its death. And so they wanted their bodies, still pulsing with life's blood, to be touched, to be fondled by the hands of the strangers, who were the only ones present to receive their love. And in this way each would feel the hand of her lover or husband, stroking and fondling her body consumed by passion. They wanted rapture, my beautiful, beloved sisters, and their burning lips drew lovingly toward us, wanting to kiss passionately, to stay alive.

Several new trucks arrived and more victims entered the big room. Many broke from the line and fell wildly, weeping and crying; naked children recognized their mothers and kissed, embraced, rejoiced that they had been reunited here. And a child felt lucky to have a mother, a mother's heart, accompany him to the grave.

They all stripped themselves naked and stood straight in the line. Some cried, while others were stonily silent. One tore her hair and talked madly to herself. When I approached her, I heard only the words: "Where are you, my love, why don't you come to me? I'm certainly young and pretty enough." Those standing near told me that she had lost her mind in prison the day before.

Others spoke to us quietly and calmly: "We're still so young. We want to live,

just a little more life." They weren't pleading with us, for they knew that we were victims just like themselves. They simply spoke, spoke just like that, because their hearts were heavy and before they died they wanted to tell their sorrow to those who would survive them.

A group of women sat embracing and kissing. These were sisters, who had met here and clung together.

There a mother sat naked on the bench, holding her daughter, a girl not yet fifteen, on her lap. She pressed her head to her breast and kissed all her limbs. And streaming hot tears fell on the young flower. Thus the mother mourned for her child, whom she would soon lead to death with her own hand.

More light now poured into the room, into the giant grave. On one side of this hell the women were now lined up, their white bodies waiting, waiting for the doors to open and admit them to the grave. We the men, still dressed, stood opposite them and motionlessly looked on. We could no longer grasp if this scene was real or only a dream. Had we fallen into a world of naked women who were soon to be the victims of a demonic game? Or had we fallen into a museum or artist's studio where these women, of different ages and with faces contorted in every way, weeping softly and moaning, had been brought specifically to serve as models for the artist?

For we wondered why they, unlike many other transports, were on the whole so calm, many even brave and carefree, as though nothing could happen to them. They faced death so heroically, so calmly, that we were deeply moved and surprised. Could it be that they didn't know what awaited them? We regarded them with pity, because already there came to us a new, dreadful realization of how all these vibrant souls, even the noise and chatter that rose from them, would in a few hours be stilled by death, their mouths silenced forever. The sparkling eyes, now so bewitching, would gaze fixedly in one direction—seeking something in the deadness of eternity.

These same women who now pulsed with life would lie in dirt and filth, their pure white bodies smeared with human excrement.

From the pearly mouths—teeth and flesh would be torn out together and blood would flow.

From the noses, so finely shaped—two streams would trickle, red, yellow and white.

And the faces, white and pink, would turn red, blue and black from the gas. The eyes would fill with blood, so that it would be impossible to know if this was the same face we were looking at now. The head, now covered with wavy hair, would be shaven by cold hands, and ears and fingers would be stripped of their earrings and their rings. And then two strangers would pull on gloves or lay strips on their hands, because the snow-white figure, so dazzling now, would by then be so repulsive that they would not want to touch her with bare hands. They would drag her—this same beautiful young flower—across the cold, filthy cement floor, and the body, after sweeping all the dirt in its path, would be flung aside like a carcass, to be lifted by pulley to the inferno above and fed to the fire that in minutes would reduce it to ashes.

Already we saw their inevitable end. I watched them, these vibrant souls who filled such an enormous room; entire worlds were represented here—and in only minutes from now. . . . A second image appeared before my eyes, of a fellow

prisoner steering a wheelbarrow filled with ashes to the mass grave. I was standing now near a group of ten or fifteen women and thought how all their bodies, all their lives, would soon fill a wheelbarrow. No trace would remain. All of them, who had occupied entire cities, who had had a place in this world, would be effaced, uprooted, as though they had never been born. Our hearts ached with sorrow. We felt through them, suffered through them the anguish of passing from life to death.

