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Notes from Diana Plotkin: Correction Copy After Telephone Calls, April 7, 1995 [Edited version]

MAGDA HERZBERGER

But my mortal eyes can't see
The shape of my destiny...
Nor can my spirit grasp
Life's unpredictable course of action...¹

I was born in Rumania on February 20, 1926 in the city of Cluj, in Transylvania. I have lived with Jewish persecution since I was very young. It was true for most Jews - those in positions, those in schools, and those on the streets.

My father loved books, and he was a great reader. We had books all the time. Books were cherished. We had leather jackets on them. He had a library with a glass cabinet which displayed the beautiful books. He always said, "A good book is like a sacred thing. You have to take care of them."

I grew up with lots of music. My father loved music and played three instruments. When he was young, he played in an orchestra with my uncle. I have always had a love for music. As a teenager I wanted to learn to play the piano at an earlier age, but those were hard times and we could not afford it. Finally I got a very good piano teacher. I also liked to fence and to ice skate. I

¹From Magda Herzberger, "Mystery," in The Waltz of the Shadows, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), 108: 4-7.

had things that I liked to do and nobody could talk me into doing something that I didn't want to do or that did not appeal to me.

We were very ignorant about sex. At the time I grew up, discussing sex was a no-no. At my age, when I was a growing teenager and even when I came back after the war, I was like today's seventh graders! Even now seventh graders know more about sex! Those were different times. I didn't have a normal teenager's life - like you would go out and dance at a prom. No, as a teenager I always had to be very serious; I had to fight for my grades.

We had four elementary schools and eight gymnasiums. Each had a very heavy curriculum. You had to pass an entrance examination to the gymnasium. Then, in the fourth gymnasium year, you had to pass another entrance examination. If you didn't pass that one, you couldn't get further education because the four years of gymnasium were dedicated towards selecting your profession. You had to decide whether you want to earn a bachelor of arts or science degree. At the end of the eight gymnasiums, you got a bachelor of science or bachelor of arts degree. Prior to this, you had to pass the nightmarish exam covering all the material from all eight gymnasiums. Then you went straight to the university.

My father advised me very well when he said, "You are Jewish; you have to take a profession which is needed." I wanted to study medicine at a very early age. I knew by the time I was finishing my fourth gymnasium that I had to pass this exam. Since I was Jewish, I would need a very high grade average in order to get to the fifth gymnasium. If you wanted to go to medical school, you had to pass the medical school entrance examination.

Father, my dear father,
I can never forget you -
Your words are deeply carved

Into my memory.
Beloved father, rest peacefully.²

It wasn't just my father's decision; it was my wish. It was my dream, and I worked towards it. I did get into medical school on a full scholarship after I came back from the German concentration camps.

When times were good, my father was a manager in a large engine factory, *Energia*, which means energy. Naturally, when the persecution started, there were difficulties in his job. Jews were not allowed to maintain managerial positions. When the Germans occupied our city on March 19, 1944, we had to wear the Star of David and, therefore, could be molested on the streets. We were scared. My father accompanied me at all times, and we went out just for the absolute necessities. At that time, some of my father's friends were able to get him some work, working until 3 o'clock or midnight. He had three jobs in order to make ends meet. This wasn't legal, but they wanted to help him. This was a very scary period.

Things started to be bad in the middle 30s, and slowly became worse. By 1938 and 1939, things were really bad. Prior to the Germans' arrival, we were gradually robbed, first by the Hungarian government and then by the Germans. The Jewish people had to give them all our radios, so we could not hear any news. They did not want us to know what was going on in other parts of the world, and there were severe penalties if you didn't surrender your radio. Then we had to give certain jewelry items; and gradually, there were more and more restrictions. Then, in 1944, when Hitler occupied our city of Cluj, we knew something very bad was about to happen.

²*Ibid.* "Eulogy (in memory of my father)," 74: 38-42.

But we didn't realize how bad it was going to be.

My father had always respected the German culture. He admired Beethoven and Mozart. Since he had grown up with Germans and Hungarians, he spoke both languages. He talked like a German. Since we had no idea about the German concentration camps, my father thought we could trust them. If we would have had any idea, we might have run away to Rumania and left everything behind. But it's hard to go away. We didn't have much money at that time. My father had a low paying job so we could have something to eat; we had a little apartment. Why should we go?

The German army occupied my home town on March 19, 1944. In April, all the Jewish people had to wear the Star of David pinned on our clothing at all times. The word "*JUDE*" was written on the Star of David; it means "Jew" in German.

So that everyone could see
From far
The stamp of our religion--
We were avoided
Like the plague.³

We had to cut it out from a canvas-like material; it had to be yellow. Why yellow? Because it represented the tarnished, the filthy Star of David, symbol of the filthy Jews. In March and April, when it was cool, we had to wear it on the left side of our outer clothing. It was very humiliating, very painful. Sometimes I felt that it was so unjust and unfair that I took off my Star of David

³Herzberger, "The Yellow Star," *Waltz*, 25: 8-12

and went outside. My parents were very upset because if I would have been caught, I probably would have been put in prison.

We had to walk the streets with this Star of David pinned on us. It was very dangerous because many of the special Hungarian police and local citizens were anti-Semitic. Naturally, not all people were anti-Semitic, but there were some who did not like Jews. And, from their viewpoint, with good reason, because Jewish people were holding good positions; they were ambitious. Some of them wouldn't have minded having a Jew's job. We were always persecuted. Even though we too were citizens like they were, we never had the same rights. We always had to excel. Naturally not all people felt this way, but some people went along with that. It's sad, but that's the truth.

Everyone could see the sign of our religion. They also had a special nickname for Jews, very degrading. In Rumanian, they called us *Jewdan*. This lasted through March, April and May.

Everything happened fast from then on. May was the worst part. In Rumania and in Hungary, when you registered, you had to specify your religion. Therefore, City Hall had a list of the Jewish people. I was registered as a Jew; it was on my identification card. In May we were taken out of our homes. It was easy for them; the SS and German soldiers with a special Hungarian police took the list and went from street to street, from home to home, pulling out the Jewish people. The Hungarian police were wearing boots with little bells on them - special bells. There was a special police force. I don't think they had a special name, but they assisted the Nazis in taking the Jews from their homes. When they started doing that, we knew that our street was going to come. There was no way we could run away anymore; we would have been

arrested.

We lived in an apartment house, but it had a yard and trees. We had some little heirloom pieces. My father did not want to lose the few things he cherished, like his pocket watch, a little locket, the wedding rings, his rings, whatever we had. Hearing that they came from street to street, he buried them in a box in the ground at night. That's how we could retrieve them. I still have those - a little locket from my great grandmother. I never knew her.

My father also gave some of our photographs to our Hungarian friends with whom he played chess, to hold for us just in case. I have these today, a selection of meaningful photos of ourselves. We didn't know that we were going to be taken to Germany. They said that we were going to be taken to labor camps within the country. Who would have thought that we would end up in Auschwitz? We hoped that we would come back, but it did not happen that way. We had to leave the house, and we knew what was happening to our house. When you walked out, you knew.

I will never forget that day. I could see that the going was bad. We lived on the second floor in a two bedroom apartment. I could see the Germans coming in with the civilian police. I could hear the bells. They were taking our neighbors, and then they came up - walking up the stairs.

I experienced brutality for the first time in my life. I was an only child. I grew up with lots of love. My father was a peace-loving person, and I never got corporal punishment. He always believed in the power of words and not of blows. I had very kind parents. We were a very close, loving family.

The Germans broke in and started pushing us. They were treating us like cattle who

had to be taken out from the barn. "Fast, fast, fast; out, out, out." Beating us if we didn't move fast enough. To avoid the blows, we had to go fast.

They said that we can take only a small suitcase. We opened the drawer and pushed in whatever we could. All the rest remained in the house, which was totally looted - probably by the Germans and by local people.

When we came back, our neighbors had some of our stuff, which we couldn't even retrieve. None of our neighbors tried to help us because they were scared. They would have been punished if they helped us. They couldn't. Nobody could. Nobody was coming to our aid. And I refer to the priest, I refer to the reverend, I refer to everybody in the city. They were silent. They had seen what was happening to us, but I think that they did not have any second thoughts about stealing some of our stuff.

There was one thing that is still very painful to me. They took everything away. We had to leave our house with everything that my parents worked for for a lifetime. My mother was very good in crafts; she had beautiful needlework. We had personal pictures, family pictures. I had a beautiful sketch of my great grandmother on my father's side. I never knew my great grandmother. Everything had to be taken out. Not to speak about documents. Nothing. You lost everything that you had!

They took us from our apartment to open trucks that took us to the so-called ghetto, an open area at the site of an old abandoned brick factory on the outskirts of the city. We were put down there on the ground. We did not even have a roof above our heads. We had a very poor diet. It was practically a starvation diet. Most of it was just a little bread and some water. Some of us packed food and took along some things like eggs and things that can be preserved. The

conditions were horrible hygienically.

