

"This is a K.L.," he said. "Remember those two initials, K.L. . . . *Konzentrationslager*. This is a death camp, a *Vernichtungslager*. You've been brought here to be destroyed by hunger, beating, hard labor, and sickness. You'll be eaten by lice, you'll rot in your own shit."

"Let me give you one piece of advice: forget who and what you were. This is a jungle and here the only law is the law of the strongest. No one here is a Mr. Director or a *Herr Doktor*. Everyone here is the same; everyone here is shit. All are going to die."

"There's no hope?" someone asked tremulously.

"Ten per cent of you may survive. Only those who can get a special job have a chance. Those who have gold, jewels, money, can buy jobs. For the others, only one hope: to organize."

That was the second time I had heard the magic word and I thought it referred to a highly clandestine but ubiquitous organization of the just which protected the most deserving or the most wronged. But Barrack Elder Szydlower quickly dispelled my romantic fantasies. In camp slang, "to organize" merely meant to look after Number One. It was to steal soup from the kitchen, for example; but to steal bread from a fellow inmate, however, was to *really* steal.

"And another thing," Mietek added, "it's important to keep your eyes and ears open all the time. We have a saying here: You'd better have eyes in your ass."

We were all hungry. We hadn't eaten, couldn't remember our last meal, but we were too late to be fed that day; there hadn't been time to put us on the rolls properly. We'd start eating the next day, we were told. Later we learned that this too was another example of organization — by camp officials. Several hundred stolen suppers meant a handsome profit for them.

The barrack was a long wooden shed originally intended as a stable for horses, easily verified by the *Pferdbaracke* inscription over the doorway and the ramps instead of steps at the entrances. A narrow glass opening ran around the building just under the roof to let some daylight in, but there were no windows in the usual sense. Triple-decker bunks stood against both walls and a narrow aisle was kept between bunks and walls, a broader one between the two rows of bunks. At the far end of the building was a second entrance, usually kept locked. Near the main entrance were the bunks of the barrack élite: the Barrack Elder, the Scribe, and a few orderlies (*Stubendienst*). The Barrack Elder was mas-

ter of life and death of his subjects. The Scribe kept the rolls, the life-and-death statistics of the barrack. He recorded the daily increase (*Zugang*) and decrease (*Abgang*), or transfer (*Verlegung*), whether to another barrack, camp, or hospital. He also noted "natural" decreases, i.e., by death. The orderlies kept the barrack swept and in order, and saw to it that no one stayed hidden there during the day. Occasionally they also acted as the Elder's deputies in handing out food rations. Soon after our arrival a new official was appointed to beat up inmates at the Elder's orders, a job usually given to Soviet prisoners of war. In our barrack the job was held by an athletic native of Leningrad named Andrey. In the next barrack it was another Russian, Ivan. Andrey was normally quiet and rather good-natured; but when he was "on duty," he would grow excited and could be terrible.

All these "authorities" were subject to the central authority of the *Lagerschreiber*, or Camp Scribe, who had a dozen clerks working for him. Together these were the clerical office (*Schreibstube*). The *Lagerschreiber's* principal assistant was the official who assigned inmates to specific work parties, the so-called *Kommandos*. As a member of a *Kommando*, each prisoner was subject to another hierarchy of masters. Each *Kommando* had a *Kapo*, or head. The term was thought to be derived from the Italian *capo* (head); but others maintained it was an abbreviation of *Kazetpolizei*, or *Konzentrationslager Polizei*. The *Kapo* also had assistants called *Vorarbeiter* (foremen) who in their turn had assistants called *Schieber* (pushers). Although these were all prisoners, too, they had the power of life and death over the workers assigned to them. At the very top of the concentration-camp hierarchy was the so-called *Lagerälteste* or camp warden, also a prisoner, but invariably a German.

These various prisoner authorities were themselves ruled by a parallel SS organization. Every barrack had its own SS barrack leader, every labor project its own SS men, and at the top of their hierarchical pyramid stood the *Lagerführer*, or Camp Commandant, generally a high-ranking SS officer.

Maidanek was divided into five "Fields," each in reality a separate camp, consisting of a gigantic rectangle surrounded by barbed-wire fences. A few yards from the wire, wooden signs warned: "ATTENTION! DEATH ZONE!" Wire was electrified and anyone who touched it was electrocuted. At the four corners of the rectangle stood watchtowers

with armed guards at the ready. The first Field housed the central camp offices and the files; the second was occupied by highly skilled prisoners employed in the camp workshops; the other laborers were crowded into the third and fourth Fields, between which there was a large area called Coal Field or In-Between Field. Field Five was reserved for women prisoners. Fields Three, Four, and Five were filled with inmates destined eventually for the crematoria.

Field Three, where I was assigned, had twenty-two numbered barracks, all of the same design, around a large central open space — except for Barrack Nineteen, the *Gamelbaracke*. Entrance to that was obscured by a high wooden fence so that one couldn't see what went on inside, but we soon learned that it was where the old and weak inmates were housed, the vestibule to the gas chamber. To the right of the entrance to the Field was the Field Office barrack, inhabited by the "aristocracy" of the Field; to the left were the automotive workshops (*Fahrberetschafft*). The last barrack on the left was the kitchen serving all five Fields; across from it was the L-Barrack, which contained washrooms.

In Barrack Number Five we were given sacks and told to go out and fill them with straw. Those were our mattresses. We were each then assigned a bunk. When the soup, bread, and margarine were brought in for the regular inmates, we newcomers ran to the washroom to get a drink of water to stay our hunger, but the crowd around the faucets was so great that we had little hope of getting close to them.

At 9 P.M. we were driven inside the barracks and 9:30 the gong sounded to mark the end of the day. Anyone caught outside after that time could be shot on sight by the guards on the towers. The lights inside went out except for a few small bulbs, but we were not to have a quiet night's sleep. About 10:30 P.M. the noisy *Wagenkolonne*, the working party which took rations from the kitchen to the other Fields, came in. Though this assignment was hard work, those on the work party were given double portions of food and allowed to catch up on their sleep during the day. Moreover, they earned money by such chores as delivering messages between one Field and another, carrying greetings or gifts from husband to wife, or vice-versa. The majority of these men would not have exchanged for anything in the world their privilege of visiting the women's Field three times a day. The *Wagen-*

*kolonne* turned in quickly, but then the parade to and from the latrine began and kept up for the rest of the night.

What was called a latrine consisted of a wooden box with handles at both ends similar to what hod carriers use to transport cement. Only one such box was assigned to each barrack, which might house two or three hundred inmates, and some times as many as five hundred. The overwhelming majority of the camp inmates suffered from diarrhea and almost everyone also had weakness of the bladder, so that the latrine was soon filled and overflowing. The stinking puddles on the floor were nauseating and when men had to wade through them barefoot because they had been thoughtless enough not to put on their wooden shoes, it was worse. But barefoot or shod the inmates trotting to and from the latrine soon tracked the entire barracks up with filth. To add to the dreadful stench the crowd around the latrine was usually noisy, and for our first few nights at Maidanek we found it very hard to bear. Afterward nothing could disturb our sleep.

At 2:30 A.M. the *Wagenkolonne* left for work, and an hour later, at 3:30 A.M., the gong announced the beginning of a new day. The orderlies yelled, "Everybody up!" and we barely had our eyes open before Andrey was running back and forth pulling sleepers out of bed by their legs, clouting some over the head, speeding along the dawdlers. Over and over again, in his comical mixture of Polish and Russian, he threatened, "You're going to get twenty-five lashes on your bare ass. . . ."

And so the nightmare began first thing in the morning. German *Ordnung* demanded that our bunks be made up in strict military style and rigidly perfect. Since the majority of inmates had no military or even scout training, the demand was rarely met. Though Barrack Elder Szydlower daily rewarded the two best bedmakers with an extra portion of bread, he simultaneously punished at least a dozen by depriving them of their portions. When that proved ineffective, he ordered those whose beds were improperly made to be flogged. The barrack orderlies took immediate advantage of this — "organization" — and for a modest payment in margarine, soup, or a slice of bread, they exempted the untidy or made up their bunks for them.

After making our beds we rushed to the L-Barrack to wash. We soon learned that the washrooms, like everything else in Maidanek, were instruments of torture. Crowds pressed around the building in

such numbers that they had to be held back by Kapos with clubs in their hands. When you did finally manage to get inside and close to a faucet, you were likely to be attacked by one of the many Kapos or orderlies standing there. Anyone taking off his shirt was especially liable to be beaten. "What do you think this is, a Roman bath? Or a beach?" A punch in the face was the usual accompaniment to such comments. If, prudently, you kept your jacket on and simply splashed your face, the Kapo would shout, "You filthy shiftface, don't you know how to wash?" And you got your punch in the face anyway. Every day men came back from the washroom bleeding from the blows on the head and face, and before long the intended aim was achieved: the number of visitors to the washroom dropped to a minimum and the orderlies no longer had to work so hard cleaning and polishing it. Prisoners themselves, they consequently did not have to be so frightened when the SS inspectors came around, for the SS men had no special consideration for the buttocks or necks of camp "officials."

At 4:30, "coffee" — a light mint infusion without nourishment and with a repulsive taste — was distributed. We often took a few swallows and used the rest for washing, but not all of us were able to do without this poor substitute for coffee and consequently many inmates ceased to wash. This was the first step to the grave. It was an almost iron law: those who failed to wash every day soon died. Whether this was the cause or the effect of inner breakdown, I don't know; but it was an infallible symptom.

After coffee came the daily roll call, in which inmates lined up in ranks of five, dressed and redressed to military perfection, and interminably counted and recounted. The actual number of prisoners had to dovetail with the theoretical number computed by the Barrack Scribe. Prisoners who had died since the previous roll call also had to be counted present so their bodies were dragged out of the barracks and placed on the ground next to their live comrades. When everything had been checked, with continuing screams and blows, the barracks staff took its place in front of the assembled ranks. Two block *Führers* marched briskly from barrack to barrack, and at their approach everyone froze at attention and held his breath. The Barrack Elder always gave the command in an especially dramatic way: "*Block fünf. Achtung! Mützen . . .* (the pause always seemed to last an eternity) . . .