Our hearts filled with pity. If we could only have given them pieces of our own lives, sacrificed ourselves for our sisters, how happy we would have been! We wanted to press them to our sorrowful hearts, cover their limbs with kisses, imbibe the life that soon would vanish. To etch in our hearts their living images, to carry their portraits in our hearts forever. We were all in the grip of these nightmarish thoughts, while they, our beloved sisters, wondered why we were so shaken when they were so calm. They wanted very much to know what would be done with them when they were dead, but none of them dared ask, and the secret was never revealed to them.

The enormous, naked crowd now stood looking fixedly in one direction, and it could be that a single dark thought wove through all their minds.

There on the other side all the clothes and articles that they had just discarded lay in a pile. These things troubled them now. Although they realized they would no longer need them, they had been strongly bound to these possessions, which still retained the warmth of their bodies. Here they lay cast off—a dress, a sweater that had clothed someone and kept her warm. If they could only put them on once more, how good, how happy they would feel. Was it really so—their situation so hopeless that they would never wear these things again?

Was it possible that these clothes would just be left there? That their owners would never return to them?

Clothes abandoned like orphans. Like witnesses or testimonies to the approaching death.

Ah! Who knew who would wear these things after them? A girl stepped out of place to retrieve a strip of silk from under the foot of a companion. She took it quickly and stepped back into the line. I asked her why she needed this kerchief. "For a keepsake," the girl replied in a low voice. She would take it with her to the grave.

The Death March

The doors burst open. Hell gaped wide before its victims. In the little room that led to the grave, the representatives of the regime stood in full regalia, as if for a military parade. The entire Political Section had turned out for the celebration. High-ranking officers were there, whose faces we had never before seen during our sixteen months in the camp. Among them stood a woman, an SS officer, the director of the women's camp. She too had come to witness the "national" festival, the murder of the children of our people.

I stood aside and observed both groups—the terrible murderers and their hapless victims, my sisters.

The march, the death march, had begun. The victims walked proudly, boldly, with firm steps, as though they were marching toward life. Nor did they break

down on seeing the place where the final scene of their lives would be played. They kept their footing even when they realized that they were captives in the heart of hell. They had settled all accounts with the world and with life before coming here. All ties with life had been broken in captivity. That was why they walked so peacefully, so calmly, approaching their end without breaking down. Without a pause, these vibrant, naked women marched. It seemed to go on for an eternity, an eternity.

It seemed as though entire worlds, entire worlds, had been stripped naked and brought here for a devilish stroll.

Mothers passed with small children in arms; others were led by the hands of their little ones. They kissed their children—a mother's heart cannot be bound—kissed them all along the way. Sisters walked arm in arm, clinging together, wanting to face death together.

All glanced scornfully at the line of officers, not wishing to grace them with direct gazes. No one pleaded, no one sought mercy. They knew there was no spark of human conscience in those hearts. They didn't want to give them the pleasure of watching them beg for their lives in despair.

Suddenly the naked procession came to an abrupt halt. A pretty girl of nine, whose long, intricately plaited braids hung in golden strips down her childish shoulders, had approached followed by her mother, who now stopped and boldly addressed the officers: "Murderers, thieves, shameless criminals! Yes, now you kill innocent women and children. You blame us, helpless as we are, for the war. As if my child and I could have brought this war upon you.

"You think, murderers, that with our blood you can hide your losses on the front. But the war is already lost. You know very well what beatings you take every day on the eastern front. Remember! Now you can smooth everything over, but there will come a day—a day of revenge. Russia will be the victor, and she will avenge us! You will be carved up alive. Our brothers all over the world will not rest until they have avenged our innocent blood."

And then she turned to the woman and said, "She-beast! Have you also come to look on our misfortune? Remember! You too have a child, a family, but you will not enjoy them for long. You will be torn to pieces, and your child won't live much longer than mine. Remember, murderers! You will pay for everything—the whole world will take revenge on you."