It was a big area guarded by Hungarian police. Some of the Hungarian police - not all of them - were just like Nazis. They were Jew-haters too. Sometimes they were very vulgar. The way they made us go to the restroom for instance. We had outdoor privies. I knew one of the guards. I really wished they would have caught him. There was an older lady who had to go to the bathroom. He said, "You can make it in your pants." She could only go when he wanted. There were instances when you got sick. It was very bad because who is going to take you out from the ghettos? Thus, we were in a very bad position, and we couldn't do anything. We couldn't get away; it was too late because we were guarded from all sides.

If we could wash at all, it was very primitive. We did not have showers. We did not have sinks; everything was outdoors. It was very hard. You even had to stand in line for water. If you didn't have much water, you did what you could with a little. Water was distributed in big containers. We had to wait for it. There was no soap. My parents had a little soap which we treated like a sacred thing. But you could not use the soap because it required too much water. At that time, I had long hair. It was almost impossible to wash it unless you used cold water. It was inhuman the way we were treated. You had to do whatever you could to help yourself under those conditions.

Toilet paper was unheard of. We used whatever was around. If you had a newspaper, you used that, or whatever paper you could get hold of. It was not a luxury. This was really the preliminary German concentration camp. We slept on the floor. There were no buildings. No covering. It was surrounded by a metal fence with barbed wire. And this was surrounded by soldiers. There were thousands of people; they concentrated all the Jews just from Cluj. I don't

know exactly what our number was, but it was quite a sizeable Jewish population. It was a big camp.

It had gates, but you could not go through them because they were guarded. We were told, "This situation is not going to last. It's a short period." They were feeding us all along with lies. "It's going to be just for a little while. Families are going to be together." That was a big thing - "Families are going to be together. The situation is going to be much better." Our situation lasted for a whole month.

Sometimes we had to form lines and go for water. The camp was in the outskirts of the city and there was a water supply. We had to go there and get the water and carry it back. I can't remember whether it was a well, a spring or a faucet. I think it might have been an outdoor faucet. On those occasions when we carried the water, I said to my parents, "Let's run away; this isn't good." That's when I saw an opportunity. "Let's get to the end of the line and maybe we can do something." We had Hungarian friends who lived in the vicinity. But I think my mother was scared of doing anything. I said, "Maybe we could run to her place. We must try something." But we were scared. You want to do something, but you're fearful about what is going to happen to you. It was a no-win situation.

We did not know anything. We had no way of talking to people who were in Poland or Czechoslovakia. We could not imagine something horrible. We were kept in total darkness after our radios had been given in.

The camp was guarded by German and Hungarian guards. Most of the German guards were Wehrmacht. You could still find among the Wehrmacht some people who were humane. But the SS were totally loyal to Hitler. The SS had a license to kill in the camps. They enjoyed

torturing you. Torture can be emotional and physical, and they were skilled in both of them.

That was going on for a month. We still didn't know what was happening. The Jewish Committee had to make the lists to meet the quotas imposed on them. We were wondering where they were going. There were maybe five hundred people on each transport. The transports were accompanied out of the camp with several guards. They were transported in cattle wagons to German concentration camps, but we did not know where they went. It was just a gradual thing; you take five hundred people, again and again.

Our turn came on June 1, 1944. The whole camp was taken. We were marching for awhile, accompanied out of the camps by Hungarian police and the German guards. Then we were taken to the cattle wagons. These cattle wagons had hardly any windows. They put us in compartments which were filled to their maximum. We could hardly move in there. Then the trains started moving. We did not get any food; we did not get any drink; we had no toilet. They locked us in those cattle wagons, and they bolted the doors from outside. We traveled for three days and three nights. The situation inside the cattle wagons was horrible! All that excrement! Some people were in a horrible state. Imagine little kids and old people traveling like that - no water.

Everyone was fighting for his or her own survival. We had to sleep on the floor of the wagon. My father was a very strong man, strong personality, and this was the first time I had seen him really crying. He said we made a grave mistake, but it was too late.

After three nights and three days, the train stopped and I heard German voices. I was scared. We didn't know that we were in Auschwitz. The biggest extermination in the history of Auschwitz was going on in 1944. Transports came day and night; 27,000 Jewish people were

gassed and cremated each day. It was madness! I couldn't have come at a worse time.

The heavy doors of the cattle wagons were opened and the SS guards came in with short rubber sticks. They were hauling us out and beating us if we didn't go fast enough. They were really brutal. We were advised to leave everything in the cattle wagon. We could not take our small suitcases. We had to come down, "fast, fast, fast; *shnell, shnell, shnell*; get out, get out." Then we were standing on a platform, and I will never forget the first look at Auschwitz.

So many times
I could have been selected
For the gas chambers
To meet the horrible fate
Of all the infants, the children,
The young, the old,
The sick, the disabled
Who were executed
In the mysterious
"White House" of Auschwitz,
Who naked bodies were thrown
To the furnaces
Of the huge crematoriums,
Whose ashes were used
On the fields and the gardens.⁴

I couldn't understand why I could see great flames belching from chimneys and why the air was filled with a strange, sickening, sweetish odor. It turned out to be burning flesh. It smelled like a slaughterhouse when they burn the fat. We didn't know then what was burning there. I couldn't imagine that my family members and innocent victims were burning there. I couldn't imagine something that horrible.

⁴Herzberger, "Memorial," in *Eyewitness to Holocaust* (Mattoon, Illinois: Modern Images, 1987), 15: 4-18.

I actually arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The gas chambers were in Birkenau. It was a huge camp surrounded by a barbed wire fence charged with electrical current. I could see these concrete posts connected with barbed wire fence. On the top of each of these concrete posts, there was a light directed to the camp; it was a watching eye. The women's camp was behind the fence. I could see women who were shaved and who were begging for food. They were dressed in rags. I thought that this was the mental asylum. I couldn't believe it, how horrifying this was - my first impression of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Cruelty all around.

It took a long time. The wagons stood there, and we had to leave everything in them. Then the Polish prisoners took our things from the wagon and put them in the Canada⁵ warehouse. We didn't know that, but we found out later.

We were standing on the platform. Then the first separation took place. Women were separated from men. This first part of the selection was done by a medical committee. I found out later that the head of the committee was Dr. Joseph Mengele. I did not know his name. He had very dark hair, dark eyes, dark eyebrows, and something of a cold, callous look in his eyes. He was impeccably clean. He was a well-built man - I would say even good looking. I looked especially at his highly polished boots. He held a stick in his hand. I can't remember what it was, whether that was made of wood or something else.

But I remember Dr. Joseph Mengele, and I found that the other one was Dr. Fritz Klein.⁶

⁵The warehouse where the possessions of the Jews were sorted for distribution throughout Germany.

⁶Dr. Fritz Klein, from Braschow, medical director of the camp. He was in charge of the women's camp at Auschwitz. He believed Jews were the equivalent of a "gangrenous

Dr. Mengele and Dr. Klein, two German high officials, did the selections when I came. Dr. Klein was shorter than Dr. Mengele, but I can't remember him that well. Dr. Joseph Mengele pointed me to the right and many of my family members to the left. I remember him because he looked directly at me.

He was asking the age of the children, and the people were telling the right age. They didn't know what is going to happen. Children up to age fourteen were taken away to the gas chambers along with the infants. They were sending all the old people - the aged - to the left. They were joined by pregnant women, the disabled and others who were weak or injured. Sometimes they would take a child away from its mother. They enjoyed this emotional torture. There were instances when a grandmother and the children were taken away, and the mother said, "Please take care of my children." The Polish prisoners were telling the mothers, "Give the child; they are going to have better treatment." They knew if the mother goes with the child, she's going to be gassed too.

It took hours to separate everybody. If you were pointed to the left, you went to the gas chambers; if you were pointed to the right, you went to the barracks.

The gas chamber had a white fence around it, and there were four crematory units. Each consisted of an underground viaduct, the gas chamber, and the crematory ovens. There was a forest next to our camp. People who were selected sometimes would stay in the forest and wait until two thousand could go into this underground viaduct, where they had to strip off their

appendix," according to references in Robert Jay Lifton, The Nazi Doctors, (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 1, 206.

clothing. They were told that they should put everything nicely together. For what purpose? They probably knew what was happening to them. Most of the people working in the crematory ovens were men - Polish prisoners. Every four months the unit was exterminated and others were brought in. That's where the mutilation took place.

Mengele did not say anything to me but pointed me to the right. He was motioning, "left, right." He looks at you and assesses you, and then decides what he's going to do to you. He was talking to us, asking our ages. Sometimes, he would ask the age of a fourteen or fifteen year old, and he would point to the gas chambers. That's what happened to my cousins. He did not talk to me. I was eighteen years old. I was very well developed and strong. I looked like I would be good for slave labor; they could leave me alive and use me later on. I played a lot of sports in my life. My uncle was a fencing champion of Rumania. I was in competitive fencing. In class, I was always sitting in the back. I was tall, taller than many others. I'm five feet, three inches tall, but that five feet, three inches was considered to be a taller person in my home town.

We were pointed to the right. To the left, I could see families trying to run after each other. The SS guards were shooting in the air; there were beatings. It was such a horrible scene! I can never shut that out of my mind. I was totally shocked. I thought that I must be dreaming. This could not happen. They separated families. Within a short period of time, my family was taken away from me. That was such emotional torture. Now I didn't have the emotional support of my family.