*ab!*" Then he stepped forward, reporting the number of prisoners present. The SS men would inspect the ranks, take their own count, and then pass on to the next barrack.

When the numbers did not tally, there was hell to pay. The barrack staff scurried around like rats and they were urged on by SS men with kicks and blows. The barracks were thoroughly searched and woe to the wretch who had fallen asleep, fainted, or was simply too weak to stir. They fell on him like a pack of mad dogs. If the barrack staff found him before the SS men got there, he had a chance; but once the SS men arrived, he was as good as dead. By the time he was dragged out and propped up in formation, he was half dead from the beating he had been given. As soon as roll call was over he was publicly hanged for "having attempted to escape."

Most often, however, when a man had to be searched for, he was beyond the reach of the SS. He would usually be stretched out staring up at them with fearless, glassy eyes, teeth bared in a mocking grin that no SS man's fist could wipe away. They would kick and curse him nonetheless, but he was beyond their power.

When roll call was completed, the order, "*Arbeitskommandos formieren!*" rang out. The formations would then scatter, and in the big open area dozens of work parties would form and be marched out of the gate under the leadership of the Kapos. Slowly the square was emptied and the barracks staffs would go back inside to their duties. Only the newly arrived who had not yet been assigned to *Kommandos* were left behind. For these there was no hiding or resting in the barracks. Whether in broiling sun or pouring rain it was forbidden to be in the barracks during the day and new arrivals were forced to spend the entire day out of doors. They would be divided into groups of fifty with a Kapo in charge and the drilling would begin. This pitiful and comic spectacle of ragged men in wooden shoes trying to imitate well-drilled military formations was continued beneath a barrage of blows, curses, and orders. The Kapos, young and well fed, did not tire quickly and depending on their mood — and the frequency with which SS men appeared on the square — drill might be more exhausting and sadistic on one day than on another. When the Kapo was in a bad mood or desirous of showing his zeal to the SS men, formations did everything on the double, push-ups, knee-bends, and all the rest,

without letup all morning long. The sun rose and beat down pitilessly, we grew increasingly exhausted by the exercise, we were tormented by hunger.

At last noontime came and an hour break for lunch. We stood in formation before the barrack awaiting the return of the work parties. The barrack staff brought kettles of soup from the kitchen and set them up in a row, and we stood in line and one by one went up to the kettle. One of the orderlies took a bowl from a pile, and the Barrack Elder in person ladled some soup into it. One by one the inmates grabbed the bowl with the steaming soup and greedily began to drink it while walking away. There were no spoons at Maidanek: with time, you might organize one, but in the interim you drank the hot soup directly from the bowl and you did it in a hurry because the bowl might be needed for someone else.

The soup line always moved fast. Several hundred starving men kept the closest and most suspicious tabs on the Barrack Elder as he plunged his ladle into the kettle and filled bowl after bowl. To distribute soup from the kettle was a great art and a great mystery. Theoretically, each inmate was entitled to a liter of soup and the ladle did, in fact, hold one liter. But all the Barrack Elder had to do was step up the pace of his serving, tip the ladle ever so slightly to one side or another and he pinched some of the soup from each theoretical "full" liter. Several hundred such fractions add up to a considerable amount of soup. In most cases the thicker and more nourishing ingredients in the soup fell to the bottom of the kettle and the top was little more than water. Naturally the Barrack Elder always left the thickest part of the soup at the bottom for himself, for his own turn came last. Often he would work it so that the spoon literally "stood up" in the bottom of the kettle. A rude voice would yell angrily, "Stir the soup goddam it!" The Elder would seem to give the soup a good swirl with the ladle, but he would be careful not to stir very deeply so that his own share would be nonetheless nourishing for all of the showy exhibition.

Only the newcomers waxed indignant about this; the old-timers knew better, and didn't try to buck the system. Their strategy was based on the type of soup being served. For potato or turnip soup, where the best settled at the bottom, one tactic was necessary; for cabbage or nettles, where the "best" remained on top, another was called for. Each kettle held fifty liters, and for potato or turnip soup, they placed

themselves in line at the end of every fifty men, while the newcomers surged forward to be served first. In these matters, the experienced inmates acted with great shrewdness, and one of them initiated me into the soup strategy shortly after my arrival, my basic course in the *Konzentrationslager* University.

After everyone had had his bowl of soup, the Barrack Elder granted his favorites the privilege of scraping the bottom of the kettle and licking it clean, and there was constant competition for that privilege. This one-hour break for soup, served and consumed outside the barrack, was the only break during the working day.

Field Three housed from 5,000 to 8,000 inmates, and during my first lunch break I looked around eagerly for men I had known in Warsaw. I found many and from them I learned that the workers from our printing plant had been sent to the *Flugplatz* only a few days before me; they had been assigned to Poniatowa, Trawniki, the *Flugplatz*, and Maidanek. They had been deported with the personnel of the *Werterfassung*, and only Rachman and a group of nine men had been left behind to dismantle the presses and prepare them for transport by rail. The *Werterfassung* authorities had decided to move the printing plant to Radom and as soon as the machines were installed and ready, all the printers now in the camps would be sent there to operate it. Some of the printers told me that Rachman had given a high SS officer 100,000 zlotys so that the print shop would be moved to Radom and our printers assigned to it.

After the *Kommandos* had been formed and marched away for the afternoon work, the newcomers were ordered to the barracks to be shaved and to have numbers sewed on their clothes. The barracks barber turned out to be my regular barber from Leszno Street, a man named Stopnica. The man who sewed on my number was the well-known Warsaw tailor, Nisson. Inmates were not yet issued striped uniforms in those days but instead wore cast-off civilian clothing: down the back was a wide red band and the letters *K.L.*, with similar stripes on the trouser legs down the front of the left leg and the back of the right one. Inmates who failed to report to the authorities when these stripes faded risked being hanged "for planning to escape."

Each inmate also had a black number on white canvas sewed over the left breast of his jacket and below it a colored triangle with a

letter inside designating nationality: P for Pole, U for Ukrainian, F for Frenchman, and so on. The color of the triangle indicated the nature of the inmate's "crime": political prisoners had red triangles, common criminals green, saboteurs black ones, homosexuals pink, religious objectors purple, and Jews yellow triangles. Neither Germans nor Jews wore letters to indicate nationality. The Jews were a group apart and the yellow triangle was a sufficient badge in itself. Only we, the Jews of Warsaw, were singled out for special "distinction": besides the yellow triangle pointed upward we had on top of it a red triangle pointing downward. Together they made a red and yellow six-pointed Star of David which stood for "the Jewish Bandits of Warsaw."

After being shaved and having our numbers sewed on, we were sent out of the barracks to continue drilling. This time we were to learn to take our caps off together, and the practice gave opportunities for endless sadistic beatings of those who put their caps back on a second too soon or too late.

Beating and being beaten was taken for granted at Mайданек, and was an integral part of the system. Everyone could beat an inmate and the more experienced inmates never questioned why. They knew that they were beaten merely because they happened to run into someone who wanted to beat them. In most cases, the beating did not even involve personal anger or hatred; the authorities hated their victims as a group because when you wrong people for no reason, sooner or later you must come to hate them. It is difficult for man to endure the idea he is a beast and maltreats another human being without cause; therefore, he eventually discovers justification for his behavior and imputes the fault to his victim. Thus, beating was part of the system. Thus, also, the victim was expected to take his licks standing rigidly at attention. Attempts to avoid blows, to cover one's face or head, were treated as additional offenses. Some made the mistake of smiling stupidly as if they understood the "joke" being played on them, as if they appreciated the authorities' "sense of humor," which served only to irritate the beaters further. Worst of all were the beatings undertaken for sheer distraction, for there the morbid imagination of the executioners knew no bounds. Some derived their greatest pleasure from refined torture and were delighted by the professional approval of their colleagues. Some were motivated by sadistic curiosity: they wanted to see how a

man suffers and dies. Still others achieved a sexual enjoyment from the last fatal spasms of their victims.

One Kapo, for example, lay in wait near the camp latrine, hidden behind a brick pile. When he saw an inmate running for the latrine he would jump out of his hiding place and call the prisoner to him. The unfortunate victim, repressing the pain in his bowels, would stand at attention while the Kapo showered him with questions. "Where are you going, you son-of-a-bitch? Who is your Kapo? What *Kommando*? Where were you born?" By that time the poor wretch would be writhing with pain. Then the Kapo would give him calisthenics, making him squat in deep-knee-bends until the poor man could no longer control his sphincter and "exploded." Then the Kapo would belabor him with kicks and blows until, bruised and bleeding, covered with his own excrement, the victim would be allowed to drag himself to the latrine.

Another Kapo specialized in torturing alleged escapees. All over the area were scattered large cement pipes a yard in diameter. Occasionally, an inmate ready to faint from exhaustion would seek refuge from the hot sun or pouring rain in one of those pipes, where he would usually fall asleep. Which was precisely what the Kapo was waiting for. He would sneak up to the pipe and arouse his victim with a blood-curdling yell. The prisoner would leap out of the cement pipe and run for his life, the Kapo screaming in hot pursuit. Soon other Kapos and SS men would join the hunt and prolong it deliberately until their victim was surrounded. His pursuers would merely stand there for a time, watching the inmate's agonies, his heaving chest, his maddened eyes, and the smile on his face, the inexplicable smile of a man who knows his end has come but somehow cannot believe it.

Then one of the pursuers would step forward for the kill. The step signified that the victim was his, and his alone, and none of the others would touch him. If the man playing the part of the matador was one Kapo, a native Viennese, he would knock the prisoner down with a lightning blow and then, with a balletlike motion put his heel against the man's throat. His speciality was strangling prisoners with the heel of his boot, and he would stand erect in the pose of a Roman gladiator enjoying the approval of the other Kapos, who would speak admiringly of a "good, clean job." A real master, a strangler who did not need to dirty his hands. If the matador was another Kapo, named Janusz, his

method of killing was different. He would throw himself on his victim and lie on top of him, almost caressingly wrapping his fingers around his victim's throat. To the uninitiated, it might seem that the two bodies were throbbing in erotic ecstasy, and in fact the Kapo did have an orgasm at such moments, while his companions looked on in snickering admiration. This might happen once, or even twice a day.