Then she spat in their faces and ran into the bunker with her child. The officers stood silent, stunned. They couldn't look at one another. The terrible truth they had just heard tore into their bestial souls. They had let her speak even though they knew what she would say, compelled to listen to this Jewish woman on her way to die. Now they stood gravely, deep in thought. This doomed woman had torn the blinders from their eyes and revealed the future that loomed before them. None of this was new to them; many times dark thoughts had clouded their minds, but now it was a Jewish woman who spoke the truth: Unashamed, she had forced them to see reality.

They were afraid to think too long, for the truth might penetrate too deeply. And then what would they live for?—But no! The *Führer*, their god, had claimed something completely different, that victory was not to be won on the battlefields of the east and west . . . but here in the bunker. This was where victory lay—here where the terrible enemy, the cause of German blood being spilled on the battle-

fields of Europe, was now marching past. These were the hated enemy; for their sakes English airplanes dropped bombs night and day, killing young and old. It was because of these naked women that they were so far from home, because of them that their sons had to lay their heads down in the east. No, the *Führer*, the god, was correct. They must be exterminated, destroyed. Only then, when these naked women and children lay dead, would victory be assured. Ach, if only it could happen faster, if only all the Jews could be gathered and driven from the world more quickly, stripped naked and driven into the inferno like these women here! How good it would be. The cannons would cease thundering, the airplanes would stop dropping bombs, the war would be concluded. Peace would reign over the world. Their scattered children would return home to begin new and happy lives. Only one obstacle remained—these naked women—there were members of their nation still in hiding, who had not yet been brought here to be stripped naked like these who were marching past. And a brutal hand stretched out a whip and mercilessly beat the naked bodies.

Run faster, our enemies, faster into the bunker, into the grave, for every step you take brings us closer to victory. And victory must come more quickly, more swiftly! We have paid too dearly for you on the vast battlefields—now run faster, children of devils, and don't stop along the way, because that would hinder our victory.

They marched on—rows of young, naked women. And again the marching came to a halt. Another woman, this time a lovely, blond girl, had addressed the officers: "Wretched murderers! You look at me with your thirsty, bestial eyes. You glut yourselves on my nakedness. Yes, this is what you've been waiting for. In your civilian lives you could never even have dreamed about it. You hoodlums and criminals, you have finally found the right place to satisfy your sadistic eyes. But you won't enjoy this for long. Your game's almost over, you can't kill all the Jews. And you will pay for it all." And suddenly she leaped at them and struck Oberscharführer Voss, the director of the crematoria, three times. Clubs came down on her head and shoulders. She entered the bunker with her head covered with wounds, and the warm blood caressed her body lovingly; she laughed for joy, for her hand still tingled from the blow she had dealt the notorious killer's face. She had achieved her final goal, and proceeded calmly to her death.

Pouring in the Gas

Two pairs of footsteps disturbed the night's silence. In the moonlight two figures appeared. They put on masks, in preparation for pouring the poisonous gas that they carried in two cylinders, enough to kill the thousands of victims who waited there. They walked now in the direction of the bunker, treading softly. They walked calmly, cold and assured, as if called upon to perform some sacred duty. Their hearts ice, their hands never even trembling, they guiltlessly moved to each "eye" of the sunken bunker, poured in the gas, and covered the "eye" with a heavy lid so that no gas could escape. Through the peepholes they could hear the deep, agonized groan of the mass of people struggling with death, but they remained unmoved. Deaf and dumb, they moved on to the second "eye" and again poured in the gas. Then, after taking care of the last one, they removed the masks. Proud, calm, at peace with themselves, they walked away, having performed a

great service for their people and country, having brought them a step closer to victory. . . .

The Second Front

Everyone now moved "over there," to the second crematorium—the officers and guards, as well as ourselves. Again, a front was established. All was tense, in readiness for combat. Even more security measures were taken now than before because, even though the first reception of prisoners had proceeded smoothly and without any kind of resistance or casualties, the present group consisted of strong, young men, and so anything could happen. Before long we heard the familiar sound of the trucks. "They are coming!" shouted the Commandant. This was a signal to get everything ready. In the silence, one heard the rifles and machine guns being positioned for the last time before battle, so that they could function properly if called upon to do their "duty."