My father told me, "Please practice the art of love, forgiveness, and tolerance in your heart. Take care of your mother. Cherish and respect her. Don't forget your loving father." These were his last words when we were separated. And I promised him, I made a vow to take care of

my mother. I love her and I will always take care of her. I said, "Mother, I love you and I will do everything so that you are happy, regardless." She said, "I know. That's all I want to hear." Now she's in a nursing home, but my promise is a promise; it's a commitment. When you love somebody truly, then you don't let the person down when the person is in need.

Your last words
Still ring in my ears
After so many years -
"My child, my dear daughter,
Soon we will be separated
From each other.
I may never return -
Be strong, don't cry.
Let the candle of hope burn
In your heart
Take care of your mother,
Cherish and respect her - ⁷

I went to the right. First, we entered a room where we had to leave all our belongings, everything we had. We were just a bunch of women separated from the men. Two women whom I knew from our city were with me, but I was one of the youngest. We were all naked. We had to leave everything and enter the shaving room naked. I cannot shut out the experience I had there from my memory. I was naked in front of everybody. I tried to hide myself.

An SS woman ran the shaving room. Some of these SS women were nastier than the men. They were snakes who enjoyed biting you. I know she enjoyed it. She saw me and she thought (I interpreted this way), "I'm going to have fun." I had hair down to my knees. My hair was in a

⁷ Herzberger, "Eulogy," *Eyewitness* , 30: 17-28.

"Gretchen" hairdo: two sets of braids twirled around your head and fastened with pins. I did that because it was more hygienic. She was smiling when I came in. She took the shears and was cutting my hair. I said, "Please leave me a little hair." I never forgot that horrible feeling I had when somebody was pulling my hair with such force. She cut off all my hair. Then I was in a shock. She was enjoying herself, smiling and laughing while she did that. It was a horrible experience when I saw my hair fall down in one piece. The head was shaved, but not the pubic hair. They used the hair for different purposes, including the hair from the victims of the gas chambers - from the dead. They used the hair for pillow cases and wigs, probably my hair also, which was beautiful long hair. I couldn't even cry because I said, "This is a nightmare." It couldn't happen. It's not happening.

The guards came in, and then I felt a pain on my naked back. They were hauling us into the shower room. I was in shock, and I got hit because I didn't go into the shower room fast enough. This was a real shower room. I don't think it was heated water, but I can't remember that. You took a shower, but you were persecuted and harassed: "*shnell, shnell, shnell.*" Could you even take a decent shower when you were so shocked that you are in another world, a world of nightmare?

When we came out of the shower room and entered the dressing room, we got the most ridiculous clothing. Some of us got summer clothing. The good clothing was taken away, so we got the clothing that they probably wanted to discard but gave to us instead. I did not get the prison clothing. I ended up with a long, dark blue dress. I don't wear too much dark blue today because of that! I like blue, but not that color blue! It was a dark blue dress and it was long - down to my ankles. It was probably about twice as big as I needed. Then I got an orthopaedic

shoe for a foot that needed it. I didn't. It was a high shoe with laces. Maybe it was a shoe of an old lady who had some problems. I had pain walking in that shoe because I have normal feet. I didn't need that orthopaedic thing, but who cared if it was my size, or if I needed an orthopaedic shoe? I did not get any underwear. But I was lucky that I got a long dress. I realized that later because every day, in the morning before going to work, they numbered us standing in line. We looked like people from comic strips - like clowns.

Next came the paint room where they painted our outer clothing. It was a red stripe about four to five inches wide. It went all the way down from the base of the neck. Why did they do that? Evidently so that if we ran away, we could be recognized.

Who could run away from Auschwitz? People tried, but in Auschwitz there were Doberman killer dogs; you could hear their barking in the morning. When somebody tried to escape, the alarm went off. The dogs were barking and going after the people. I don't know if anybody escaped from Auschwitz, but if you didn't succeed, you were better off if you were shot. Otherwise you were put in the torture cell, which was about three feet by three feet. You were chained and they could do anything - torture you. Or they would hang you in public. I realized I could never have gotten away. Nevertheless, very often the alarm was sounding, and there was a whole commotion. Somebody tried to escape because they couldn't stand it the humiliation any more.

When we left the paint room we were led to our barracks. It's interesting, when you are in shock, you experience three contradictory emotional reactions: either you laugh, or you cry, or you can't even cry. Some started laughing; it was like an abnormal thing because they found that we look very ridiculous, and yet some started laughing. I personally couldn't laugh. I couldn't

cry. I was in shock. I didn't know if it was real. I was confused.

I was not tattooed. None of our transport was tattooed for a good reason: because in 1944 there was the great extermination going on and maybe they did not even want to invest that effort. Besides, the going wasn't exactly that great for the Germans. So I was lucky. Would I have come earlier to Auschwitz, I would have been tattooed. So there's no record of me being in Auschwitz. We were not tattooed in Bremen; neither were we in Bergen-Belsen because when we got there, you had a three week life expectancy. We were infected with typhus and everything. But when I was in Bergen-Belsen, when I was liberated, I got a fingerprinted certificate.

There was a great extermination going on. In Auschwitz⁸ there were four crematory units. Each consisted of an underground viaduct, gas chambers and the crematory ovens. Two thousand could go into this underground viaduct, where they had to strip and were told that they should put everything together nicely - for what purpose? When everything was transported to the Canada warehouses, they could select and put it nicely in order. They were given soap and towels; they were accompanied with classical music to that point. Did they ever think that they are going to have this fate?

They distributed towels and soap and then they were pushed into the gas chamber - five hundred at one time. On the door of the gas chamber was written "BATH HOUSE," so the people went voluntarily in. The doors were closed. The gas chamber had fake shower heads. On

⁸The main camp, Auschwitz I, had one gas chamber and crematory oven; Birkenau [Auschwitz II], the extermination camp to which Magda was brought, had four.

the ceiling, there was an opening which was latticed with a glass window through which a lethal gas was administered - Zyklon B mixed with cyanide. The gas chambers had porous walls. There were ducts from outside administering the gas through these holes. The gas came from above and below. People were defecating in it. It's a horrible thing to talk about. I just have nightmares; I never got rid of my nightmares. The gas chambers had peepholes so the guards could look in. People died in those gas chambers. You could see true love. They were holding hands in rigor mortis. They had terrible contortions. They used hook-tipped poles to separate them.

There was a special sonderkommando. Everybody who worked there was sonderkommando. We who dragged, we were sonderkommando, but so were the SS who administered the gas - the sonderkommando.⁹ When everything was over, then the sonderkommando was dragging the corpses from inside. Naturally, I was also selected for that gruesome task because I was young and strong - eighteen years old. And so, I thought that anything - leaving Auschwitz - would be better.

My first night in Auschwitz, my first night in the barrack - it was a very large barrack, and it had two entrances. They could accommodate, I think, about five hundred people. The barracks were very poorly constructed. I know that on my side were less windows. It was always dark. You could see some chimneys from the kitchen of the barrack. The food was terrible. The barracks had some wooden planks, and many people were on each plank. When I got there, those

9 Actually the term "sonderkommando" refers to the group of men who removed the corpses from the gas chambers, examined them for hidden gold or jewelry, and put them into the crematory ovens. Every so often the sonderkommando were themselves exterminated, and a new group of men were designated as sonderkommando.

barracks with planks were filled, so we had nothing except the floor. We had to sleep with crouched knees, practically like sardines. In my barrack, I was one of the youngest. There were more mature women, or maybe even girls who were more like twenty or twenty-two. I was eighteen. I woke up with some other women; there were three women whom I knew from our city who were also with me.

There was a door in the middle of our barrack separating one side from the other. When it was raining, we got rain through the crevices. We were given pails. The water accumulated, and we had to throw it out with pails. The barracks were inundated. I had a friend a little older than I, about twenty-three years old. She was very nice, a kind and very gentle person. One night, there was a horrible night of rain. Our barracks started to get water. We took the pails to get the water out. The other side of the barrack was cleaner; they had water, but we had it worse. They thought our side was better, and they broke through that door to see. It was a nightmare. My friend was close to the door. In order to survive, she started strangling those people, attacking, so that she would stay alive. That night passed, but my friend never recovered. I think she snapped. Every time there was rain, she was actually trying to strangle the people. She became violent. She was not a violent person. She had a mental breakdown. She was screaming. She was taken away. We never saw her again because she was a bother; she was probably killed.

It was cold in the barrack. Five people got one blanket, a wool blanket. These were kept in a corner. When people were coming back from work, the fight started for the blankets. I was very good at running into the barracks and preparing at least one blanket because otherwise we remained without any. It was like a madhouse. Everyone came into the barracks and reached for the blankets. It was horrible!

The first nightmare I faced the first day in Auschwitz must have been around 4 o'clock in the morning. We had no watches; we didn't know what time it was, but it was pitch dark. We had no electricity in our barracks. Then the guards came in with those sticks. "*Heraus, heraus, heraus, fast, fast, fast.*" I was waking up from a dream. In my dream I was home, combing my long hair, when I heard "*heraus, heraus.*" It was a roll call.