But most beat their victims because it was the custom of the place. At Mайданек no one could be neutral: either you were victim or executioner. Anyone in authority who failed to take advantage of his privilege to beat inmates undermined his status in the camp elite. Later, we learned that the elite of our tormentors was far from homogeneous; within the hierarchy there were complex factions and conflicts.

At 6 P.M. the *Kommandos* began to return and the gate became lively. Every few minutes a Kapo — some in red cavalry breeches — drew up before the guard, stood at attention, and reported that his team was returning in such-and-such numbers and the guard would scrupulously write that down in his book. Some teams came back like victorious armies, ranks swaying evenly and rhythmically, files on parade. Others came back as from a pogrom, uneven ranks of emaciated and exhausted men driven by the kicks and curses of their foreman and Kapos. At the end of such processions usually came the corpses, carried on stretchers by their comrades. The work parties assigned to road building, about which there were bloodcurdling stories, produced the most corpses. Not only was road construction beyond the strength and endurance of weakened, undernourished men, but the worst sadists were the Kapos and foremen on those *Kommandos*.

The camp was, in fact, a small city, and continually expanding. Administrative work alone required considerable staff. The kitchens for inmates and SS took a small army of potato peelers, dishwashers, cooks, and food handlers, as well as the special detail which carried the rations to the various Fields. The camp kitchen in our Field served at times as many as 30,000 inmates. Workers were required for new buildings, new roads, fences, water conduits, and all the rest. Workshops of all kinds employed tailors, mechanics, cobblers, seamstresses. Only a small part of workshop production went to fulfill camp needs; most of it was devoted to cleaning up and repairing objects looted or confiscated by the Germans so that they could subsequently be sent to the Reich. Hundreds of inmates worked at sorting, disinfecting, and storing the

property taken from new arrivals, and choosing the best of it for shipment to the *Vaterland*.

A special team was permanently employed to empty the gas chambers and dispose of the bodies. The normal problem of the murderer — what to do with the body — was one of Mайданек's most difficult "technical" problems, and the task of disposing of the dead frequently lagged behind the constantly stepped-up "output." Some dead were buried in the old-fashioned way in enormous mass graves in the Krepiec Woods — the work of the so-called *Waldkommando* (the forest detail) — and some were burned on special grills in a provisional crematorium — the task of the *Himmelkommando* (the heaven detail). Bones were ground up and mixed with ashes and the latrine excrement to be used eventually as fertilizer. A special *Scheisskommando* (the "shit detail") cleaned up the latrines and carried away the excrement. Of all the work parties this was considered one of the most desirable: men assigned to it were given better rations and the SS men left it alone because of the stench. . . .

After supper Szydlower sent for me to tell me that my middle-tier bunk was now assigned to some "big shot," and I'd have to take one of the top bunks a few rows back. At first I didn't care, but around midnight I was awakened by something wet on my face. The barracks was full of snores and the latrine stench. Outside it was raining heavily and there was a hole in the roof right over my bunk. I moved to the edge of the bunk, but soon it was completely drenched. I got no sleep and finally the gong ended my torment.

Something different was in store for me. After roll call, when the order resounded to form *Kommandos*, the scribe called out the numbers of those inmates assigned to road building, but many of them began to gripe and one had a hysterical fit. He threw himself on the ground, tore his shirt, screamed he would rather be killed on the spot. Others showed the marks of the previous day — a black eye, welts from a riding crop, a bandaged hand. Several Barracks Elders and a Kapo came to the assistance of Szydlower and the "mutiny" was swiftly quelled. "As punishment," thirty additional men from our barracks were assigned to the road-building work party, including me. We joined a large column which soon was marched through the gate, and we sank up to our ankles in the clayey ground still sodden from the all-night

downpour. Our wooden shoes stuck to the clay, making every step an effort. Small wonder that road building was a recognized necessity at Mайданек. We marched past Fields Two and One and found ourselves in an open area next to the Chelm highway. Before us were the guard-house, the kennels with 200 trained police dogs, and the Political Department, whose mention gave the political prisoners the shakes. Nearby was a house said to be the camp garrison's *bordello*.

We were split into a number of small groups, mine assigned to loading stones on a cart that was mounted on rails and stationed at the top of a small hill. When it was filled with stones, a prisoner got up behind it to steer it. Other prisoners gave the cart a shove and the driver went down the hill, braking the cart with the help of a heavy pole wedged between the back wheels and the body of the cart. In the same way he had to bring the cart to a halt at the bottom of the hill, where another work party unloaded the stones and then four prisoners, of whom I was one, had to push the empty cart back up the hill. Two young Soviet prisoners of war, supervised by a Kapo and an SS man, were our foremen. During the morning all went well, but in the afternoon the SS man and the Kapo for some reason became enraged and began to belabor us with riding crops and sticks, shouting in broken Polish and German: "Quick, quick! Shove hard, you lazy bastards!"

The foreman emulated them and soon we were running up and down hill under a steady stream of blows. The Russians joined the game wholeheartedly, enjoying the beating and adding their native Russian obscenities to the continual stream of *Dreckjude*, *Judenisau*, and other imprecations screamed by the Germans. One of the Russians ran up to the man next to me and smashed him in the face with his fist. When I looked at him surprised — could he be the same man who had spoken so gently that morning? — the Russian screamed at me, "You Jews won't work. In Russia, too, you always pick the cushy office jobs. Well, now we'll teach you a lesson!"

I had made a mistake in attracting his attention. After a moment the cart was ready to descend again, but this time the driver didn't manage to slow down. His pole broke, the cart jumped the rails, turned over, and spilled the load of stones. The driver had jumped off right into the arms of the SS man and was killed on the spot for "sabotage." When his bloody remains were shoved aside to be carried back to camp after work, the Russian pointed to me and said, "You take his place."

I had never done anything like that in my life. With terror in my heart, I tried my best . . . and to my surprise was successful. Every time the cart got safely down the hill, I was soaked with sweat and shaking with tension. That evening when our column returned to camp, four stretchers with the dead made up the rear, two of them from our barracks. I could barely stand on my feet at roll call. We were counted, as usual, and the numbers tallied. The Barrack Elder glanced at the corpses sympathetically because they had died conveniently. The barracks staff hated to have inmates die at night, for then they did not profit from the deaths. This way the Barracks Elder and his cronies got the dead men's shares of the supper ration, since the supper roster had already been closed for the day. To die during the night was an uncomradely act and the disappointed jackals showered abuse on the corpse in the morning.

Our misfortunes were not yet over for the day. A slip-up somewhere had left the over-all roll call for Field Three short. In Mайданек, where the main activity was the extermination of hundreds of thousands of people, the slightest bookkeeping error sent everyone scurrying as if the fate of the Third Reich were at stake. At such times the roll call might be prolonged for hours until the missing inmate was found, or the error otherwise accounted for. This time we did not have to wait long. In about half an hour a prisoner ran in through the gate followed by an SS man belaboring him with a club. "Aii, I'm dead. I'm not alive!" the victim screamed at the top of his lungs. The poor man did not know how close to the truth he was. It turned out he had been in the latrine when his *Kommando* had been ordered back to camp. By mistake he had fallen in with another team which ended up at Field Four. He realized this at the gate to Field Four and reported to the sergeant on duty there. Nevertheless, he was summarily sentenced to be hanged for "attempting to escape."

On the night of my first road-building experience, again I could not sleep. It rained and my bed was soaked; I was tormented by rheumatic pains; I had caught cold in the bladder and kept having to run to the latrine all through the night; in the morning I could barely drag my body to roll call. Again I was assigned to the road-building *Kommando*. This time we were to dig ditches for sewers, and each group of five prisoners was allotted a length of ditch to dig. My group included two

sturdy, well-fed young Polish laborers, two emaciated Jews from the last Warsaw shipment, and myself.

The Polish boys worked so efficiently that our group did better than the others, our sector was ready before the midday break, and the Kapos and SS men who strode back and forth passed us by and did not beat us. After soup, our group was ordered to dig a lateral trench to the main conduit. Our Kapo nudged me, picked up a stick, thrust it into my hand, and said, "You'll be foreman!" The Polish boys glared at me angrily, but dared not protest. Flashing their shovels, they set to work again efficiently, but the two Warsaw Jews at the other end of the ditch could barely move and every other minute they had to stop for rest. The Poles grumbled loudly: "Look at those goddam goldbricks! No wonder the Germans exterminate them like lice." Gradually, they grew bolder and began to urge me on: "What are you standing there for? What kind of a foreman are you? So now we have to work for these dirty Jews? Why don't you use your stick on them?"

I tried to appease them, but failed. When I urged the Jews to greater effort, they replied that I was as much an anti-Semite as those Polish brutes. I knew that to save my own skin I ought to hit them, but I simply couldn't do it. In a camp swarming with sadists and murderers waiting only for a pretext to indulge themselves, and many who did not even need a pretext, I was sure that I would be maimed or killed. What was I to do? I began to shower abuse on my mutineers: "You so-and-sos, shut up, and get back to work!" The Poles and Jews responded in kind, and our Kapo ran up. "Was ist los?" he yelled. Examining the ditchdigging at the Polish end and at the Jewish end, he ordered me to bend over and a merciless blow set my whole body afire. A moment later I was in the ditch with a shovel in my hands and a new foreman, one of the Poles, stood over me, brandishing his stick. "You shitty intellectual, so you want to play the good guy, huh? Well, if you don't want to smack them, you'll have to work for them!" I dug with such a passion that the Pole was amazed; I dug as if my salvation depended on it, and my two Warsaw colleagues, encouraged by blows, were working harder, too.

I dragged myself back to camp that night like a beaten dog. When I went into the barrack, Szydlower jeered at me. He had heard about the incident. "Next time you'll know better," he laughed sardonically.

"I, too, thought in the beginning that the world would come to an end if I smacked someone, that I was a traitor to humanity, to my people, to God knows what. Jews are sacred, Jews are martyrs. How could I lift my hand against them? But I got used to it. Jews are just shit like everybody else." The two Warsaw Jews who had brought it all on me listened with cynical approval. "Everybody knows you can't be an asshole in the KL. A *schnmuck* of a Jew is worse than an apostate. If we get a stupid foreman, why should we work ourselves to death?"