The enormous searchlights once again illuminated this place of death. And in their light and the light of the moon, several rifle barrels glittered once more, wielded by the "Great Regime" that now stood ready to do battle against the defenseless, hapless people of Israel. Faces peered wildly through the trees and barbed wire. In the moonlight the "death's head" gleamed frightfully from the helmets of "heroes" who wore it with pride. Like demons, like murderers, they huddled in the silent night, waiting, waiting in fear and hunger for their prey.

Devastation

We were all tense—both "us" and "them." The representatives of the regime stood frightened, apprehensive. They were trembling. Perhaps this group of desperate men would go down like heroes on the threshold of the grave. In such a case, a "misfortune" could strike one of the guards. Each one wondered who it might be; perhaps he himself was marked.

We too were tense, our hearts pounding as we removed them from the trucks. We hoped, believed, that it would happen tonight, that tonight would bring the redeeming moment for which we had been impatiently waiting, when the desperate throng on the edge of the grave would pull out the flag of resistance. And we would go with them, side by side, into the unequal battle. At that moment we would not think about the futility of our struggle or whether it would gain us life and freedom. Our best hope would be for a heroic end to this dismal life, an end to this terrible tragedy.

But what actually happened shattered our hopes; instead of fighting like wild animals, the victims for the most part came down from the trucks peacefully and passively, looking nervously at the vast area around them. Their final glances lingered on the building, the giant hell, and with arms dangling and heads bowed in resignation they proceeded quietly to the grave. All of them asked if their women had already been there. Their hearts beat only for them; thousands of unbroken threads still joined them. Flesh and blood, hearts and souls were still bound together into single organisms. It was not yet known by these fathers, husbands, brothers, bridegrooms and friends that their wives and children, sisters and brides, the thousands of souls whom they still thought of as alive and connected to their

own lives, already lay dead in that gigantic building, that deep grave. They didn't want to believe it when we told them that the thread that bound them to the women was already severed.

A few threw their parcels violently to the ground. They recognized only too well this building whose chimneys every day spewed forth corpses to the high heavens. Others stood still, or whistled a little tune while looking wistfully and dreamily at the moon and the stars, and then, moaning, descended directly into the deep bunker. Before long all the naked men had gone peacefully, without struggle or resistance, to their deaths in the bunker.

She and He

It was a heartrending scene when a number of women who had been unable to fit into Crematorium 1 were brought over to the men. Naked men ran frantically to the women, each seeking his wife, his mother, his child, sister or friend. The few "lucky" couples who were reunited here clasped each other firmly and kissed passionately. In the middle of the big room one saw unbearable things—a naked man holding his wife in his arms; a brother and a sister standing embarrassed, kissing through tears, and passing "happily" together into the bunker.

There were several women who remained miserably alone. Perhaps a husband, brother or father was already there in the bunker. Perhaps he was thinking about his wife and child, mother or sister, not realizing that she was in the same bunker, naked among strange men, seeking his beloved face in the crowd. And so, yearning, searching, her gaze wandered wildly.

In this crowd of men a woman stretched upwards, yearning and searching, her body facing the throng. Even as she was drawing her last breath, she looked for her husband.

And there on the edge of the crowd, by the wall, he stood restlessly, on the tips of his toes, looking for his wife. And when finally he saw her, his heart began pounding furiously, and he stretched out his arms toward her, trying to make a path, to shout her name. That was when the gas entered the room, and so he remained transfixed in that position—arms outstretched, mouth open, eyes insanely frozen. His heart had given out, his soul departed, with her name still on his lips.

Their two hearts had beaten together with one pulse, and, yearning and searching, together they expired.

"Hell Hitler!"

Through the little window in the gas chamber's door, they, the authorities, could see for themselves how the mass of men lay dead, stiffened from the poison gas.

