

OK, continue. Tell us about Auschwitz.

Yes. Now, on the 21st of October, on a Saturday morning, we left from Plaszow to Auschwitz, 60 people in one boxcar, in a cattle train. It's cold. We are cramped tightly together. It's dark. And again, our misery accentuates, it says.

I have here a page from my diary.

Yes.

That I have written in the boxcar.

Would you hold it up under you-- like that, yeah, yeah. You were able to write in the boxcar?

Well, hardly, but I did. I was obsessed with the idea to write down everything what's going on, possibly everything that was going on.

Yeah. Were both pages written in the boxcar? Because I notice the handwriting is so much--

No, this page-- no, this page only.

That page only.

This page on the left where you can see the traces of my tears that were falling down my cheek. And I was, with the indelible pencil, I was doodling around them.

Yeah, yeah.

It looks as though there's different colors there. And it looks like it's being scrolled very quickly.

Well, of course, I wasn't sitting at my desk.

Yes, yes.

So, it was very difficult for me, but I wanted to write this.

Yeah.

And every possible moment I could grab, that nobody disturbed me by pushing, or hitting, or pulling me, or designating me to this group or to the other group, I tried.

If you want to quote a little bit of what you wrote there--

Yes.

--we would like to hear it.

OK. In the middle of the boxcar stands a bucket. Into this we defecate. We are dreadfully cramped. Quarrels break out-- move those legs-- oh, my foot has gone to sleep-- move-- at least a little bit. Sit still, smarty-- change places with me-- don't lay on me. Someone even scratched somebody.

By daylight, when the doors of the wagon are ajar, and it's bright inside, our spirits are up. We sing. The mood gets light-hearted. One sees the ludicrous moments of this ride. But when night falls and it gets more and more chilly, then we feel profoundly the whole distressfulness and misery of this dismal journey.

But this also comes to an end. In the middle of a dark, drizzly night we finally arrive at our designation. In rows of five, in an enormously long column, we are walking through a long alley. Instead of trees, alongside there are electric wires. Behind them, barracks without windows, dark, silent. Fear grips one's heart.

From everywhere pervades an air of some grim mystery. Some terror breathes from these dark, mysterious barracks. All the rumors we have heard about this hell now occupy our minds. We are turning again. And we are entering into the rear alley, an alley with tall birch trees growing densely, one next to another, concealing some secret-- Birkenau.

Our restless eyes are trying to pierce through the dark of the night to penetrate beyond this wall of trees. There-- something must be there. Hearts are beating uneasily. Eyes searched until they found it. Two tremendous tall chimneys threateningly sticking out from behind the wall of birches. What is that? Hearts shrink in animal fear. Thoughts are in a whirl. Imagination works frantically. To our minds come the children. No, no, it is better not to think what comes now.

Far away in the darkness little lights glimmer. Some lit building, the bath, sauna, an Auschwitz term. And this was also a horrible experience. The most frequently used word was the word oven by the people that served in the sauna.

Did you know where you were going?

No, we never knew where we are going. We never knew. And we always-- we heard rumors in Schindler's camp that they burning people, that they killing and burning people in a crematorium. But we shut them off. We said, keep quiet, don't talk such crazy talk. We never wanted to believe it.

We never-- even from the very beginning of the war, we always-- we always hoped that in a week, in two, the war would be ended. Especially that we got news that England and France is behind us, behind Poland. And they-- they are against the Germans. So we were sure that this will only take a short time. But it took six bitter years.

Did you know what the smoke from the chimney meant?

Well, now we knew, when we saw it.

How did you know?

From when we had this before. And then-- we heard in Plaszow about the oven, about chimneys. Questions forced themselves upon our lips. Where are the children? We asked the sauna crew. Better not ask. Where are the sick, the frail? Chimney, oven, chimney, oven. Thousands of people are burned in the crematoriums and there are five such ovens in Auschwitz. And there are-- aside from this-- I don't want to read this.

All right.

They used methods that very intimidated us. And--

You said that there were a number of selections.

Yeah.

Can you describe them?

Yes.

Please.

Now the most important thing happens, the selection. Now your fate hangs in the balance. We are ordered to undress. From our belongings we are not allowed to take anything except shoes and bread. Like a pack of mad dogs some camp

personnel girls are plunging in upon us, pounding, hitting, and screaming-- quick, get undressed.