The roll call lasted for hours. We were surrounded by guards with machine guns. They had high platforms, where the guards were standing with machine guns. That's when our torture started - with the roll call. First of all we had to stand straight in line, erect, in the morning. It was cold at that hour. I was lucky. At least I had my long dress and my high shoes. If you deviated from your line, and you were so unlucky that the guard caught you, your whole line was punished. The whole line had to kneel, even though only one person was out of order. Just to teach you. We had to kneel in clay or in stone as long as they wanted us to, with our hands up in the air. If you were unfortunate and couldn't keep up your hands, you were beaten.

I want to talk about physicians in the camp. People would think that physicians had privileges, but not all physicians were treated well. Many were treated very badly. Maybe some physicians were treated better, but not where I was. Sometimes they would line up physicians in order to persecute them more because they were intellectuals. Some of these guards with very little education now suddenly got power. They hated intellectuals.

It happened that in my barrack there was a physician. She got worse treatment than all of us because the guards and the *blockaltesters* were very cruel. I hate to tell you that some were Jews, Polish Jews. I think they must have been in the camp for a longer period of time, and they sold themselves to the Germans. So they had to act like that; they had to be more cruel in order

to maintain their positions and not to be gassed themselves. It's no excuse. But we had these *blockaltesters* who were cruel enough. So sometimes you were better off not to reveal that you were a physician. I don't think people knew that.

One morning this physician - she was older, thirty-two, middle stature, and she had dark hair. She was with me in the barracks. She was always cold. In order to warm herself up, she tore a part of her blanket and put it around her chest. We advised her not to do that. She did that several times. She had, unfortunately, a thinner dress. It was the roll call. Not only did they number¹⁰ you, they could also check you. You could not hide anything on you. If you were caught with anything, you were punished. So, there was the roll call and she had this little piece torn from the blanket rapped around her chest.

The SS guards were usually wearing handguns and high boots; they were always well dressed. The SS guard, on this day was very pretty. We called her the blond angel of death. She was very cruel and sadistic. If she felt like it, she could hack you up. Unfortunately, she saw that the physician looked more stuffed, and she pulled off that little piece of blanket that she was holding. And, my God, she started beating her. Slapping her and slapping her and slapping her. Her face was all red. And what she did - she couldn't stand it. She attacked and wanted to strangle the SS woman. She went for her neck. Naturally she was taken away and we are pretty sure she was shot.

If you got sick in Auschwitz, it was scarlet fever; it was scurvy; typhus was raging. As far

¹⁰In this context, number means count.

as medications in Auschwitz, you got nothing. People were dying of scarlet fever, of scurvy. You would be sick and still have to drag the corpses. People were beaten to death because they couldn't drag the corpses anymore.

We were on a starvation diet. In the morning, the black coffee tasted like dishwater. We had foul water in Auschwitz. In the evening we got foul water. You had nothing during the whole day. In the evening, again they counted us after we came back to the camp. And you had to wait in line for that. The food was distributed. You got a six-and-a-half ounce bread. It was always stale bread. Hard. It had something in it that tasted like sawdust, and it irritated your throat. We never got fresh bread. And always dark bread. Then you got a little soup with a few rutabagas floating in it. It smelled awful. You could feel the sand in it. The only way you could eat this was if you closed your nostrils. That's the way I did it, I closed my eyes. I had to eat that soup because that was all I would get. With this kind of nutrition, how could you survive? Occasionally they would give us a razor thin slice of a kind of a meat - a kind of a cold cut. I don't know what it was. And then a big delicacy sometimes - a spoon of jelly. We did not have any possibility for additional food.

I don't know the exact distance, but across from our camp was a men's camp. I think that they were Polish prisoners, Polish Jews. I remember that some of the women did something they shouldn't do. If they had a long dress, they would cut a part of it off, and they would put on a little bonnet to hide the baldness, hoping that the men would throw them a piece of bread or something. They were begging from the men.

Some prisoners defected. These Polish prisoners were there so long that they had access to other food. I could never beg food from them. I felt I'd rather die because it would be like

prostituting myself. I said, "No, I am a proud person." But sometimes, those Polish men were able to cross over to the women's camp. I don't know how they did it, but they must have had some of the men working in the Canada warehouses. In the Canada warehouses you had jewelry, you had clothing, you had shoes. So some of them could bribe the guards. We could not do this. I think the only people who could bribe the guards were the ones who were working in the Canada warehouses because they found jewelry. The guards were not supposed to take anything, but greed exists. That was going on in the camp. I felt I rather die in dignity. I have very strong principles and values which I never gave up regardless of circumstances. But I remember definitely that in the men's camp some people had more access to food and other things. But not us. We had to be satisfied with that coffee and with that miserable food.

Everyone in the barrack took care of herself. We got bread and soup in the evening. You had to hide it underneath your head because there were people in the barracks who would steal your bread. I found that it was the safest to eat it so nobody could steal it. I remember thinking what to do with my bread when I got it. When I got to the barrack, I said, "Well, I'm going to just take a few bites. I'll leave something for tomorrow." I got up in the middle of the night and said, "Maybe one bite." By the morning the bread was finished. I was a young person, so I used up my food. My luck was that God really protected me.

I was faced with a horrible job. If we were strong and young, we had to drag the corpses. I saw many of my fellow prisoners getting the corpses out of the gas chambers, and throwing them on the lorries to take them. They were naked traveling to the crematory ovens. Mostly Polish prisoners, men, worked in the crematory ovens. I saw people beaten to death because they collapsed with the corpses. They were standing up, beaten, collapsed, standing up, beaten. There

were people who were shot in the back of the gas chamber too. Every four months, many of us perished. It was only luck that I survived seven weeks in Auschwitz. If it had been longer, I don't think I would be here today. Not that I went to a such beautiful place in my second camp, because I went for slave labor too. But at least I was on the streets. Maybe I could raid a garbage can.

In Auschwitz I had no way of doing anything of that sort. We had to drag the corpses also from that wire fence almost every day. People who did not want to live anymore touched the barbed wire fences with electrical currents. Others went close to the barbed wire fence to be shot by the guards because they didn't want to live anymore. So we dragged corpses from the fence.

We had two kinds of corpses in the barracks. There were those who tried to hang themselves and succeeded. They often used a piece of their clothing to hang themselves. Others who got typhus were not treated. If you got sick, you were not useful anymore. It was very dangerous to be sick; it was your death sentence.

I did not see any infirmary. I never saw any kind of medical assistance. I did not get any medication whatsoever. I didn't see anyone get medication. There was no access to medication. There were some people with cancer who were not treated, and they had terrible pain. Not only did they have pain, but they had to work with that pain. Our barracks had nothing. The only infirmary I saw was in my second camp in Bremen. You had to be half dead to get anything from there. But in Auschwitz I was confined. We were isolated. There were gates separating barracks. We were in the Hungarian camp. There were gates between the quarters. There was no way you could get out because it was guarded by the SS. If you went out past a certain barrier, the guard could shoot you on the spot. So I did not go out of my environment.

There were outdoor toilets. Just holes, that's all. Sometimes the guards didn't let you go when you wanted. Just to torture us, they made us shit in our pants. You had to do everything with others watching. You had no privacy in there.

We were just the women's camp, isolated from the men's camp. We had barbed wires. You had to go through a gate, but you could see the men's camp. The only people who went through gates only were those who were transporting the food - that little black coffee. They were the *ess commando*. I'm glad I never was selected for that because it was another torture. It had to be boiled at night so that it could be transported by them early in the morning. It was a huge metal kettle - holding about fifty quarts, weighing about one hundred fifty pounds - with handles on both sides. There were a number of people assigned - not too many - and sometimes they got burned by carrying it. But the worst thing was that we received very little fluid. We didn't receive a drink during the day. Your drink was in the morning. It was a nightmare when that coffee came. Sometimes these people who were carrying it were attacked; everyone feared they would get left out and not get their ration.

We didn't have utensils. No knives, forks, or anything. We had a kind of an army-like thing, metal containers, and had to drink our soup from that. They would take those metal containers and try to pour the coffee in that. Many times the coffee spilled. People who were close by were burned. You had to be very careful because it was like a revolution when that drink came. It was dangerous to be transporting that. The same thing happened to the people who transported the other food. But the other food was dished out. The guards were there. But in the morning, because of all the nights and the torture and the hunger, there was a craze. Every morning was an absolute madness! People were hysterical.

I have seen people who wanted to die and refused to eat. Why? It was easy after a while not to eat because they fell into depression. They didn't care. They didn't care to have even the soup. They didn't care to have that coffee. That's when you knew that somebody is going to go down. If you started looking like a skeleton, you were called a *Mussulman*. You knew this is not going to be good; they are going to be taken away. You tried to prevent it. Sometimes you succeeded and sometimes you couldn't.

In my second week or third week in Auschwitz, I started toying with the fence. I was trying to think whether it's worth living under those conditions. I felt that I had very little hope - just a slow torture and I am going to die ultimately. Something interesting happened to me on that night because I think really God protected me. Because of the things that happened to me, I believe in miracles. I have a deep faith in God because that's the only place I could turn for help.