That night it poured again and I lay on my bunk, groaning, in what was no more than a mud puddle. Every muscle and joint of my body ached, and I still had a cold in my bladder. I was close to a complete breakdown. What hurt me most was the attitude of the two Jews I had tried to be decent to. I could not keep up the struggle any longer. I would have welcomed death; I would even have killed myself if the effort had not been too great. I was at my lowest ebb. "You're *kaputt*," I said to myself. "They've finished you off in three days. *Kaputt!*" My instinct of self-preservation summoned up visions of Lena and Wlodek, and of those who had died in the ashes of the Warsaw Ghetto and whose last testament I had determined to transmit to the world, but in vain: my will was broken.

I slept fitfully, in starts, and gradually the will to live won out over my torpor. I was lucky. Had the breakdown come two weeks later I would no longer have had the inner resources to resist, but Mайданек had not yet sucked out my last ounce of strength; there was just enough left to tip the scales. "I am going to live," I said to myself. "Let them jeer, let them call me an asshole, but I will not beat anybody up." Half unconscious I climbed down from my bunk and sat with my back against the wall where the rain could no longer soak me, and so spent the rest of the night until reveille sounded.

Before roll call I went to the Scribe, a man I'd known before the war, and asked him not to send me on the road-building *Kommando* because it was beyond my strength. He looked at me closely, but said nothing. It was a cold morning and I shivered in my wet clothing; I could barely stand at attention. The Scribe assigned me to do garden work near the barracks, the lightest work in the camp. I had to weed the lawn and remove all refuse from it. I picked up every piece of paper, stone, weed, then watered and smoothed the ground. I spent

most of the day on my knees. The day grew warmer, too, my wet clothes steamed in the sun, and the warmth assuaged my rheumatic pains.

"I must do something," I kept saying to myself. But what? I had to get less dangerous and exhausting work. But how? Beginning with the Scribe Weinkiper and Barrack Elder Szydlower, all the people who might help me looked at me with what I can only describe as embarrassed compassion. The Barrack Elder in Number Six barracks, who was a prisoner of war, and who was looking for an office worker, told me candidly, "I have at least twenty inmates who'd gladly give me a ten-dollar gold piece to get this job. Have you got anything to offer? If you have, we can talk. If you haven't, you're wasting my time. I'm too poor to afford gifts. I might do it for my brother, or my best friend, but for a stranger . . . ?"

In despair I took a step so bold that later I never did understand how I dared it. The ruling caste among the camp inmates during that period were Czechoslovak Jews. They controlled the central office jobs, kitchen jobs, and most other key jobs. They had been sent to Maidanek in May, 1942, when the camp was "ruled" by Jewish prisoners of war from the Polish army, soldiers who had fought in the 1939 campaign against the *Wehrmacht*. Originally there had been 12,000 Czechoslovak Jews there but by May, 1943, only 800 were alive. The survivors spoke of the past with horror, of roll calls that lasted all night in winter cold so that in the morning the ground was littered with frozen bodies, of the ruthless slaughter of the sick and weak, of endless beatings for the slightest infraction, of unremitting hunger. And all those Czechoslovak Jews remembered was that their torturers had been Polish Jews. Though they knew their tormentors were only tools in the hands of the Germans, their resentment persisted. Those who had survived were the strongest, toughest, and shrewdest, and gradually they had managed to move in on the better jobs as the Polish prisoners of war were sent into Lublin. They were able to do this because most of them spoke fluent German.

In the main office of Field Three, the *Lagerschreiber* who was next in rank to the *Germaner* was a Czech Jew named Horowitz. Small, bald, with a low forehead and jutting jaw, yellowed skin and a bristling beard, he treated the new shipments for the crematorium with contempt rather than hatred. Occasionally he made short speeches at

roll call to inform the inmates of the latest orders and, although no one understood the language, he spoke Czech, usually opening with "Pricks!" (*Hújové!*) After summing up the order in Czech, he translated it into German. He did not torture inmates, but he was short-tempered and did occasionally strike out at or kick a prisoner.

I made up my mind to ask Horowitz for help. As he was coming into the administrative barrack, I stopped him and in one breath told him I was an editor and journalist by trade, and that I felt I had a duty to survive to tell the world about the murder of the Jewish people. I appealed to him to help me to survive. When I finished my outburst, I closed my eyes, expecting to be beaten. When I opened them again, Horowitz was looking at me kindly. "Strange," he said in German "before the war, I, too, was a journalist. I edited a monthly issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Prague. I understand you. I'll help. Go back to your barrack. Don't worry." He asked for my number, the number of my barrack and my name. I looked at him incredulously. He smiled and repeated, "Go back to your barrack. And don't worry."

When I got back to my barrack, the Scribe informed me that the big shot who had taken my bunk had been transferred to another barrack and I could have my old bunk back again. But when the road-building *Kommando* returned that night, carrying two dead, my spirits sank again. There was wailing and lamentation, and finally Szydlower made up his mind to take a drastic step. After roll call he negotiated with two Kapos of the road-builders' *Kommando* and concluded a deal which he announced triumphantly to us. For a regular tribute of one bread ration a week — in our barrack of 300 men that meant 40 loaves of bread — the Kapos promised to beat the workers more moderately, and not to death. Needless to say, Szydlower got his cut of the 40 loaves. But even that enormous (by Maidanek standards) bribe did not stop the murders. After two days of relative calm, the torture and murder resumed, allegedly because of intervention by a third Kapo, and the transaction came to nothing.

Szydlower had figured out that it was more profitable to rule over a gang of well-placed inmates than over wretches. Though he would not have hesitated to sacrifice an inmate's life to make his own easier, he was ready to help us as long as our survival did not threaten his interests. With new shipments from Warsaw arriving daily, more men were needed in all branches of the camp administration. Szydlower got

busy at the Employment Office, headed by another native of Lodz, a lawyer, and one night announced that he had succeeded in placing about 50 of us in the kitchen as potato peelers.

The very word *kitchen* was a magnet to which everyone was attracted. Szydlower picked out the neatest-looking inmates, and I was one of the lucky ones. We marched eagerly to the kitchen barrack and were met by the foreman of the potato-peeling room, a man generally called Lieutenant Franto, because he had been a lieutenant in the Czech Army. I spoke to him and in him gained a protector. The only Jew in the town in which he lived, his Jewish ties amounted to the fact that once a year, on Yom Kippur, he took his family in a horse-driven carriage to the nearest town where there was a synagogue.

The camp kitchen was in an L-shaped barrack, divided into three rooms: one where potatoes were peeled, a washing-up room which also served as a storeroom, and the kitchen proper. To the last we were forbidden access. At the head of the kitchen department was an SS man with a number of assistants, a crowd of Kapos and foremen and *Schiebers*. Our work was organized so that on each side of a trough of potatoes a group of ten inmates sat peeling. There were troughs at intervals of every two yards. The peeled potatoes were thrown into a small vessel with handles which, when filled, was taken to the wash-up room where a clerk recorded the number of vessels brought in by each group of peelers.

We began work the next day and a few days later our group included teachers, lawyers, rabbis, and other intellectuals, among them my old friend, the historian and former deputy to the Polish parliament, Dr. Isaac Schipper.

After the days spent in calisthenics and drilling and on the road-construction gang, sitting down in a warm room and doing light work was heaven. We were particularly grateful when the weather was bad outside. Yet even here we had to work without letup. The output of each group was carefully watched, and the group which daily peeled the most potatoes received an extra ration of soup. We had to be careful not only to deliver our daily quota of peeled potatoes, but we had to make sure that the parings were not too thick. Anyone caught peeling potatoes uneconomically lost the job. Moreover, we were searched every day to make sure that no one smuggled either potatoes or peelings out with him. Because the rabbi, Dr. Schipper and I were scarcely

expert potato peelers, we resorted to a stratagem: in co-operation with some of the other potato-peeling groups, we "borrowed" one filled vessel every day so that each group had its turn at getting the additional soup ration. Thus, even we finally managed to organize something. But like the rest, we were hungry, and being so close to food, smelling its tantalizing odors all day long from the kitchen, was an added torment which gave us dizzy spells and painful stomach spasms.

Aside from the higher-ups, the dominant figure in the potato-peeling room was a former Polish police officer named Gernasinski. Dark, squat, with a square-cut face and turned-up nose, Gernasinski was, under the guise of joviality, a menace. He had two favorite games. One was to hide and watch the potato-peeling brigades. When he caught someone slowing up or talking to his neighbors, he would throw a potato at the man's head. If he managed to hit his target, joyous shouting and laughter rang through the room. His second game was more dangerous. There was a big water basin at the back of our room and Gernasinski would sneak up on his victim and suddenly push his head into the water and hold it under. If the SS man in the kitchen ran up, lured by the victims' struggles and Gernasinski's maniacal laughter, the game would end tragically. The victim would be ducked again and again until he drowned. The other prisoners were forbidden to stop working or to look up and watch while that sadistic exhibition was being perpetrated: we had to sit there pretending that nothing was happening.

In the adjoining room, where the potatoes were rinsed before being taken to the kitchen, all the jobs were held by a well-organized group of young Belgian Jews. They spoke French among themselves, lived in the same barrack, and shared all their possessions.

The kitchen proper was run by Slovak Jews, most of them from Carpatho-Ruthenia, superstitiously religious and simple-minded. They took special care of rabbis, so that in Field Three rabbis had a good chance of surviving. From these men the two rabbis who worked with my potato-peeling group often got extra portions of thick soup, slices of salami, meat, and margarine which they hid under their coats. One of the rabbis ate everything he got; the other, a taciturn man involved with his private concerns, exchanged everything — even his soup ration — for bread and boiled potatoes. The former said that Jewishness allowed one to eat nonkosher food if one's life was endangered; the latter

merely smiled and remarked that if such was the will of God, he would get by on dry bread rather than eat nonkosher food. The law allows, but does *not compel* such observance, he said.