Women from the Brinitz, the transport, are not getting undressed but assembled in the court. That gives us cause to all kinds of speculations. Panic-- many of us jump out of the window. We went to join the Brinitz women, but there is-- but there it goes according to the list.

Again, the list. We always have lists. From the beginning of the war, there are lists. In the ghetto, in the camps, always a list. This is why-- this is an aftermath of this-- a hangover, you say, when somebody knocks on my door today and hands me a list, would you please, we vote for this one? I don't want to be on the list. I don't want to sign my name on the list.

Like a petition or anything?

Yes.

Yeah.

Yes, no lists for me. It's something that awakes fearful feelings in me. Older women run down, looking-- older women run down looking, the old, the frail, he puts aside. And again someone weeps, someone scuffles, someone screams. We, the young and healthy ones are moving ahead through a corridor. A mass of naked bodies. We are so cramped that we are choking.

Now they are shaving our pubic and underarm hair. This performed in the presence of men. Apparently, this is no attraction for them because they are talking leisurely with our flayers. Next process is the barber shop. The ones with unclean, matted hair, but most of all the ones that have pretty hair, they shave their heads bald.

They are doing it with a rage, cursing and yanking us about. They hate us, Polish women, and they take revenge on us for injustices suffered from the Germans. They are hitting and kicking us, wild and irrepressible in their anger.

I feel sorry for them, degenerated creatures. And whose fault is it? Theirs. They dehumanized us. Whoever didn't want to come to a pitiful end in Auschwitz had to become an animal. Now--

Can I ask you a question?

Yes.

Was your mother with you at this time?

No more.

Where--

No more.

What happened to her?

My mother went with one of these transports from Schindler's camp because they had to make room

Yeah--

--for the people from the list.

Yeah.

And they took her to-- to Skarzysko.

Yeah.

And to also a camp. And then I didn't have any more news. I didn't know anything anymore about my mother. And today I use all my defense mechanism not to visualize this, what happened. Because I couldn't go on living, you know?

Yeah.

After the barbershop-- oh, I almost left out. How hideous a woman looks without hair. Every step of the way they brand us-- armbands, Jewish stars, painted stripes on our clothing, tattoos, shaving of our hair, prison striped clothing. And in our souls they branded an everlasting stigma of all these horrible experiences.

After the barber shop, we are coming finally to the showers. The sight of Dee, beautiful Dee-- that's the girl in the picture.

The one--

The beautiful girl that looked like--

Dorothy Lamour.

Dorothy Lamour, yes. She was so beautiful. The sight of Dee, beautiful Dee and Bee with shaved heads made an awful impression on me. I will never forget the look in these eyes at the moment when the hair clipper moved through her beautiful blond hair. It was the look of an animal caught in a cage, terrified, forlorn, looking for help from somewhere, a despairing reflex and-- there's a missing word here-- in vain.

Somebody's strong hands, cold steel of the hair clipper-- despair. Ready, you have to move ahead to the bath. They didn't shave off my hair. They didn't even shorten it. I am wearing such short, straight hair. I always wore very straight, short hair. The wave you see, it's with a curling iron.

When I saw Dee and Bee without hair, I started to weep so hard that I had to turn my head so they wouldn't see it. I composed myself and I tried to lift their spirits. During those horrible days in Auschwitz I was the strongest of my four friends. I had, first of all, better self-confidence. I had my hair and a lot of energy.

Did you meet those friends in--

Oh, yes.

--in Plaszow or in Schindler's--

Oh, these-- well, some of them I knew from Krakow, of course.

Yes.

You know, yes.

What happened to Dee? Can you tell us?

Dee, I told you her story, that she--

Not on camera you didn't.

Oh, I see.

OK.

Yes. Dee-- the man that became her husband-- she got pregnant and she didn't know it. And she went to Auschwitz. And she was selected by Mengele to go out of the column. And they took her to the [GERMAN].

The sick ward.

The sick ward, yes. Where we don't know-- most probably they wanted to make experiments. I remember that I managed the next day to sneak out of my barrack. That was not far from the sick ward. And I brought for her a piece of red beet so she can paint her cheeks, so she looks healthy. Because that was very decisive. If somebody looked sick or frail, they took them straight to the gas chamber.