On that night I couldn't sleep, and I was wondering what to do - whether I should live or I should die. And I said, "Well, what am I going to do?" I am going to just get up in the middle of the night and think and go closer to the wires, but I was toying with suicide on that night. We were so cramped. I got out, and I passed over the others. They were cursing me because I had to go through those older sleeping persons to reach the door of my barrack. I was standing there and thinking, "What's the reason for me to live?" Naturally I have parents. I am only eighteen years old; I want to do many things in my life, but then what kind of a life do I have here? Who knows, maybe my parents ended up in the gas chambers. Who am I going to have? I know many of our older people and children have not survived because they were pointed to the left. I knew what is happening to them at that time. Then I felt a hand on my shoulders. There was a girl in my barrack who was just one year older than I was. She was my schoolmate in the elementary

school. She and her sister were very poor. They were not very good students. I think their living conditions had to do with the things they had to face. She never got to go to that gymnasium. She put her hand on my shoulder. "Magda, what are you doing? Why did you come up?" I said, "How do you know?" She said, "I followed you." She recognized that there was something not okay with me because I would close my ears. I didn't want to hear anything. I started not to have interest to swallow my food. She had seen that something was happening to me and she wanted to save me. She said, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself? What if your parents survived and you never come home? You are an only child." I went back and I was thinking, "What can I do?"

In the third week, my depression was getting worse. I didn't know if I could take this much longer. At age eighteen, I had to make the biggest decision. I was debating with myself: why I want to live; why do I want to die? And I came up with the end result: I want to live regardless of circumstances. People sometimes make so much about problems that don't deserve all that importance. But that was an important thing - whether you want to live or you want to die. I was given that great, divine gift, a great miracle created by God, and I have to respect it, I have to cherish it, and I have to do everything in my power to fight for life. I asked God to help me how to do it. I knew I had to do something because I was very depressed. When you are depressed and there's nobody to help you, you have to extricate yourself. If you are not able to do that yourself, you are lost.

I got my first slap on the face from a guard. I never was beaten at home. Then you create an invisible shield and say, "I don't feel anything anymore." That happened to many of the prisoners. You had to anesthetize yourself emotionally in order to be able to tolerate it because otherwise you knew you are going to do something. Either you kill yourself, or you are going to

go into a depression. Then you don't eat; then you are not useful anymore. It's a vicious circle.

I had this shield over me. I didn't care. But I didn't like it, and I knew that there is only me who can pull myself out of this. I had to do something to start with, to break the emotional anesthesia so that I feel something. I knew I had to inflict pain upon myself, to shock myself. I had to break the pattern, to shock myself out. I had to do some injury to myself, to wake up and feel - feel some pain, feel that I'm alive. I decided that I'm going to put my nails in my flesh so deep that I'm going to feel pain. I'm going to see my blood coming out, and I did it. And it surely hurt. I could see my blood flowing out. I said to myself, "Now this is you. I mean, you are not dead yet; you are alive, and you can feel." I knew that if I inflict pain upon myself, I'm going to feel it. If it was somebody else, I was anesthetized to that.

Naturally we didn't get any scissors; you had to bite off your fingernails. Also at the beginning, we didn't get any tampons or anything, so the blood was flowing in our menstrual periods. It was a horrible stench. They didn't want that. I think that they must have administered something in our food because gradually we lost our periods. We heard that a drug was administered in our soup; it's a type of powder.¹¹ I don't know actually know what they gave us, but we lost our periods for a whole year. I got my period back after liberation. They must have done something to us because it wasn't just me. It was my whole barrack, all the people, my fellow prisoners in my barracks. I don't know what happened in other barracks, but this happened to us. They must have used some medications or something, unless it was due to the stress and

¹¹*This is a common misconception among Holocaust survivors. There is no historical evidence to support the claim that there was any such powder in the soup.*

the poor nutrition. But it was a blessing because it was a horrible thing. You worked, you walked. I had always heavy periods, and I had nothing to protect myself. They didn't give us anything to protect ourselves. We were considered filthy; we were addressed names like you wouldn't believe.

We had tags. Each tag had a six digit number. You were a number. You lost your identity. You had no name. I had the tag in Auschwitz; I had the tag in Bremen; I had the tag in Bergen-Belsen. I wish I would have kept my tag, but after we were liberated, people were throwing out and crushing their tags. Can you imagine the rage you feel when you are liberated? Do you want to see your prison tag? I did not realize that one day maybe it would be nice to have my prison tag. I did not think that way at that time. I wanted to crush it and burn it and wreck it. That was not only me, but all of us because you were so enraged. Wearing this tag for such a long time and being a prisoner, you didn't want to have anything that even remotely reminded you of that.

You were taken to the gas chambers when you were not useful, but while you were useful, you were in great danger because twice a week, you had to sit naked and march in a front of an SS committee headed by Dr. Joseph Mengele. He was the chief physician in Auschwitz. He also had the infamous laboratories for experiments. If you were considered useful, only then were you left alive. If you were not considered useful anymore, if you had any sign of weakness, you were pointed to the left and exterminated.

There were people selected for horrible experiments conducted in the infamous laboratories of Dr. Joseph Mengele. Dr. Carl Clauberg was one of the other physicians working

with Dr. Mengele.¹² He was a monster in my opinion. Anybody who collaborated with him was a monster. Dr. Mengele had pet projects. One was to do experiments on twins. My cousin was selected as one of the experimental children. For months Mengele castrated them; then he would inject chloroform in their hearts. He also wanted to turn their eyes blue. In order to do that, he was injecting some dye in the eye, turning many of them blind. Out of about two hundred twins, about twenty, came back alive.¹³ Some of them were not healthy, even after they were liberated.

My cousin had a terrible experience. He was fourteen years old, and I was very close to him. Mengele, for some reason, pointed him to go with the experimental children. My cousin was not a twin, but he said that some children went in with the twins, which was a whim of Dr. Mengele. He was a sadist because he had a horrible game for those who were not twins. This was told to me by my cousin. They were brought in a room for selections between the twins and those non-twins who were thirteen or fourteen years old. In that room was brought a pole, which was hung from the ceiling and lowered. Whoever could reach the pole was left alive for awhile, for another good purpose, for experiments. The ones who couldn't [reach] were taken to the gas chambers. He enjoyed that - to see which child is going to reach or not to reach. My cousin said,

¹²*Clauberg conducted the sterilization experiments on women in Auschwitz, Block 10.*

¹³*According to the account in Children of the Flames, "when Auschwitz was liberated by the Russians on January 27, 1945, approximately 160 twins were found. Later another 30 or 40 were found.*

(Lucette Matalon Lagnado and Sheila Cohn Dekel, Children of the Flames: Dr. Joseph Mengele and the Untold Story of the Twins of Auschwitz, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 257).

"Magda, I reached it."

Then he was with the experimental twins. He said, "Do you know what it feels like that you are going to be taken one day for some experiment? They come in and you don't know if you are next in line." My cousin was very lucky because before he was liberated, he was scheduled for experimental surgery. He was once, though, injected in his spine with something. He doesn't know what it was, but he was afraid all his life. He said, "Magda, I don't think I'm going to live a long life." I said, "Alex, how can you say something like that?" Because I didn't know what this was.

There were two twins who were his friends, who were together. They were injected with something, and they gradually became paralyzed. Gradual, gradual deterioration. They could hardly move their necks, and he said, "I didn't know what will happen to me." They never knew what my cousin really had because he died suddenly. I think he was in his fifties. He was always scared, and maybe with good reason, who knows.

There was a woman, Margaret Swartz, a Hungarian from Transylvania. They were experimenting on her: the effects of starvation in the infamous laboratories of Auschwitz. They also mutilated her knees by sectioning them. They were dissecting people and when they were through, they would throw these horrible bodies in the gas chambers. There were skin grafts without septic care. I have about one hundred-thirty slides; some of them show medical experiments, including vivi-section, which were conducted in Auschwitz. Others are actual photographs from Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, which were given to me later by a liberating soldier. They were using young women, exposing them to radiation. They were sterilizing them and dissecting them to see the effects of the radiation, after which they were gassed. I have a

relative in Israel, a cousin of my mother. He lost his two beautiful children, his wife - they were killed. He met this other woman in the camp after liberation and married her later. He knew that she never could have children because she had been sterilized. She was also beaten to the point where she lost her hearing in one ear.

There is another thing horrible thing that happened in Auschwitz. Pregnant women were taken to the gas chambers. There was a pregnant woman among us in the barrack, and we really had to guard her so they would not see her tummy. This was difficult, and if the guards would have found out you were pregnant, your fate was terrible. You were taken to the gas chambers because you were carrying another life within you and you were not useful anymore.

In another barrack was a Jewish physician who had access to medication. She would inject the mother, making it possible to abort the embryo in order to saved the mother. If a woman somehow managed to give birth to a new life, and a Jewish physician who had access to drugs was around, she would inject the baby with a lethal dose of medication in order to save the mother. Once the mother know what was going to happen if that was not done, she was faced with a terrible decision: whether to perish with her baby or stay alive, in which case both would be killed.