The Slovak Jews favored children as well as rabbis. There still were a number of children at Mайданек, boys between ten and fourteen who had escaped being gassed on admittance. Most of them were employed by the *Schreibstube* as messengers — *Laufer*. All day long one saw them dashing back and forth in the various Fields their young voices crying, "Barrack Scribe Number Six wanted at the office!" "Barrack Elder Number Eleven go to the Employment Office." Some had fathers among the prisoners and took care of them affectionately, as if they themselves were grownups and their fathers children. Even the most hardened Mайданек old-timer had a soft spot for the Jewish children, a species being made extinct before our eyes by the Germans. Some of the prisoners showed their affection in the most curious ways, such as teaching the boys obscenities and terms of abuse. When the children used such words, their mentors purred with pleasure.

But some children were not so fortunate. A few days after my arrival I saw eleven-year-old Uri Horensztein, son of one of the *Judenrat* secretaries who, before the liquidation of the Ghetto, had lived in our apartment house on Muranowska Street. Though Uri was big for his age, he had been pampered by his mother and now cried all day for his parents. Because of his experiences and the drastic change of diet, he lost control of his bladder and wet his bed nightly. The Barrack Elder assigned another boy of his own age to keep him company, but the other boy proved no help; instead, he abused Uri, beat him, mocked him, stole his food, and made fun of his bed-wetting in front of everyone. Finally, the Barrack Elder sent the boy to the *Camelbaracke* where the *Lagerführer* found him one night and personally handed him with a belt.

By being assigned to the kitchen detail I was better off than before, but I was still tormented by hunger, and in the face of that basic animal deprivation, food became the only subject of conversation, the master of our thoughts. . . .

At long last, Horowitz came one day to tell me he had gotten me the job he'd been waiting for. He took me to a field near the entrance where a single barrack stood surrounded by a high fence. A square sign before it had the inscription: *Fahrbereitschaft*. . . .

The *Fahrbereitschaft* was Mайданек's motor pool. In the barrack

was a repair shop with every trade connected with automotive repair represented by at least one specialist: mechanics, glaziers, locksmiths, electricians, painters, carpenters, saddlers, etc. Two noncommissioned SS officers, who looked like twins, were in charge, and they had a Kapo, a Scribe, and a messenger boy. Most of the staff were Poles, there were a few Slovaks, and only two or three Polish Jews, thirty people in all. The Kapo, a Warsaw-born Pole, received me politely, but without enthusiasm. He looked over my clothes and said that first they'd dress me up. We went to the storehouse where I was given a decent suit that almost fit me, clean linen, and a pair of real leather shoes of the right size. After washing myself and putting on the clean clothes, I felt like a pasha. I had caught cold from standing barefoot on the frozen ground in the icy temperatures, and my nose was running. Timidly, I asked the Kapo for a handkerchief and, to my surprise, was given one.

Horowitz had done his level best. I hadn't known there was such a paradise at Mайданек. My companions were decent and courteous. A loaf of bread was divided into four portions instead of eight. You could eat as much soup as you wanted and nobody cared because most of them received food parcels from home. The barrack was heated by an iron stove. We talked about politics and other general subjects. Finally, we got up at 5 A.M. instead of at 3:30 and roll call took no more than a few minutes. Most phenomenal, there were no members of that Mайданек scourge: lice! In short, it seemed like heaven.

evening . . . brought coffee to the sick. The last time she brought it was on the eve of her own death." Sometimes it took the form of one group helping another, as when a work squad had to carry sacks of cement from the storeroom to a building site:

*I was equal to the job, but working with us were weaker men who grew exhausted after a few trips. The younger of us, myself included, pitched in to help them. We had agreed among our group that we would help one another to whatever extent was possible, rather than surrender to the dog-eat-dog philosophy which poisoned the minds of some prisoners.*

And sometimes help came collectively, unplanned and uncalled for, where and when it was needed:

*For example, five women are pushing a conveyor car loaded to the brim with gravel . . . the car jumps the track . . . then it gets stuck in the sand. The women stop, completely helpless. Fortunately the chief is not around. All efforts to replace the car on the tracks are fruitless; the heavy-laden car will not budge and the chief may appear at any moment. A clandestine congregating begins. Stealthily, bent figures sneak toward the derailed car from all directions: the women who work on the mound of sand, those who level the gravel, a group just returned from delivering a track. A common exertion of arms and backs raises the car, the spades dig into the sand under the wheels and heave — and the loaded car moves, shivers. Fear gives strength to the workers. With more pushing, one wheel is on the track. A Kapo comes rushing from afar, she has noticed people missing at various points of work. But before she can get there, one more tug, one more push — and the gravel-laden conveyor car proceeds smoothly along the tracks.*

The survivor's experience is evidence that the need to help is as basic as the need for help, a fact which points to the radically social nature of life in extremity and explains an unexpected but very widespread activity among survivors. In the concentration camps a major form of behavior was gift-giving. Inmates were continually giving and sharing little items with each other, and small acts like these were enormously valuable both as morale boosters and often as real aids in the struggle for life. Sometimes the gift was given outright, with no apparent relation between donor and receiver:

*One evening we were served a soup made with semolina. I drank this with all the more relish since I often had to forgo the daily cabbage soup because of my bowels. Just then I noticed a woman, one of the prostitutes, who always kept very much to themselves, approaching my bunk, holding her bowl out to me with both hands.*

*"Micheline, I think this is a soup you can eat; here, take mine too." She emptied her bowl into mine and went without food that day.*

The assumption that there was no moral or social order in the concentration camps is wrong. Except peripherally and for brief periods similar to the "initial collapse" of individuals, the general condition we call chaos or anomie — what philosophers designate as the "state of nature" — did not exist. Certainly it did not prevail. Through innumerable small acts of humanness, most of them covert but everywhere in evidence, survivors were able to maintain societal structures workable enough to keep themselves alive and morally sane. The "state of nature," it turns out, is not natural. A war of all against all must be imposed by force, and no sooner has it started than those who suffer it begin, spontaneously and without plan, to transcend it. . . .

The survivor is the figure who emerges from all those who fought for life in the concentration camps, and the most significant fact about their struggle is that it depended on fixed activities: on forms of social bonding and interchange, on collective resistance, on keeping dignity and moral sense active. That such thoroughly human kinds of behavior were typical in places like Buchenwald and Auschwitz amounts to a revelation reaching to the foundation of what man is.

Sybil Milton

## Women's Survival Skills

The fate of the deported women depended less on nationality and the reason for arrest than on a variety of other factors: date of arrest, place of incarceration, and conditions of deportation. Survival also depended on luck, special skills, physical strength, and membership in a supportive group. Women had significantly different survival skills and techniques

Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust," as appeared in Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Copyright © 1993.

than did men. Although there were neither killing centers nor ghettos in western Europe, German-Jewish women and those of other nationalities frequently used similar strategies for coping with unprecedented terror. Women's specific forms of survival included doing housework as a kind of practical therapy and of gaining control over one's space, bonding and networks, religious or political convictions, the use of inconspicuousness, and possibly even sex.

Women appear to have been more resilient than men, both physically and psychologically, to malnutrition and starvation. Clinical research by Jewish physicians in the Warsaw Ghetto confirmed the impressionistic accounts of contemporaries and brought proof to the assertion that women were less vulnerable to the effects of short-term starvation and famine. Women in Gurs, Theresienstadt, and Bergen-Belsen reported that men "were selfish and undisciplined egoists, unable to control their hungry stomachs, and revealed a painful lack of courage." Women also shared and pooled their limited resources better than did men. In Berlin, the Gestapo allowed small groups of Jewish women to provide food for the deportees at the railroad station. The women, experienced in trading for scarce and rationed food, performed this job until the end of 1942. In the camps, women swapped recipes and ways of extending limited quantities of food. Men could be overheard discussing their favorite banquets and restaurants. Since women had been primarily responsible for their families as housewives and cooks, there was some direct correlation between their own survival and previously acquired skills.

After the initial trauma of deportation in freight trains and cattle cars, women were separated from their husbands and children when they entered the camps. Entire groups were automatically sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz on arrival: the old, the young, and the weak. Usually, mothers were not separated from their small children and, thus, perished immediately with them. Fathers were not linked to children in this way. Instead of the protection normally extended to these weaker individuals, women were more vulnerable and their chances of survival decreased if they were pregnant or accompanied by small children.

Those who survived the deportations and selections faced great deprivations. Stripped naked, shorn of hair, and with all possessions confiscated, the women were shocked and numbed. At Auschwitz and Ravensbrück this scene was repeatedly enacted. France Audoul,

deported from France to Ravensbrück in 1943, described being "skinned and shorn":

*One day the order came to go to the showers and there all illusions soon ended. Baggage, clothes, jewelry, letters, souvenirs, and even our hair disappeared under the hands of expert prisoners, hardened by this kind of work. Cries and tears only brought beatings. A hot shower was soothing, but only for a brief moment, for the distribution of shoes and bathrobes was made without any thought of size and height, and this horrible leveling, this ugliness was completed at the political office by the loss of all identity. Names were replaced by triangles with numbers on them. The concentration camp system closed over the terrified women.*

Religious Jewish women, who, once married, kept their hair covered in public under either a wig or scarf, felt both a physical and a spiritual nakedness, thus unprotected and exposed to the whims of their Nazi tormentors. The initial trauma of loss and separation was compounded by isolation in quarantine followed by claustrophobically cramped living conditions in noisy overcrowded barracks where sometimes as many as seven women shared one bunk or straw mattress. The brutal separation of husbands from wives and parents from children only increased the sense of shock and despair. Even in the milder conditions of the Theresienstadt ghetto and transit camp, lack of space led to mass dormitory housing in separate men's, women's, and children's barracks. Many of the German-Jewish women were of middle-class origin; others came from small, close-knit rural communities; all were stunned by the noise of the overcrowded ghettos and camps.

Epidemics also spread more quickly in the confined quarters, exacerbated by constant hunger and thirst. Inadequate sanitary facilities, latrines, and even water for drinking and washing reached unusual extremes in the women's camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. In January 1943, one faucet served 12,000 women for drinking and washing. Charlotte Delbo mentioned being unable to wash for sixty-seven days, unless it snowed or rained. Even Camp Commandant Höss remarked that "general living conditions in the women's camp were incomparably worse [than in the men's camp]. They were far more tightly packed-in and the sanitary and hygienic conditions were notably inferior."