Now, she lived through in Auschwitz. Auschwitz was liberated already in January. And she hid herself. When the Germans were leaving Auschwitz, she was afraid that they will shoot her because, of course, they didn't want any witnesses. So she buried herself underneath the dead-- the dead people that were prepared for the crematorium.

And there she stayed because the Russians were so nearby that any minute they expected them to walk into Auschwitz. And so it was the Russians walked in. And then she managed to get to our hometown, Krakow, where she had her baby.

We visited her after the war. And we saw her baby. Her baby now is an officer in the Israeli army, has a family of his own. A very handsome, beautiful man. And unfortunately, she died shortly after the end of the war. Maybe all these experiences caused her sickness or something. And she's no more alive.

So you spent four months in Auschwitz.

No, I spent only three weeks in Auschwitz. And that was my luck. I have a number. I don't know if you want to--

Well, I don't know if we can see it--

If you can see it, no.

--on camera, but I see it.

I have a number here and I have also here.

Yeah.

KL, which means konzentrationslager, which means concentration camp.

Did they put you to work there? Did you do anything while you were there?

Where?

In Auschwitz?

From one roll call to another, from one selection to another, then we were in Birkenau. I remember we were knocking with some bricks, senseless work, really. Not-- nothing-- senseless work. And this was already October, November. It was very cold, rainy season. And we had no proper clothing on.

We always talk with our friends, how come that now we get colds and head colds from anything, and there we had no underwear, we had no proper shoes or socks. I was given-- I was given some shoes, different shoes. One was high and one was low. And many of us were given the wooden-- the Dutch shoes.

Clogs.

The clogs, yes. And in Auschwitz at this time was very muddy. And I remember how we-- we were five friends that we were very, very close. And we always kept close together. And we had to jump over a puddle, big puddles of mud. We tried to keep with each other. We tried to call each other, we shouldn't get lost. And-- and I was only, luckily for me, three weeks in Auschwitz. Because I would perish there. I couldn't take it really.

And I remember one incident that-- there was underground in Poland. And some of my friends, my very good friends were in this underground. When I was working with the bricks there, the senseless work, suddenly I saw a group of-- a small group of men coming from the Buna camp. That was a different-- a man's camp.

They were in the underground. And I recognized one of my friends. And I got up. And I looked at him as he passed by me. And I said to him, tell me just one thing, is it possible to live through this? If not, I will not fight anymore.

And he couldn't show that he's talking to me because that was dangerous for him. And he said it under his breath, putting his head down. I never forget it. He said, you want to live? Go on, hold yourself. And that gave me courage and hope.

And-- and we lived through. Because they took us-- luckily, they took a transport of 300 women. They came one time. We were already standing next to the crematorium, you know. But we didn't know it was crematorium. Later on they told us that it was the crematorium. And we were standing and standing for hours.

And then it became an order that we should go someplace, some other place. And there was a column maybe of thousands of women, maybe more. And some Germans came and needed 300 women. And we were lucky to be among the 300 women that they counted.

And they took us to this camp in-- working camp in Sudetenland. And that was-- I mean, it was a concentration camp. We were very hungry there. We were working.

What was a camp called?

Lichterwerden. This was a spinner-- they spinned from flax thread. And we were working there. We were six months in this camp. And it took six months to learn the skill of stopping that, turning-- the turning.

The spinning Jenny, as they called it.

The spinning thing, yes. Of course, this caused us a lot of physical pain. Because we were unskilled. It takes six months to get skilled. And at night we were laying and licking our wounds. Because the threads cut in to us. And from the [INAUDIBLE], we had no vitamins, no food. It was-- we were cut and it didn't heal.

Was the treatment very brutal there?

The treatment, we got beatings, but we were not shot. But they were always threatening us, the SS ladies. They were always threatening us. You see that hill? On this hill you will be all shot because you are swines. Because we stole some food. Some girls broke into the kitchen one time, into the cellar. Because we couldn't go on anymore. The hunger was terrible, you know.

And we got all follicles all over our body. And how you call it-- you know, wounds.

Scabs.

Scabs and follicles oozing, that didn't heal, because we had no food, no vitamins, no nothing. The soup was water. At the end of the war they gave us this soup without salt. And one of my dear friends who is in Israel now, my friend Ruth, she said, I'm not going to eat that soup without salt. This was just water with a rotten beet or potato anyway.