Some people, due to stress, lost their humaneness. Others maintained that humaneness, that feeling of helping. You had that little piece of bread, and you didn't know where to hide it if you did not eat it because someone would take it from you while you were sleeping. Not everyone was doing that. There were many among us who could see the signs of depression. If we didn't help those persons, they would be going down. We tried to prevent it. In some instances it was possible; in other instances it was not.

My uncle had said, "You have to be able to tolerate pain to improve your endurance." I was thinking of his words when I was dragging those corpses. You had to take the corpse and pull it; you drag one arm, then the other and pull it. You always had to bend to pull these corpses. Some of them were still warm. Some of us had to hoist the corpses on lorries. Others had to drag the lorries. The prisoners dragged the lorries since we had no horses. The lorries traveled with the corpses stripped of clothing. No respect for the dead. Everything was stripped from the dead: their hair, their artificial limbs, their golden teeth. Everything you can take from the dead was taken away.

The crematory ovens had huge casks. Body fat melted at the high temperatures was used for soap. The ashes from the crematory units were used as fertilizer on the fields and in the gardens. In addition to that, I had to dig death pits for the innocent victims of persecution. Then we would have to throw the corpses in and incinerate them. We had no choice. I was digging the pits; I was strong.

All the loot from the victims in Auschwitz was thrown in the Canada warehouses and shipped to Germany. Mostly Polish prisoners worked there. They had access to some things. Because they had the access, they survived because some of the guards who were not as harsh turned their backs. Loot had some benefits.

The ones who were working in the crematory ovens were executed every four months because the Germans, the SS, never wanted to be found out. So they were executed. They were lured by saying that if you worked there you would get better food. You were often lured into things. You didn't know exactly what you volunteered for. Food was an excellent lure because we were starving. Seeing my fellow prisoners beaten to death, I knew the only way I could

survive, if I had the intelligence, was to have the strength to endure pain. And I did. That was the toughest work that we had to do. I saw good people go insane because they recognized a family member.

I was in Auschwitz for seven weeks. You could see people get sick. There was scarlet fever - high fever - and scurvy. People were pulling out their teeth just like that from vitamin deficiency. Every single day I tried my teeth to see they were still in place. I survived three camps. In Bergen-Belsen I was starving, but when I came home, I didn't have a single cavity. This is a miracle.

There was a selection in the seventh week in Auschwitz, especially younger people and young women who looked strong. We didn't know where we were going to be taken, but we were taken out of Auschwitz. I thought that anything would be better than Auschwitz because there we had to face selection every day, either pointed to death or left alive.

After seven weeks of doing that horrible, nightmarish job, five hundred women were selected from Auschwitz for slave labor. We didn't know where we were going when we were selected. We were taken to Bremen in cattle wagons on a train. Bremen was the second largest port in Germany. At that time it was really the front line and was attacked day and night by the Allies. When we arrived, Bremen looked like a cemetery. We walked through a part of the city to our barracks. I have never seen anything like that in my life. Whole streets were gone. There were half ruins sticking out; walls looked like tombstones in a cemetery. You could see people, caravans of people, big caravans, moving away from that city because it was bombed morning, noon, and night. We got into a war zone and were used as slave labor used to clear the city from the ruins. Then we had to drag the corpses of victims.

Our barracks in Bremen had bunks with mattresses. It was a primitive mattress filled with straw. It wasn't a big mattress, maybe two or three inches thick. There were three bunks for five hundred women, the ones who were taken from Auschwitz. I was always on the top bunk because I could climb well. The mattress was checked every day by the guards to see if we hid anything. Paper and pencil. You could be shot immediately if they found paper and a pencil, which could be used to record some of these events.

We were allowed to heat the barracks only once a week for two hours on Sunday. We had ice cold water at all times for washing a little bit. We came from the streets all chilled, and then we went into the chilled barracks. We were shivering outside and inside. I had frostbite on all my fingers. All my fingers and toes were affected. We got thin blankets and were cold through the night.

We were five hundred
Jewish prisoners,
Women with lost identity,
Captives of the Nazis,
Transferred from Auschwitz
To the port of Bremen,
To clear the ruins
And the charred bodies
Of the devastated streets
Of that doomed city...
And destined to be annihilated
After our last drops of strength
Were extracted.¹⁴

I was horrified by the effects of the war; seeing people going away.

We had to get up early in the morning and then march for awhile until we got to open

Herzberger, "The Streets of Bremen," *Eyewitness*, 18: 1-9.

trucks which took us to the part of the city we were supposed to clear. Usually after a great bombardment, we had to go select things that could be reused, like whole bricks or big pipes. It was heavy labor. I was constantly in pain, back pain. All of us were because we had to lift all day. Winter caught us there, and we were very poorly clad. We didn't get winter clothes. We got wooden Dutch shoes and rags around our feet. We put rags around our hands. One SS guard, a woman we called "the Raven," even wanted us to strip so that we could work faster. She thought that cold workers worked faster!

I will never forget that winter in Bremen. The fact that I did not lose my extremities, which some of my fellow prisoners did, was because I was moving all the time. Frostbite was a great danger. You were taken away because you were not useful anymore. My training from fencing gave me tremendous endurance because I learned to move and jump all the time. I said that I was not going to die by not constantly moving my legs and everything, and I did not freeze.

In Bremen, we could only get excess food from two sources. There was a garbage can if you had a good guard who would close his eyes. The other possibility was at the site of bombed factories or bombed out houses.

One of my friends was called Ilus, a Hungarian name. She is now living in Israel, a survivor. She was quite a bit older than me, maybe forty, forty-one, or forty-two. She was a very strong woman, and was very protective of me - like a mother to me. I grew up with good manners at home. I could not do certain things. I couldn't steal; I couldn't attack somebody and take away their food.

I remember we were working at the site of an old brick factory - of an old cheese factory.

Ilus was digging and came across something that looked like a piece of excrement. It was round. We were laughing; we said, "Ilus eats everything." And Ilus said, "When I clean it, I think we might want to eat from it!" She was a very good woman. She cleaned it. The surface of the cheese was burned, but inside the cheese looked good. This was a delicacy. There were a number of them underground. And she pulled them, cleaned them, and shared with all of us.

To do this, we had to have a good guard. On that day we had a Wehrmacht guard. Ilus cleaned it and asked, "Would you like to have a piece?" The guard ate a piece of that cheese with us because he didn't have much food. There was not much food in Germany during the war. He was like a friend of ours. He was unusual. There were a few Nazi guards who were humane. On that day, if we found something, we could eat it. On that day he closed his eyes to something that we should not have. But when we had the SS guards, we could not raid the garbage cans. We could not take anything because if they found it, they would beat us. So we knew we would have a bad day. But on the good days, we had some extra food, which was crucial, especially in winter. But we were in danger because we went into those holes that had incendiary bombs. They would explode.

In Bremen, they sold us as slave laborers to people who were in construction. They paid the Germans, but we didn't get anything. And if we died in the work or were bombed, they would bring more people from Auschwitz. We were dispensable. The only improvement was that occasionally we had access to food from the streets. One day there was a bombed house. I was poorly clad in the same blue dress I described before. Ilus found this little spring coat in one of the bombed basements. It became my winter coat. It was like a raincoat, but not the same material. It had two pockets, a real luxury. You could put your hands in the pockets. This was a

great thing. When "the Raven" came, I had to take off that coat. She said I had to be cold to work better. I lived in pain. I thought I would come home with a broken back.

I had an uncle who, when we were separated, gave me his last advice. He never had children of his own; I was his little girl - that's all he had. I thought he would survive, but he never came back. He said, "You have to tolerate pain in order to increase your endurance." He always told me, "It's good for you." I will never neglect my physical fitness because I made a promise. I'm going to do something for his memory.

We had two guards. One of them was fantastic. He was a most compassionate person. When he came with us, we knew that it was a good day because we could keep the scraps we might find underneath the ruins. If we had a bad guard they checked us; we were beaten up if we were found with a piece of food.

The only thing you would hope for was to have a good guard you go up to after one of the bombardments. There was a little SS guard, a short man. He was uneducated, vulgar. When we were marching to the open trucks, he could not contain himself; he had to kick somebody, to beat somebody, to kick, to be violent. He was very nasty. When he came, we had a miserable day, a horrible day.

We were working on the streets. With no heat, my fellow prisoners came back with horrible frostbite on their extremities. We were assigned to lift a heavy pipe, really heavy. I speak German, and asked the guard if we could get some more people to help. He said, "Oh, I can help you. What's the problem?" He came over and I said, "This is the problem. We need some more people. This is very heavy. We can't lift this." He said, "Oh, if you can't lift it, I'm going to help you. I'm going to count to three. One, two, three. If you don't lift it, I'm going to

shoot all of you." I don't know how we did it; we lifted it because we had no choice. I was injured for a year. Naturally we never got rid of pain afterwards, but we knew we were going to die because he meant it. I lived with pain for the rest of the winter. So did every one of us. I thought I had a broken spine - fortunately not - but probably we strained our backs.

In Bremen there were a group of French prisoners who were working on the street next to ours. I don't know what they did. I think that they were political prisoners. These people were absolutely wonderful. There was one who was like an angel. The reason why we survived the winter - we can thank them. I don't know how they had access to some packages.