Vignettes and diaries by women interned in Gurs, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Bergen-Belsen revealed that women's traditionally domestic roles as wives, daughters, and mothers aided them under

conditions of extreme duress. In Gurs, during the winter of 1940-1941, despite the increased overcrowding caused by the dumping of the Baden Jews, women fought against the primitive conditions. "They fought the dirt and lassitude with cleaning, scrubbing, and orderliness." This cleaning apparently lowered the spread of disease and consequently decreased mortality in the women's barracks. Comparative mortality statistics by gender in Ravensbrück for August 1943 reveal a similarly lower death rate in the women's barracks. Survivors of other camps in western and eastern Europe reported similar experiences. In Bergen-Belsen, it was reported that "women revealed signs of a more practical and community-minded attitude, chiefly for the sake of the children. They steel themselves to find ways of remedying the situation and show real courage, even prepared, if necessary, to make sacrifices." Cleaning not only prevented the spread of disease; it also functioned as did other familiar "housework" routines as a form of therapy enabling women to gain control over their own space.

Small groups of women in the same barracks or work crews formed "little families" and bonded together for mutual help. Hanna Schramm reported that in Gurs "at first, the women were an undifferentiated mass; one did not recognize individual faces and personalities. Gradually, tentative friendships began." These small families, usually not biologically related, increased protection for individual internees and created networks to "organize" food, clothing, and beds, and to help cope with the privations and primitive camp conditions. At the French jail at Rieucros, 360 refugee women pooled their pennies to buy a second-hand kettle, since the prison food was inedible and the water unsanitary to drink.

Mutual support also came from membership in a religious, political, national, or family unit. Clandestine channels of communication existed in every concentration camp. Lone individuals, men as well as women, had a smaller chance for survival. Kitty Hart attributed her survival to the fact that her mother, deported along with her, was always in close contact. Homogeneous religious groups like Jehovah's Witnesses retained a cohesiveness and comradeship that increased the emotional and physical will to survive. Depending on the situation, this could be either life-saving or very dangerous. Contemptuously nicknamed "Bifos, Bible-Bees, and Bible-Worms" by their SS tormentors, the Witnesses earned a reluctant and secret respect, which occasionally resulted in lighter work assignments as domestic servants in SS homes. But their religious scrupulousness sometimes proved dangerous; a small group of fundamentalists in Ravensbrück refused to eat blood sausage because of

biblical injunctions and thus increased their risk of malnutrition and starvation as well as corporal punishment. [This refusal to eat prohibited foods also applied to some Orthodox Jews.] The Witnesses' pacifism led to their refusal to tend rabbits, whose fur was used in military clothing, resulting in the execution of several women for treason.

Similar group cohesion existed among Orthodox Jewish women from Hungary and Subcarpathian Ruthenia. When Sabbath candles were unavailable they blessed electric light bulbs; their colleagues assigned to the Canada barracks at Auschwitz (the barracks where food, clothing, jewelry, and other goods taken from prisoners were stored) filched supplies for them to make Sabbath candles improvised from hollowed-out potato peels filled with margarine and rag wicks. During Channukah, *dreidels* (tops) were clandestinely carved from small pieces of wood. Christmas was celebrated among the arrested French and Spanish women members of the resistance at the French camp of Les Tourelles "crouched on our straw mattresses, heads hidden under the covers, each sang whatever song she knew . . . through the night." If caught violating camp prohibitions against religious observance, the women were punished by whippings or detention in dark, cage-like solitary confinement cells, and often "selected" for the gas chambers. Similar episodes of religious observant behavior also occurred in men's camps and barracks. Bonding because of religious or political convictions may not have been specific to women, but the degree of group cohesion and noncompetitive support available to women seems markedly greater than among men.

Survival frequently depended on a prisoner's ability to remain inconspicuous; reading a Bible or prayer book during roll call was a conscious risk. Religious Jewish women interned in Gurs during 1940 and 1941 sometimes refused to take advantage of Saturday releases from the internment camps, because of the traditional prohibitions against travel on the Sabbath. By staying, they were sometimes trapped and later deported to Auschwitz, where they perished. Religious group cohesiveness among Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians had both positive and negative implications for survival. During 1944 and 1945 it was tolerated, even in Auschwitz, whereas earlier in the war it often marked a prisoner for more rapid death.

Ability to withstand the extremes of winter made survival more likely. Almost all the memoirs refer to the miserable climate and swampy or clay soils that turned into seas of mud in Gurs, Birkenau, and Ravensbrück.

In freezing winter rains, this mud became as slippery as ice. Fetching food in Gurs during the winter was an acrobatic balancing act; prisoners sank up to their thighs in mud with arms filled with cauldrons of hot soup or ersatz coffee. Those women who were deported from the warmer and milder Mediterranean climates of Greece and Italy could not adjust to the harsh winters of eastern Poland; this increased their vulnerability to disease and death. Inadequate thin prisoner clothing and clogs were unsuitable for standing in rain, ice, and snow during roll calls, many of which lasted up to ten hours. Some of the women repaired their ragged garments and groomed themselves carefully despite the lack of water for washings; this imitation of normal behavior was a conscious and rational attempt at survival. A few prisoners with special skills, like the Communist plumber Charlotte Müller in Ravensbrück, enjoyed somewhat better living conditions. Favored labor brigades were plumbers, masons, and electricians; they received better barracks and rations, which increased their odds of survival.

A popular postwar myth, sometimes exploited and sensationalized, held that Jewish women were forced to serve as prostitutes in the SS bordellos and were frequently raped. Although such cases did undoubtedly occur, it was not the norm and reflects a macabre postwar misuse of the Holocaust for popular titillation. Kitty Hart calls these sexual fantasies of postwar literature and television "ridiculous misconceptions." Sexuality, either heterosexual or lesbian, was most likely practiced by prisoners who were camp functionaries and therefore better fed.

Still, clandestine heterosexual liaisons did occur, even in Auschwitz, where men were assigned to labor details in women's camps. Brief stolen moments were arranged in potato storage sheds, clothing depots, warehouses, laundry vans, the bakery, the canteen, and even in chicken coops. Despite the risks if caught, the border zone between the men's and women's subcamps in Ravensbrück and Auschwitz became a place for reasserting visual contact, signals, and covert messages. In Gurs, a limited number of passes were allotted to each barracks so that women could visit their interned husbands in the men's enclosure. Although privacy was hard to find, in Theresienstadt, for example, lovers met hurriedly in the barracks' coal bunker at night. Weddings also took place in Theresienstadt and other ghettos and transit camps where milder conditions prevailed; and if both spouses survived, these symbolic marriages were often legalized in postwar civil ceremonies. There were also deep friendships between women that may have become lesbian relationships.

These have been difficult to document given the inhibitions of survivors and historians. Occasionally, flirtation and sex were used to buy food or a better work situation; even sex could have served as a strategy for survival. Traditional anxieties and guilt about sex were not applicable in the world of total subservience reinforced by terror in the camps.

Every camp had an active resistance movement linked to the outside world. Women were observed to be more resourceful and skillful than men at passing messages between jail cells and barracks, on work details, and during roll calls. They were also more skilled at trading cigarettes and food to obtain essentials for their friends and prison families. Inmate physicians in Ravensbrück saved many prisoners from selections; for example, the Yugoslav doctor Najda Persic wrote false diagnoses and the Polish doctor Maria Grabska tried to remove or change the tattoos on Austrian women slated for death.

There were even open revolts in which women participated at Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and possibly even Bergen-Belsen. It is believed that French-Jewish women inmates revolted during October 1942 at the satellite camp of Budy near Auschwitz and were consequently massacred by those arrested as associates and prostitutes together with SS officers. The only surviving evidence is from the memoirs of Pery Broad, an SS man in the Political Department at Auschwitz. This event, if accurately reported in documents by the perpetrators, is unique, since there is no other instance of one category of prisoners massacring fellow prisoners on the same work detail.

Flight, escape, subversion of the rules, noncompliance, and sabotage on work details were common forms of resistance in every camp and ghetto of occupied Europe. Every camp had an active clandestine cultural life with concerts, theater performances, puppet shows, reading circles, music, and art. Schools for children were also secretly organized. The care, supervision, and teaching of children were tasks that were frequently allotted to the interned women. Child care and education in the home were traditionally women's work and, after deportation, those children who survived were usually housed with the women. Hanna Lévy-Hass recorded in her Bergen-Belsen diary that she tried to teach 110 children of various ages ranging from three to fifteen.

Lawrence L. Langer

## Gendered Suffering?

If the world of the German labor camps, concentration camps, and death camps has taught us anything, it is that abnormal living conditions prompt unpredictable responses. Listening to the voices of women who survived those domains reminds us of the severely diminished role that gendered behavior played during those cruel years. Even when we hear stories about mutual support among women in the camps, the full context of these narratives shows us how seldom such alliances made any difference in the long-range effects of the ordeal for those who outlived it. Because it can never be segregated from the murder of the many, the survival of the few cannot be used as a measure of why some women survived and others did not.

Let me begin with the written monologue of Mado from Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, which appeared in full English translation only in 1995. Delbo, a non-Jew, was arrested for underground activity and sent to Auschwitz in January 1943, together with 230 other French women. Only 49 returned. Delbo visited many of them after the war, and in one of her volumes she explored the damaging effects that their interlude in the camp had on their subsequent lives. Mado, one of these survivors, reveals a neglected consequence of the camp experience, which I call the "missed destiny of dying." In our haste to celebrate renewal, we are inclined to ignore the scar that intimate contact with the death of her women friends and supporters has left on the memory and feeling of the witness.

Mado begins: "It seems to me I'm not alive. Since all are dead, it seems impossible I shouldn't be also. All dead. Mounette, Viva, Sylviane, Rosie, all the others, all the others. How could those stronger and more determined than I be dead, and I remain alive? Can one come out of there alive? No. It wasn't possible." Delbo then invites us to unravel the tapestry of paradoxes that Mado weaves around the belief that she is "living without being alive" — a talking corpse. This idea recurs often

enough in our encounter with the voices and faces of other women survivors to force us to admit it into our colloquy about the Holocaust. Its fate there, however, will depend on whether we let it fester or pledge to explore the sources and echoes of its taint.