And we persuaded her-- we tried to persuade her, you have to eat otherwise you will die. You will die. It was shortly before the war-- very short before the war. And our rations that belonged to us, the Germans, the crew, they stole it, because they were also not-- it was the end of the war, and they were also-- they don't had such deliveries.

So the delivery that came to us, they stole-- the salt and other things, you know. So my good friend Ruth-- this is on the humoristic side, she said I'm not going to eat those soups without salt, never. And she went on maybe for a day. And we persuaded her, you must eat. And then, the end of the war came. So she said, now when I got used to the unsalty soups, the war ends. She had always a good sense of humor. She was a wonderful person.

So you were liberated from that camp?

Yes, we were liberated from that camp. And this liberation was-- the Russians liberated us. And the liberation was really like in a fairy tale. Really, truly like in a fairy tale.

Can you describe it a little for us in your own words?

Oh, yes. Yes, surely. It was the night-- first of all, the detonations and we heard fighting. And the 6th of May, our lagerfuhrer, that means the kommandant of our camp, he was not a young man. Because at this point they took many that were-- the kommandant of our camp in Lichterwerden was a little bit crazy. And really, he hit us. And he was not quite there.

But at this point they took everybody, older people. And this man, who was drunk like anything, he came out, he made the roll call. And he came out and he said, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]-- I am damned to do this, to announce to you that from now on you are free.

At that moment, it was such a mixture of feelings. We were-- we felt very jubilant. And then we threw ourselves at each other and we cried. Because we realized that our families are not with us. And it was a very strong moment. It was a very happy moment and we also felt the tragedy of it.

Our dream came true. We became free. Now just before we heard detonations. You asked me about how-- we heard detonations and shooting. And we didn't go out of the camp, of course, not even to work. At one point, and I have written this in my diary, that the kommandant of our camp wanted to destroy us all as not to leave any witnesses.

And the director of our factory where we worked, who was a civilian, he-- he was against it. And somehow he didn't do it. We were lucky. That night, before the liberation, many German houses had already-- we saw this later and we were told also about it-- white--

Flags?

--flags, yes. But there were groups of Germans coming through that tore down the flags and didn't allow this. Because they didn't want to give in. Now we were near a-- we were near woods. And a small road led to our camp, that at the beginning of the town it said [? Verboten weg ?]. That means the forbidden road, that no civilian was allowed to go there.

And we were at the end of that road. We were 300 women in the barracks. And at night we heard constant detonations. We heard shootings. And we put our ears to the floor as to hear better. And then on the windows we had those shutters, wooden shutters. And we tried to peek out. We tried to see something, but it was pitch black.

And just at the-- dawn, the beginning of--

Dawn, yeah.

Yeah, just at dawn.

Sunrise.

Suddenly we heard like the horses, horseshoes, click, click, click, very fast from one side-- from one side of the woods to another side. And we looked. And we saw a rider on the horse, on a white horse. Like in a fairy tale was this liberation really. And then few minutes later-- and we were so excited and we were so-- we were-- we felt so-- I can't describe it.

And two minutes later, a few minutes later, another horse passed by, also on a white horse. And a few times so. And then it became to the light, the day came, daylight came. And suddenly we heard harmonicas. And we heard tanks coming. The tanks were coming. The Russian tanks were coming.

And the Russian soldiers, they sit on the tanks and they play on their harmonicas. And when we heard that, whoever was capable in that camp ran out on that forbidden road towards the town. And an officer on a white horse came in. His legs in the stirrups. We kissed his feet.

At this time, you don't ask who is liberating you. They were our liberators. And right away, they had a beautiful speech. And they said in Russian, you are our sisters and brothers. And they brought some food into the camp. And also they said, you are free to go wherever you want.

And so we went the next day, we went home. And that journey was, of course, a happy journey. We went a lot by foot. And we went also-- we stopped the trucks.

Did home mean directly to Krakow?

Oh, yes, definitely, yes. First we wanted to go home. And we wanted to see who of our families are alive. And that journey was slow. We stopped in Czechoslovakia, I remember. And I also never forget an incident when we stopped there and we knocked on a farmer's house. When the night came and we didn't have any place to sleep, we knocked on the farmer's door. And we asked if we can stay overnight.