In Germany they were set for the war. There were two kind of bunkers. One was a little bunker underground, and there were bunkers that had nine, ten stories. Those were safer than the smaller ones because they were very massively built. If there was a direct hit on the small ones, you perished. If we were working near the railroad station, we were put in the underground bunkers and the guards went to the big bunkers. They locked us in there so if something happened, we couldn't get out. One of the Wermacht guards stayed with us in the bunker: "A bomb is not going to fall where the Jews are." He never wanted to go to the big bunkers because he said that God protects the Jews. Can you imagine that?

The only place where I saw any medical facilities was in the infirmary in our camp in Bremen. The Germans in the infirmary wore white robes; maybe they were nurses. I think there were two or three of them in there. You could come up from the barracks and walk directly through a hall to this infirmary. It had two parts: one had the drugs, like painkillers or just aspirin. I don't know the names, but I doubt that they had any meaningful drugs. In the other part there were fifteen or twenty regular beds with mattresses which could accommodate the very

sick. I can't remember if I saw blankets. You had to be very sick. If you had a strep throat, if you had anything, you had to go out to work. If you got scarlet fever or something else, you were finished. They took you to the infirmary and then, if you were there for a long period, they might take you to the gas chambers. Your only defense, your only chance of surviving, was being able to work.

Even if we had bloody hands, we didn't get any disinfectants or anything. If you got scratched, it was too bad, you lived with the scratch. You didn't get anything. You weren't sick enough. You never were sick enough. You were not given personal treatment or disinfectant. The next day you had to go to work, regardless of what you had. If you were lucky enough and had a good guard, you could put on some rags, take something from your clothes, use something from a bombed-out basement.

Among us, in these five hundred women, there were no physicians or nurses. I don't think there were Jews in positions like that in that infirmary because the people who were taken to Bremen were exclusively for slave labor. The only physician I had was in Auschwitz. That was the only physician I encountered through my captivity.

There was a miracle which happened to me on the eve of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, that shows how much medication we got. I got up in the middle of the night. I had so much pain in my throat. I knew I had a strep throat because as a youngster, I suffered from strep throats very often. I knew I had high fever because I was a little confused. I had to come down from this third bunk, but finally I made it. I was so dizzy that I was hanging on to the wall. I went to the infirmary and asked for a painkiller. They looked at me and said that I'm not sick enough. I looked horrible, but they threw me out. I wouldn't have minded sleeping on the bed in

there because in the morning they would take us out for work. They said that I was not sick enough to get anything. I went back to my bunk, holding to the wall. I thought I was going to die. Finally I got next to my bunk. I couldn't eat my bread, that little piece of stale bread. I soaked my bread with a little soup so that I had some fluid. The next day - it was fall - was a really cold day in the northern part of Germany. I knew if I went out, I would probably catch pneumonia.

The next morning, the guards came in. I spoke German and said, "I am sick and maybe I can stay in the barracks." They said I was not sick enough not to go out to work. I could hardly swallow, but I had to get up, totally dress and work outside. I thought this was going to be the end of me. I was praying that the Allies would bomb. We were constantly in danger of being bombed. Planes coming. We were pleased because we went to our shelter. We thought maybe this is going to be the end of the war. I was praying for the planes to come so I could go into the shelter; anything was better than the streets.

On that day there was a bombardment. It lasted forty-five minutes and was the biggest bombardment that I experienced in Bremen. You could hear the whistle of these bombs falling and exploding, and you thought they were right next door. I had no idea. At one point was a huge detonation, and I knew it must have been close by. We had electrical lights in those bunkers, and they went out. They had heavy concrete doors. From this pressure, the door was pushed open. The whole bunker was shaking. I remember I closed my eyes and said, "Oh God, if this is the end, please let me die. I don't want to end up in a gas chamber. Let me die on the spot if it's the day to die." Then it stopped. Later, we heard the "All Clear" siren telling us the planes had gone, that we could go outside.

When I came out I was horrified. There was a car when we went in the bunker; it looked

like rubble. Houses were burning; people were burning and running out of the houses. It was a total kill. Half of the bunker - there were Russian prisoners in that bunker - all died. One side took a direct hit; the part that I was in stayed intact. Thirty or forty people survived in this one bunker. After that our guard also believed that the Jews are protected.

We worked outside for about forty-five minutes at the site of a bombed preserve factory. As I was digging and working there, I found two little jars of jelly. It reminded me of Chanukah. I took those two jars. All I had was my blue dress and the small spring coat with the pockets. I put those jars in the pocket. Finally we came back on the truck to the camp. Our camp was leveled. There was rubble, nothing. The infirmary was partly hit. If I had been in the infirmary or in the barracks, I would have been dead.

Now comes the other part of the miracle. They had to take us to another camp. During this confusion, they were not checking when we entered, and I smuggled in my two little jars. I had to eat the jelly. I could not leave the jars in the barracks. I could not put them in mattresses because I would have been discovered, so I was praying that we shouldn't have any checking. I took my little jars in the middle of the night, and I had to finish their contents. I did it. It was so soothing to my throat. When I woke up in the morning, my sore throat was totally gone. I can never understand how this happened. I got those two little jars of jelly, and my sore throat was cured. I was praying and there was no checking in the morning, so I could discard those two little jars on the street. That was on the Day of Atonement. Ever since, for me it is a sacred day. I go to the temple and say thanks to God that I was saved on that day.

Towards the end of March 1945, we really looked bad. We lost a great deal of weight and looked like we were not useful anymore. They wanted to take us away and get another transport

from Auschwitz for slave labor. We didn't know at that time that we had been sentenced to death in Bergen-Belsen. We never knew where they were taking us - what they would do to us. They just pick you up. We wore wooden shoes. We did not have trucks or anything. We had to march on foot thirty kilometers. You know what it means to march on foot for thirty kilometers when you are weak, when you are poorly clad, when you don't have that much strength? But it was a policy that they could get rid of some of us on the road. Whoever was not able to go was shot. Some couldn't go and fell by the wayside.

We had terrible SS guards. Two women were especially cruel; I don't know their names, but we called one "The Raven." When she came it was the Apocalypse. The other one was "The Angel of Death." She was very pretty - blond, blue eyes, nice wavy hair. She was flirting with one of the SS officers there.

We had a stop at one point. It was the only stop we had during thirty kilometers. We were put in kind of a cottage - not even a cottage. It didn't have anything in it except the floor. Just a primitive hut. There were several huts, and "The Raven" locked us in. We could not get out. We heard later on that she wanted to put our hut on fire, but somehow she was prevented.

We used our metal containers for food. When "The Raven" locked us in, we had to urinate and do anything else in these same metal bowls. That night, if you had to go terribly, there was no choice. We could not defecate on the floor where we had to sleep.

The march continued the next day. I was so tired and weak, but if I stopped or sat down, I would be finished. I saw many of my fellow prisoners falling on the wayside get shot because they couldn't go on. I knew that I was going to die. I was so exhausted at one point, I felt that I was kind of napping - a sort of trance, but my feet kept moving. It was like somebody behind

me kept me erect and moving.

There is a nice story which I read a long time ago. A man dreamt that he was walking with God on the beach and said, "Most of the time when we walked, there were two sets of footprints in the sand. But now in the hardest times of my life, I only see one set of footprints. Why did you abandon me? Why did you let me down?" And God replied, "No, my child, I didn't. The reason why you see only one footmark here is because on the very hardest times, I was carrying you." This is what God was doing with me on the thirty kilometer march. At one point, I felt like I was falling asleep, that I was dozing off. Yet my feet were carrying me automatically.

I reached Bergen-Belsen with others who survived the march. Thirty died. It was late at night, pitch dark. Naturally, it was war time; you couldn't make light. When we entered the camp, I smelled a terrible stench of decay. I smelled the smell of death in Auschwitz; I recognized it in Bremen, and I knew there were dead bodies here. It was the stench of corpses. By now you knew it. You had no doubt about it. I thought they had brought us here to execute us the next morning.

I was at the end of a long column of prisoners, and I could see barracks. I heard screaming from the barracks and wondered what was happening. People were pushed into the barrack, and it was so full that there was no more room. But they were pushing more people in. They didn't have nice things in mind for us anyway. It was impossible to push any more people in, so the SS guards told those of us at the end of the column to lie down and sleep where we were.

I said, "Ilus, something terrible is happening here. I think we are going to be shot - no more place in the barracks." Ilus said, "You know, I can see some tents." She was so resourceful.

She said, "Maybe we can go into the tents. Maybe there are people in there." I said, "Ilus, you try it. I don't know what is in that tent." She came out and said, "Magda, do you know what is in those tents? Dead bodies." Now we were sure that they were going to execute us. Ilus watched over me and took care of me.

We slept on the ground that night, and when morning came, I saw my fellow prisoners. They looked like walking skeletons. They were in the last stages of starvation, their eyes sunk deep into the sockets. It's like you see the dead walking. What horrified me more was when I saw where we were sleeping. The ground of Bergen-Belsen was littered with corpses in all stages of decay. That was where the stench came from. What were we taken there for? To dig the graves, to dig the pits as long as we could dig them, and to bury the dead.