Happy, assured, with victory in their grasp, they emerged from the place of death. Each of them could now go home relaxed and confident. Effaced and annihilated was the great enemy of their people, of their country. And now, everything was possible once more. The *Führer*, the great god, had said it himself: "Every dead Jew—a step toward victory." And here, here were five thousand at once, killed off in just a few short hours. Such victory, such triumph, without one loss

or sacrifice! Who, who else but they, these brilliant officers, could claim such a glorious deed?

They parted with the raised-arm salute and, after hailing their "holy one," climbed contentedly into their cars.

They drove quickly, exhilarated and full of daring, leaving behind a triumph that assured them heroic stature. Soon telephones would start ringing, spreading the news.

Until word of the great victory secured tonight would reach him, the "Führer and god." "Heil Hitler!"

In the Place of Death

It had become quiet in the area of the crematorium. No guards, no cars with grenades, no searchlights. Everything had suddenly vanished. A fatal stillness resumed its pacing over God's world, as if all the death contained in that deep hell would gather into a silent wave and inundate the world—would cradle and lull the entire world into the eternal sleep of death. The moon continued her peaceful stroll. The stars glittered enchantingly in the deep, blue sky. The night flowed in calm silence through eternity, as though nothing could have happened in the world below. Night, moon, sky and stars had swallowed up the secret that the devil had prepared for them, leaving no sign or vestige of cruelty for the world to perceive.

In the moonlight the only things discernible in this place were little hills of shadows, of discarded parcels—witnesses to lives that were no more. A few silhouetted human figures were dragging a heavy load along the ground; they passed the load—a corpse—through an open door. They went back with quiet steps and retrieved another one, this time disappearing with it behind the door. Through the night silence came the sound of a bolt being turned; the brothers, the wretches who had to dispose of the dead, were now locked in. Again footsteps were heard in the quiet night. This was the guard circling the deathhouse, watching over those who worked in that hell among the corpses of their brothers and sisters; and he made sure—this guard—that none of them could escape from that place of death.

In the Bunker

Hands trembling, brothers removed the screws and lifted the four bolts, opening the two doors to the giant tombs. A sickening wave from that scene of violent death washed over us. We stood stark still and could not believe our eyes. How long? How long had it been since we had seen them alive? They still hovered before us—the vital young men and women. Their last words still echoed in our ears. The gazes of their tear-filled eyes still accused us.

And what had become of them now? Thousands, thousands of spirited, bustling, singing° beings now lay stiffened by death. No word or sound was heard, their mouths silenced forever. Their gazes were fixed, their bodies motionless. In the deadened, stagnant stillness there was only a hushed, barely audible noise—a sound of fluid seeping from the different orifices of the dead. That was the only movement in this vast, dead world.

Our eyes were glued to this sea of naked corpses. We were viewing a naked world. They lay as they had fallen, contorted, knotted together like a ball of yarn,

In four chapters not translated here, Gradowski describes how the victims sang the "Internationale" and "Hatikvah," the Czech national anthem and the Partisans' Hymn (86).

as though the devil had played a special game with them before their deaths, arranging them in such poses. Here one lay stretched out full length on top of the pile of corpses. Here one held his arms around another as they sat against the wall. Here part of a shoulder emerged, the head and feet intertwined with the other bodies. And here only a hand and a foot protruded into the air, the rest of the body buried in the deep sea of corpses. The surface of this naked globe was made up entirely of parts of human bodies.

Here and there heads broke through this sea, clinging to the surface of the naked waves. It seemed that while the bodies were submerged in the vast sea, only the heads could peer out from the abyss. These heads—dark, fair, brown—were the only parts that broke through the universal nakedness.

Preparations for the Inferno

One must deaden the feeling heart, dull its capacity for pain. One must suppress the anguish that sweeps like a storm over every limb. One must turn into an automaton, unseeing, unfeeling, uncomprehending.