We were five of us. We stuck together. We were-- excuse me, we are more than five, we were eight. Because we had other friends that came with us. And we didn't want to travel-- nobody ever wanted to be by himself, not in the war situation with the--

And he took you in?

And these people took us in. And they gave us their bedroom. We were dirty. We might have had lice. We were very hungry and not clean. And we were Jewish. And they took us, they gave us the bedroom. And we asked them, where will you sleep? And they said, no, we have a place to sleep.

And at night when I went for a drink of water, they were all sleeping on the floor in the kitchen, these people. I will never forget them.

The whole family?

The whole family, yes. I will never forget them, really. This-- as I said, I always have faith in the good people. It cannot be that only bad people succeed. The good must succeed. It cannot be otherwise.

If I can go back for a moment to your diary.

Yes.

You said you retrieved it. You lost it three times, retrieved it three times.



Yes.

Tell us about that. Tell us the specifics.

Well, the first time it was taken away in the Schindler's camp. And I simply went to the office there. This was a small camp. It was only 1,000 people. I simply went to the office there and I saw it laying there. And I just took it. I took it. I didn't ask much questions. I took it.

The second time it was taken away when I went to the camp Plaszow. And it was taken by a lager lageraltester. She was a tall woman. I don't know who she was. I don't know what-- I don't even think she was Jewish. But I walked over later to her and I asked her to give it back to me. And for some reason, she didn't want to be bothered with it and she gave it to me.

The third time, and this was the most dramatic way that it's been taken away from me. It was a very small entrance from one room to another. And the crew of Auschwitz was standing-- a girl was standing there with her foot up so no one could pass. Only she-- she passed one person at a time, one woman at a time.

Everybody had what was his priority. One person, one of my friends had a piece of soap. One of my friends had a-- how you call it-- a brassier. Because she was very big and she wanted to put that brassiere on. That was very important for her. Other people had maybe something else, I don't know.

I had my diary. I had my diary. It was like a homework book rolled together and bind with a string. And I always kept it-- maybe I was lucky, I was very flat at this time. And I kept it always on my body here, on my breast. And this way when I was supposed to go through the entrance where she kept her foot, the girl, I took my diary, I rolled it, and I kept it along my arm.

And I just went sort of like sideways when she pushed me. But she saw that I have something there. And she tore it out from under my arm. And she dumped it on that little hill that was in the doorway. The little hill was made out of those little pieces of soap, of the brassieres, of those other-- and of my diary.

And as soon as I passed that entrance when she tore it out, I hid behind the-- you know, like this. And I was just waiting till she was busy beating up somebody. And then I quickly bent down and picked up my diary and very quickly mingled with the hundreds of women that were in the room. Now there was a soldier that was walking around with a--

A gun?

A gun, yeah. So I was walking like this. Wherever he was, I was with this arm up, not making eye contact. And if he went there, I turned with this arm there. And miraculously I escaped this way in many selections, in few selections that I went through. And then they counted the 300 of us. And we went to the last camp that I was liberated.

And this is why-- really, it was an obsession with me to bring this diary through. And I am writing at one point that I am-- I hope that this diary will not fall in the wrong hands. And I have to write. I have to write so people will know what has happened. And thank God, I lived through. And here I am.

It's an amazing story. Is there anything else you would like to add to this?

I don't know.

How did you meet your husband?

Oh, that's a lovely story.

Why not end with a lovely story?

My husband-- after the war we could travel, just the number was our document. You didn't need money. You didn't need anything. You could travel from one country to another without money. We didn't have money anyway. And you know.

So I traveled to Austria with my friend who was looking for her husband, for her present husband. At this time she was going with him. And then they found each other. And she was asking me, please come with me. She didn't want to travel by herself. And I went with her.

And I went with her to Theresienstadt, and here and there, and no place. And finally, I wound up in Linz. And then I was in the Linz DP camp, displaced persons camp. And there I met my husband. My husband was my neighbor. And one night they made a dance. They made a dance for the survivors, for the [INAUDIBLE].

And my husband invited me to that dance. And we came. We have been taken and brought by big trucks. We were in the camp and they brought us and they brought us back with big trucks. And my husband at this time-- oh, he already preliminary to that tried to get acquainted a little with me. I was working at this time in the UNRRA, in the United--

Nations Relief.