Mado does not exalt her own survival, or the aid from her friends that helped to make it possible; instead, she mourns the death of others: "One morning, when it was still pitch dark, I woke up to the sound of roll call. Next to me, Angèle Mercier did not move. I did not shake her. Did not feel her. Without even looking at her I knew she was dead. She was the first to die next to me." Mado then gives us a lucid and honest appraisal of what it means for her to be among "those who came back": "I do what one does in life, but I know very well that this isn't life, because I know the difference between before and after." She tries to explain what she means by this: "All the efforts we made to prevent our destruction, preserve our identity, keep our former being, all these efforts could only be put to use over there [*là-bas*]. When we returned, this hard kernel we had forged at the core of our hearts, believing it to be solid since it had been won through boundless striving, melted, dissolved. Nothing left. My life started over there. Before there was nothing. I no longer have what I had over there, what I had before, what I was before. Everything has been wrenched from me. What's left? Nothing. Death."

In other words, the immediate threats of Auschwitz led to the creation of a community among Mado and her fellow deportees that may have sustained some of them as memories of their lives prior to the camp faded and vanished. But that community, she says, is gone now, most of its members victims who did not return. Mado refuses to delude herself about the rupture that prevents her past from gliding into a fruitful future: "This superhuman will we summoned from our depths in order to return abandoned us as soon as we came back. Our stock was exhausted. We came back, but why? We wanted this struggle, these deaths not to have been in vain. Isn't it awful to think that Mounette died for nothing, that Viva died for nothing? Did they die so that I, you, a few others might return?" She knows that this question should be answered in the negative, even as she clutches at the opposite possibility in futile hope of minimal consolation.

The experience of staying alive in the camps cannot be separated from the experience of dying in the camps. The clear line that in normal times divides life from death disappeared there, and memory is unable to restore it. Mado is married and has a son, but her family is unable to

help her forget. It's not a matter of forgetting, she insists. You don't choose memories; memories choose you. And because of that, she cannot embrace her roles as wife and mother. Love has become a gesture, not a source of fulfillment. She can't tell this to her husband, because then he would realize that "all his caring hasn't alleviated the pain." Mado's concluding words give shape to the idea that one can outlive a deathcamp without having survived it: "People believe memories grow vague, are erased by time, since nothing endures against the passage of time. That's the difference; time does not pass over me, over us. It doesn't erase anything, doesn't undo it. I'm not alive. I died in Auschwitz but no one knows it."

Is Mado's story exceptional? Judging from the testimonies I have seen, I would have to conclude that numerous other women who outlived the atrocity also inhabit two worlds, the world of then and the world of now. One biological feature of their gender, the capacity to bear children, has had a singular impact on their efforts to confront their ordeal, an impact that they could not and cannot share with male inmates. The phenomenon of maternity continues to haunt them with the memory and anticipation of a special suffering that lacks any redeeming balance. When Charlotte Delbo went to visit one of her Auschwitz companions in a lying-in hospital in Paris after the war, her friend complained that her newborn infant brought her no joy; all she could think about was the children in Auschwitz being sent to their death in the gas chambers. Like Mado, this woman has not escaped the taint of memory that has frustrated her bid to reclaim her role as mother.

Because this dilemma seems gender-specific, let us pursue it for a moment. In her testimony, Holocaust survivor Sally H. recalls the march to the train that would carry most of her family to their death in Auschwitz. Her most vivid memory is of a young girl among the deportees who was in an advanced stage of pregnancy:

*People did get married in the ghetto. People think that the ghetto was just, you know, closed in — they were getting married, because people had hope things would go on. And there was that, my mother's, a friend's daughter. She was eighteen years old, Rachel Goldfarb. I have to mention names, they're not here. She got married, and she got pregnant, became pregnant. And when we had the, when they took us out of the city we didn't have a train, there were no trains, to walk to the trains . . . I don't know the mileage to Carbatka. And I always remember Rachel, she*

*had a very big stomach, I was eleven and a half, close to twelve. So at the time, you don't think about things like this. She was pregnant, and she was very big. It was very hot, it was the second day of Succoth, it happened to be very hot. And she was wearing a trenchcoat and her father's shoes. Isn't that something? I can't forget it. And my mother, her mother, her father, and some other women were walking around her, made a circle around her, because — I don't know — either she would deliver the baby soon, or they didn't want the SS to see her. I don't know. And she never complained, she never asked for water or anything.*

*Years and years later when I had my own children, all of a sudden she came to mind. I mean all that time it was just like everything else, but when I became pregnant, all of a sudden Rachel's face was always in front of me. What happened to her. Because when we walked to the trains, there again like I said before, if you would be here that minute and not there, I wouldn't be here now. We were at the train station, and there must have been thousands of people sitting and waiting for the train.*

Because Sally H. and her sister, together with about a dozen other young girls, were randomly chosen by the SS to go to a nearby farm to work in the fields, she was not there when the others were deported that night, although she remembers hearing their screams. She and her sister were subsequently shipped to Skarżysko, and they were still alive when the war ended. Her parents did not return but, together with the pregnant Rachel, were gassed in Auschwitz.

Like Mado, Sally H. cannot simply celebrate the birth of her own child because in her imagination she associates it with the doom of Rachel and her unborn infant. She suffers from what I call a tainted memory, and neither the passage of time nor an unwilling amnesia can erase it. There may be a valid text about small communities of women who survived through mutual support or some strength of gender, but it exists within a darker subtext emerging in these testimonies. To valorize the one while disregarding the other is little more than an effort to replace truth with myth.

Yet witnesses are often reluctant to forgo the option of a dignified gendered response. This reluctance can result in a clash between texts and subtexts that frequently remains unnoticed as the auditor engages in what we might call selective listening, in search of proof for a particular point of view. A classic example is the testimony of Joly Z., who lost all her family in Auschwitz except her mother, with whom she remained despite a transfer to Hamburg and then Bergen-Belsen, where they were

liberated by the British in April 1945. She insists that the mutual support between mother and daughter enabled both to survive, and she ends with a little homily about the duty of asserting moral responsibility in the camps no matter what the conditions.

Embedded in her testimony, however, is a subtext, what I call a durational moment, that challenges her main text and reminds us how complex is the task of judging gendered behavior when painful circumstances like the following deprive one of the freedom to enact moral responsibility:

JOLY Z.: *There was a pregnant woman among us. She must have been in a very early pregnancy when she got in the camp. Beautiful woman. I remember her eyes always shining. Maybe the very fact that she had a life within herself gave her this extra energy and hope, to want to survive. But the time had come and she had to deliver, and in the washroom they prepared a bed for her, and I was assisting . . .*

INTERVIEWER: *In Auschwitz?*

JOLY Z.: *No, this was not in Auschwitz, this was already in Hamburg. And I was assistant to the doctor there, and that was a prisoner doctor. And I prepared the little box with some soft rags for the baby. And in the other room I heard suddenly the cry of the baby. I never saw or remembered before a newborn baby. And I was waiting for the baby with the little box in my hands. And then a tall SS man brought out the baby holding him or her upside down. And put it under the sink, and opened the water, and he said, "Here you go little Moses, down the stream." And drowned the little baby.*

INTERVIEWER: *What did you do?*

JOLY Z.: *For a long time, for a long time, it was very difficult to have hope after that.*

Compassion plays a negligible role here. The ritual of childbirth may be defined by the witness's expectations, based on her innocent sense of what should happen, but the outcome is decided by the SS, who sees both mother and child, and the witness too, as victims of a specific doom, not agents of their own fate. When giving birth and killing at the same time became the rule rather than the exception for the cruel directors of this bizarre drama, its "actresses" were victimized by events beyond their control that mocked their efforts to create for themselves a gendered part.

Indeed, in some instances, women were forced to reject what they regarded as one of their natural roles, as a result of their ordeals in the camps. Consider the testimony of Arina B. She was married in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941. The following year, she and her husband were deported to Treblinka, but on the journey he managed to tear the wire grate from the window, help her out, and leap after her. Others who tried to get out were shot, but they managed to escape. They lived for a while with local farmers, then returned to Warsaw to stay on the Aryan side, but were finally drawn back within the ghetto's walls by a desire to visit her parents and his brother. Subsequently, she was sent to Majdanek, and then to Auschwitz. Her narrative moment begins:

*The worst — you know, the worst part of my being in concentration camp, my nine months' pregnancy. I was pregnant when I came to camp. In the beginning I didn't know that I'm pregnant, nobody knew. But when I find out . . . it's hard to understand what I went through. Especially the last days, when the child was pushing to go out, and I was afraid I'm gonna make on the — you know how we call the beds, you know the bunk beds, and they're gonna beat me up. And I was so afraid because I got twenty-one [lashes] in Majdanek. And all the time my body was, you know, blue, my whole body was blue. I was afraid of beating because I didn't want to be crippled. I said to myself, if something — let them shoot me, you know, to finish my life, because it was very hard to live, very hard. Many times I was thinking to go on the wire, you touch it and just finish, but in the back of my head was "Who gonna tell the world what happen? Always the same thing. . . ."*

*And when I came back one time from the outside, I got terrible pains, and we had midwife in the barracks, and she heard the way, you know, and she said to me, come out on the oven. You know, in the barrack was a great oven going through. I went out to the oven, and the baby was born. And she said, "You have a boy." And she took away the boy, and till today I don't know where is the boy. I beg her, I hear crying, and I beg her to give me the baby. I'm very, I said, "I don't want to live, I want to die with my baby, give me my baby. I don't have any, you know, I said I lost my, you know, strength and everything, I can't fight any more, I want to die." And she look at me, and she sit down, and she beg me to quiet up, and she said: "You're so beautiful. You're gonna find your husband. You're gonna have children, still children." I still remember the words what she told me. I said, "I can't live any more. I want to die. And till now I don't know where's my baby."*

How shall we read this narrative? That in the camps, women helped each other to survive? My earlier mention of the role that the "missed destiny

of death" plays in the memories of witnesses receives concrete expression here. In the chaotic scheme of values created for their victims by the Germans, a birth moment is a death moment, and a mother's ambition is to leave her life to join her murdered infant. In the dialogue between hope and despair that we have just heard, nothing remains to praise. Whose spirit can the midwife's soothing words gladden?