Hands and feet set to work. Every member of the squad is assigned a specific task. We pull, vigorously pry apart the knot of intertwined bodies, one of us taking a foot, the other a hand—how convenient it all is. It seems as though we will tear the corpses to pieces with our systematic prying. Each one is then dragged along the filthy, cold cement floor, the beautiful, clean body sweeping up all the dirt and filth in its path like a broom. Then it is laid facing upwards, eyes fixed in a stare that seems to ask, “What are you going to do with me, brother?” Frequently one recognizes an acquaintance. Three prisoners prepare the body of a woman. One probes her pretty mouth with pliers, looking for gold teeth, which, when found, are ripped out together with the flesh. Another cuts the hair, the woman’s crown, while the third quickly tears off earrings, often drawing blood in the process. And the rings, which do not come off the fingers easily, must be removed with pliers.

Then she is given to the pulley. Two men throw on the bodies like blocks of wood; when the count reaches seven or eight, a signal is given with a stick and the pulley begins its ascent.

In the Heart of Hell

On the upper level, by the pulley, stand four men. The two on one side of the pulley drag corpses to the “storeroom”; the other two pull them directly to the ovens, where they are laid in pairs at each mouth. The slaughtered children are heaped in a big stack, they are added, thrown onto the pairs of adults. Each corpse is laid out on an iron “burial” board; then the door to the inferno is opened and the board shoved in. The hellish fire, extending its tongues like open arms, snatches the body as though it were a prize. The hair is the first to catch fire. The skin, immersed in flames, catches in a few seconds. Now the arms and legs begin to rise—expanding blood vessels cause this movement of the limbs. The entire body is now burning fiercely; the skin has been consumed and fat drips and hisses in the flames. One can no longer make out a corpse—only a room filled with hellish fire that holds something in its midst. The belly goes. Bowels and entrails are quickly consumed, and within minutes there is no trace of them. The head takes

Uses the traditional term *taare-bret* to underline the desecration of their bodies.

the longest to burn; two little blue flames flicker from the eyeholes—these are the eyes burning with the brain, while from the mouth the tongue also continues to burn. The entire process lasts twenty minutes—and a human being, a world, has been turned to ashes.

We watch, stunned. Two more are laid out. Two people, two worlds, who have occupied a place in the human scheme, who have lived, existed, acted and created. Who have labored for the world and for themselves, laid a brick on the great edifice, woven a thread for the world, for the future—and in only twenty minutes no vestige of them remains.

Two more lie there now; they have been washed thoroughly. Pretty young women—how splendid they must have been! In life they made up two entire worlds—what happiness and joy they brought: their every smile was a comfort, every glance a delight, their every word charmed like heavenly music. Wherever they went they brought joy and gladness with them. Once loved by many, now they wait on the iron board. Soon the mouth will open, and within twenty minutes no trace of them remain.

Now there are three. A child pressed to its mother's breast—what happiness, what joy its birth brought to its parents! They built a home, wove a future, lived in an idyllic world and in twenty minutes no trace of them will remain.

The pulley moves up and down, lifting bodies without end. As in a giant slaughterhouse, stacks of bodies lie here waiting to be removed.

Thirty hellish mouths blaze now in the two huge buildings and swallow countless bodies. It won't be long before the five thousand people, the five thousand worlds, will have been devoured by the flames.

The ovens blaze furiously, like waves in a storm. This fire was ignited long ago by the barbarians and murderers of the world, who had hoped to drive darkness from their brutal lives with its light.

The fire burns boldly, calmly. Nothing stands in its way, nothing puts it out. Sacrifices arrive regularly, without number, as though this ancient, martyred nation was created specifically for this purpose.

If you who are free should chance to notice this great fire; if some evening you should raise your eyes to the deep, blue sky and see that it is covered by flames, then you will know that this is the same hellfire that burns here endlessly. Perhaps your heart will feel its heat, and your hands, as cold as ice, will extinguish it. Or perhaps, your heart bolstered with courage, you will exchange the present victims of this never-ending inferno for those who first ignited it, that *they* may be consumed by its flames.

March–April 1944