--Relief organization. And then he wanted to make a date for skiing. This-- we came 3 o'clock in the morning, and he wanted already meet me the same morning. Just a good story. Yeah, so nice. And we started to-- courtship started. And then he proposed to me. And he had a cousin in America-- Lieutenant Colonel Isadore Abrahamer, was a great man, was a lovely man.

And he was in Salzburg, stationed in Salzburg. And he gave a sign-- he put a sign in-- if anybody from the family Abrahamer from Krakow knows anybody from the Abrahamer family from Krakow, please contact me here in this office. And so somebody told my husband that such and such person is looking for you. And my husband went to Salzburg and he found this cousin. And this cousin arranged for papers for my husband.

And my husband was one of the first ones to get the papers. But in order for me-- we got engaged, and in order for him to take me with him to America we had to be married, not engaged just. Otherwise, I would have to stay for God knows how long. So soon after we had married. It was Passover time.

We went on our honeymoon to the Austrian Alps, where we skied. I lost my ski. It fell all the way down. We came back. And then-- oh, we had a lovely wedding. We had 20 people on our wedding. Before we went on our honeymoon.

We had a very lovely wedding. 20 people, our friends, made this in the kitchen. In the kitchen was the chuppah, you know. And I remember, like today that-- one of my friends-- they were already married women-- they led me seven times-- as it is the Jewish custom-- around.

And I remember, like today, that I was putting my nails into my thighs. Because not to shake. Because at this moment I remembered my parents, who always-- there was a saying, that we wish that we should live to bring you under the chuppah. That's was this every mother's dream, every Jewish mother's dream.

And I remember I was very emotional. And I was choking my tears down as I was thinking about my mother, my father. So it was. We had 20 people at that wedding. And we had an American rabbi that gave us the-- he--

A military chaplain.

A military chaplain, yes.

When did you come to the United States?

We came to the United States in 1948. It was-- unfortunately, when we were called to the United States, we were stopped for about nine months in Munich because the Polish quota stopped. And we were very unhappy. It was a

terrible place there.

And we had no place really to bathe or to keep-- there were 12 people in a room. We slept on a army cot. And it was really very-- it was no privacy. It was very, very bad. It was very poor. And this-- we ran every morning to the list again. If our name-- and we are A-- Abrahamer. So we should be on the top of the list. If we are on the list to go to America, because they stopped the Polish quota.

Finally, after nine months came the [INAUDIBLE] Commission. And they came-- I have even in my photo album pictures. And he helped us to-- not only us, but the Polish quota went through. And finally we came to the United States.

And I have pictures when they greet us on the pier with music. And I have written captions. And they greeted us with music. We were one of the first refugees-- not the very first refugees, but one of the first transports of refugees coming to the United States.

Were both of your children born here?

Yes, both of my children were born here in New York.

Do you talk with them about your experiences? Or have they ever asked?

Well, on the beginning when they were small, and they asked me mommy, what's that, showing my number. I didn't tell them. They were too small. I didn't want to stuff horror into their minds. I didn't want to tell them that people can be bad or something.

So I told them, oh, that's my telephone number, anything. You know, they were too small to understand. And then little by little-- little by little I tell them. My daughter read the diary, the translation. And she was really the one that encouraged me, along with my husband, of course, who always encouraged me to publish it.

My daughter said-- I gave her to read it. And I said-- my daughter is a teacher by profession with emphasis on reading and all kinds of other courses that she went through. And she said, mommy, it's great. Mommy, you should really publish it with some small corrections of the sayings. Like she said, this is not really an English expression. You have to put it this way or that way.

But my translation is my very own. I worked very hard for a few years. And I am very meticulous with words. And I adore the art of words. And therefore, I would never settle for any substitute.

If I got stuck on a word that couldn't be translated or something, I looked so many times and I read so many things until sometimes I jumped up at night and I said, that's the word, that's the word. And I made a notation. And I have tons of notations, of words that I want to use or words that I question which word to use. Which is the real equivalent of the Polish expression that I have write. And my Polish was pretty good. So, you know.

Mrs. Abrahamer, thank you very much.

I thank you. And I hope that it will do some good.

I'm sure it will.