But Arina B.'s story doesn't end here. She continues:

*I was lucky. I find my husband after the war. I didn't know for three months if he's alive, but I count on two people — my sister and my husband. And they're alive. . . . I find my husband. And finally we made home in Marburg an der Lahn in Germany. And I was so afraid to have a child; he wants family. And I said: "For what? Again gonna happen, again gonna kill our children?" I was so afraid always. And I got my son. I was pregnant with second child and I didn't want it. I was afraid again. And I said to my husband, "I don't want to have a child any more. I hate to be in Germany; I hate all the Germans. I can't stand these stones, covered with blood, everything is in blood." And I was so . . . if he was thinking to have a baby, I was angry at him. And I said, "Fine, I'm going to look how to get rid of it, the baby." And I went, I got rid.*

The chronological text of Arina B.'s story has a happy ending, as her midwife in Auschwitz proves to have been a subtle prophet. Six years after coming to the United States, Arina B. had another child, and she now salutes with pleasure her two beautiful children and four grandchildren. But almost in the same breath, she furnishes a durational subtext, unwittingly internalizing her own image of stones covered in blood: "I'm like stone," she reports, "sometimes I feel I'm stone — inside, you know." We are left with a complex portrait of a woman who has survived an unspeakable ordeal to pursue a normal life while simultaneously abnormal death continues to pursue her. Although her previous "homes" include Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Ravensbrück, she has adapted far better than Charlotte Delbo's Mado; however, we must still face the dilemma of defining vitality for a witness who calls herself a woman of stone.

The testimony of Shari B. gives us a vivid glimpse into how circumstances could curtail the independent spirit of a young girl between her seventeenth and eighteenth year, a spirit that under normal conditions would certainly have flourished with a decided feminist flair. Arrested by the Gestapo while living in Bratislava with false papers, she is interrogated and beaten at night and during the day forced to clean out the police officials' offices. One afternoon, she approaches a window on the second

floor and is wondering whether to jump out when an officer enters and says, "Are you thinking of jumping? I can put you out of your misery right now, if you want." He aims a pistol at her head, and she remembers thinking, "If I faint, they will surely kill me," so she tells herself: "This moment will pass. This moment will pass." Finally, he puts the gun away, saying, "I don't want to cause a mess in the office. They're going to shoot you like all of the Jews anyway."

Eventually, she is deported to Theresienstadt. Her determination not to let the Germans kill her is further tested on the journey, when she tries to climb through the small window of her boxcar. The other people in the car pull her back, arguing, "If you escape, they'll come and shoot us." A fracas ensues among the prisoners, and Shari B. remembers turning to them and crying, "You are old; you are all old and have lived your life already, but I am young and want to go on living." Fear is a powerful deterrent to community spirit, however, and the illusion that one woman's survival can be isolated from the potential death of innumerable others can be maintained only by ignoring the inroads that German terror made on the individual will.

In spite of her inner resolve to resist, in Theresienstadt Shari B. is reduced to the demeaning state of utter vulnerability, a situation that many of her gender report as worse than the threat of death. She and the other women in her barrack are lying around naked when some SS men start walking through the room. She weeps as she speaks: "We were dehumanized. This was our most humiliating moment and I hated them that they should be able to walk around and see us naked." But there was nothing she could do. The episode is seared on her memory, as she relives it still engulfed by hatred and shame.

This is bad enough, but in Shari B.'s narrative we have an instance of how her ordeal lingers on in the response of her son. She and her husband had left Czechoslovakia and come to the United States after the war, but he died young of lung cancer, leaving her with two small children to raise herself:

*Once I read a report that children of Holocaust victims are affected, and I asked them [her children], "How do you feel about this? Do you feel you are affected?" And they said, "Mommy, how can you ask such a question? Of course we are affected!" And I said, "But you know, I never really told you anything as long as you were little." And they said, "Yes, but do you think we didn't know every time someone spoke about Germans or so on, you always had a comment?"*

And then I recalled an incident that happened. My son went to school, he was about six and a half or seven, and at school they must have told him about the Holocaust. And he came home, and he raised his hand and said, "Heil Hitler!" And I did not say anything, but I said, "You know, Robbie, don't ever say that." And he became very serious, and he didn't ask me why not. He went to the bathroom, and wouldn't come out for quite a while, and . . . So I would knock, and said, "Now, what are you doing there? Come out, please." And he came out, and his hand was bleeding, and so I said, "How did you hurt it, what happened?" And he said, "I scratched it out, so I should never say it again."

So I don't know. I didn't tell him anything. I felt I never really spoke to them while they were little, yet I must have conveyed something.

Holocaust testimony is not a series of links in a chain whose pattern of connections can be easily traced, but a cycle of sparks erupting unpredictably from a darkened landscape, teasing the imagination toward illumination without ever offering it the steady ray of stable insight. My final fragment of women's witnessing probes how Edith P., who, as she says, has a wonderful family but no past, strives to merge her memories of Auschwitz into her present life. In the course of her meditation, she accents for us the delicate balance between gender and human identity, and the tension between personal and cultural origins of the self, that surface in so many of these oral narratives:

I just want to say, I've been liberated thirty-five years, going to be this month — April fourteenth [1980]. And as I get older, and my children are all self-sufficient and no longer at home, and I am not busy being a mother and a wife, and I can be myself — I have given a great deal of thought how I should conduct myself vis-à-vis the Germans, how I should feel. Should I hate them? Should I despise them? . . . I don't know; I never found the answer. . . . But sometimes I wish in my darkest hours that they would feel what we feel sometimes, when you are uprooted, and bring up children — I'm talking as a mother and a wife — and there is nobody to share your sorrow or your great happiness. Nobody to call up and say something good happened to me today: I have given birth to a beautiful daughter; or she got all "A"s; she got into a good college. I mostly remember when holidays come, I have tried to preserve the holidays as I saw it at home, transfer it to my own children. We have beautiful Passovers like I saw it at home. But the spirit is not there. It's beautiful, my friends tell me, when I invite them, that it's beautiful, it's very spiritual. But I know it's not the same. I . . . I . . . there's something missing. I want to share it with someone who knows me really . . .

"I am no longer busy being a mother, a wife, and I can be myself" — under other circumstances, we might applaud this as a triumphant liberation of the pure feminine spirit from more traditional and, for some, confining activities. But how can we say that in this case? Edith P.'s Holocaust experience has undermined the rhetoric of renewal and self-discovery. The subtext of her life and her testimony is not a quest for release but an admission of irreplaceable loss. What she calls her absent past is permanently present *inside* the woman who is utterly alone at a Passover seder despite the company of her husband, her children, and her friends.

The curtailed potential of her stillborn life as a sister and a daughter, or her incomplete life as a wife and mother, because she is cut off together with her husband and children from the family she cannot share with them, leaves her a legacy of internal loneliness that nothing can reverse. But if we substitute for these gendered terms the more generic ones of parent and child, we move Edith P. and the other women I have been discussing into a human orbit that unites them through a kind of regret that cannot be sorted by sex. To be sure, pregnancy and childbirth are biologically unique experiences, and we have heard how they have been endured under unbearable conditions. But if we examine the following brief, complex moments of testimony, involving not only a wife, husband, and infant but also the daughter of the witness by a second marriage, we may glimpse the danger of overstating the importance of a biologically unique experience. The family is awaiting deportation, and the witness records the feeling of utter helplessness that seized so many victims at moments like these:

This was summer. Outside there was a bench. So we sat on the bench, my wife holding the kid [their infant child] in her arms. In my head, what to think first of. You want to do something, and you know you're in a corner. You can't do anything. And when somebody asks me now, "Why didn't you fight?" I ask them, "How would you fight in such a situation?" My wife holds a child, a child stretches out [its] arms to me, and I look at him, and she says, "Hold him in [your] arms, you don't know how long more you'll be able to hold him. . . ." [The witness sobs with remembered grief, as his daughter from his second marriage, who is sitting next to him on the couch, puts a consoling arm around her father and leans her head on his shoulder.] Me, a man, crying.

Exactly like Edith P., Victor C. might protest, "I have a family, but no past," and could we reasonably argue that there is a gendered difference

between the two expressions of anguish? The origins of humiliation were often dissimilar for men and women, because womanhood and manhood were threatened in various ways. But the ultimate sense of loss unites former victims in a violated world beyond gender. Victor C. clings to his daughter in the present, but the subtext of his life is the moment when, as the member of an earlier family, he was separated from his wife, his child, his mother, and his grandmother, all of whom were shipped to Auschwitz and gassed. Shall we celebrate the fact that because he was a man, and able to work, his life was saved? I think that he, a man crying, would not agree.

In the testimonies I have studied, I have found little evidence that mothers behaved or survived better than fathers, or that mutual support between sisters, when possible, prevailed more than between brothers. We do have more accounts of sisters staying together than brothers, but that is probably because brothers were more often separated by the nature of the work they were deemed able to do. This is an example of situational accident, not gender-driven choice. In all instances, solicitude alternated with frustration or despair, as the challenge of staying alive under brutal conditions tested human resources beyond the limits of decency — although we hardly need to mention that the victims shared no blame for their plight.

As for the ability to bear suffering, given the unspeakable sorrow with which all victims were burdened, it seems to me that nothing could be crueler or more callous than the attempt to dredge up from this landscape of universal destruction a mythology of comparative endurance that awards favor to one group of individuals over another. The pain of loss and the relief of survival remain entwined in the memory of those lucky enough to have outlived the atrocities. All efforts to find a rule of hierarchy in that darkness, whether based on gender or will, spirit or hope, reflect only our own need to plant a life-sustaining seed in the barren soil that conceals the remnants of two-thirds of European Jewry. The sooner we abandon this design, the quicker we will learn to face such chaos with unshielded eyes.