We were loaded, infested with lice. It was easy in those terrible conditions. There was typhus raging in the camps, killing thousands; it's called typhus exanthematous¹⁵ and is transmitted by the infected lice. Once the lice bite you, your life is in great danger because your resistance is very low. After liberation, 13,000 people died of typhus. I was very lucky.

There were corpses in all sorts of decay piled up in a pyramid shape. Somebody died, was stripped of clothing, pushed up on it. We were collapsing and dying of typhus, and the bodies built up. Nobody wanted to touch them except us. Who would want to touch those bodies? We were the ones who had to dig the graves and bury the bodies. There were fewer and fewer grave diggers, so the dead bodies were on the ground in all stages of decay, all colors. It breeds

¹⁵An eruptive disease or fever. *Dorland's Pocket Medical Dictionary*, 23rd edition, (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1982), 259.

pestilence. I had to sleep next to that! I could not sleep in the barracks; there was no place. I had to sleep next to the dead bodies and look at them all around me. We were taken there to drag the corpses - to get rid of the corpses. Gradually, you would get exhausted from it. You went without any food, without anything - dragging and digging.

At night there was raiding. Some of the Russian prisoners would attack you, pulling your shoes off, even those wooden Dutch shoes. It was a monstrous environment. Not only the corpses. They said beware of the Russians because they were the most aggressive. They tried to strip you of everything that you had. We were always afraid.

There was a girl who had been with me through Auschwitz and was also selected for Bremen. We had worked side-by-side on the streets in Bremen and went together to Bergen-Belsen. We had gone through all this hardship together, and I really liked her. She had a sister who was my friend too. One night, a week or so before liberation, we heard shooting from afar, but we thought that they were shooting us. That's always what we were thinking. It was night, and her sister had to go to the latrine. The latrines were out of doors. We said to her, "Don't go. Just do it here." She said, "I can't do that here." We said, "You do it here." She didn't listen and went to the latrine. We heard a shot and a scream. We knew she was the one. She was shot in the lungs. My friend was absolutely hysterical.

We don't know who shot her. I think it must have been one of the guards. Those guards were very sadistic. We had to bring her body back and throw it on the ground. I still was dragging corpses when this happened. The guards forced her to carry her sister's corpse and throw it up on the pyramid of death. Then she had to sleep next to it and look at her sister. She wanted to scream but we held her mouth. We were holding her down: "Please, please," because

we were afraid if she yelled, she would be shot herself. The night before that happened, her dead sister said to me, "Magda, I'm not going to see the liberation." I said, "Shut up! How do you know? How can you say such a thing? I mean how do you know? Some of us will, others will not." She said, "I am going to die before liberation." And she did.

After being in Bergen-Belsen for a week and a half, there was another torture. The deprivation of fluid and solid food. The little black coffee was not available anymore. Sometimes there was a little soup, and if you got it, someone tried to take it out of your hands. You never ended up with anything. They were attacking you. It was fight for survival. They reached a stage when they didn't care about anything except trying to live. "If you die, it's fine. I want to live, you can die." There was no human concern or sensitivity.

After three weeks I was dying. I looked like a skeleton, and I was afraid to look at myself. I prepared for death. I never thought that I would survive. There was absolutely no caring, no medication. They did not want us to have anything. They wanted us to die. To get rid of us, to bury the dead. If many of us collapsed, it was fine. If we died of typhus, that was fine too. They did not care how we died.

I thought there was no way I could escape from here alive, but I had to try. I was desperate. Up to then, I had used my judgement. I knew the worst thing you could do was to try to escape. But at this point, I said, "I'm going to die. So before I give myself to death, while I can still walk, I'm going to do something. I'm going to try to escape."

I was watching. The only people who had access to the gate were the ones who occasionally brought in the food. Most of the time we ended up with nothing. Then dehydration set in. Dehydration is worse than starvation because it can drive you insane. With dehydration

and vitamin deficiency, you start getting wounds on your tongue. You start having difficulty swallowing because you are so dry. Going through the torture of dehydration and starvation, you see yourself shrinking to the point that you become a living skeleton. I looked at myself and was scared of myself. Then you have abnormal water retention. Edema, swelling, and when you look at your fellow prisoners, they look like skeletons. You look at the ground, and you see the dead stretched out all over.

So I thought I have to do something. The only access I could see, if I could pass through the gate, was to smuggle myself in with the people who occasionally brought some food. I actually tried to escape Bergen-Belsen twice. I was so desperate. I didn't use my judgement at all any more. I wanted to live. I lost my perspective. I snuck into a line of Polish women, Polish prisoners. But I didn't count on one thing - that at the gates an SS woman would come out and count them. I was number thirteen. There should be only twelve. The others were very scared. She said, "Who is this, the thirteenth here? It doesn't belong here." If someone did not answer, she might have shot all of them, so I came out. She was beating me and kicking me all the way to my camp.

My friends said, "You are crazy. You are going to be beaten to death." I was bruised; nevertheless I said, "What can I lose? I can't stand this anymore. I'm going to try it again." I speak French, and I was smuggling myself with the French prisoners. The Jewish French prisoners were absolutely great people. They said, "We are not going to give you away; we are going to say that you are a part of us." Fate. We went through the gate, but the same SS woman came out and recognized me. She pulled me out and was kicking and hitting me like I had never been beaten in my life. I thought she was going to beat me to death. At least she wasn't hitting

my head. I came back and my fellow prisoners said, "Magda, you are crazy." She told me one thing, and I know German: "If I find you again, I will shoot you, I will kill you." And she meant it. So I had to accept it.

It was toward the end. In my third week in Bergen-Belsen, two SS women came and said, "We are going to take you from the ground into the barracks. It's going to be a lot better." I thought maybe things would get better; at least I wouldn't have to face the dead bodies. That day I was saved by God with the greatest miracle. Miracles happen to me. I have a very good faith. I was raised with lots of Orthodox Jewish traditions, and I think my faith in God and my prayers were heard. I believe in the power of prayer.

We were marching through the camp, and I could see from afar the barrack where we were supposed to be taken. As we approached, I saw a woman being thrown out of that barrack. She looked like she had been kissed by death: red cheeks, glassy eyes. We were being taken to the typhus barracks, a death sentence. Once you entered the typhus barracks, you were certain to be infected. Because we didn't look good anymore, we were put into the typhus barracks to perish with all the others. The barrack was full, so we were pushed in, crushed inside. I looked pretty bad at that time. There was this little SS woman with the comb on the side. As we entered the barrack, she looked at me: "You, go up there." It was a third tier, and I saw a woman dying of typhus up there. She wanted me to sleep next to that dying woman. It was a certain death. I did not want to die.

This was a huge barrack, holding three hundred prisoners. Desperately, I started running from her. I started running down the middle. I defied her. She could have shot me, but I didn't care because I thought I would die for sure. She wanted to chase me, but as more prisoners were

pushed in, she was prevented from running after me. I knew I had to run straight ahead through the barracks. At the end, there was an open window, and I jumped out of it. I was hiding. I thought if I'm caught I'm going to be executed. She was trapped in the middle and couldn't do anything to me. My maiden name is Moses, and I felt like the waters split and then the Egyptians came and the water rose and they couldn't do anything. Really, this was a repetition of that. How do you explain these things?

After a while, I was as close to death as I could be. It was the end of the third week. I could not stand up anymore. I was lying next to a pyramid of corpses and I was helpless. I weighed about seventy-five pounds; I looked like a living skeleton. At that point, I felt that it might be the end of me. I said, "Oh God, I don't know what other miracle can happen. Only you can save me, but what miracle can happen now?" And He did it. I remember that day which I thought it was going to be the last day of my life. I think that if you ever were that close to death, you are going to love life, and you are going to live it and be a doer in your life.

Physically, I was in apathy. I did not feel hunger anymore. I was so weak that I was prepared to die. I gave up my fight on that day, and I felt very sad. It was April 15, 1945. It was a nice day, I thought, to say goodbye to life. I was thinking back. Like you have a movie in front of you, and you relive your whole life and you see how you acted at one point or another. I said, "Oh God, I want only three things and those are the most important things, the most valuable things that you can have: your life, your freedom, your family. I don't ask for any more. A little food, that's all I want." And I would like to do some things in my life yet, but I said, "If that's the time I have to go, I accept your will. But I have three wishes before I go, and if one of them I see that is fulfilled, I know that the other two might come true too. My number one wish is to

embrace life for the last time. I did not see how I was going to do it because I saw death around me. And help me to be buried next to a living thing so I can be a part of it. And then help me to escape my doomed body and let my spirit rise to heaven." I was not afraid of death. I was prepared for the first time to die.

I was very conscious, just very weak. I could not move. I don't know if I could talk, but I was thinking. I had myself. I could see very well. I could hear very well, and I was totally conscious of myself. I could still feel the smell of death. I could feel. We heard shots through the night and thought they were killing other prisoners; maybe some of us were being executed. We didn't know anything about the war or that the liberators were coming.

And then, as I was thinking, suddenly I looked at the birch tree which was very close to me. Since our camp was in a forest, I thought, "Oh God, I want to reach this old birch tree because I see something on it, the first bud, that's life. Please let me embrace this tree and feel life for the last time." And I crawled, digging my fingernails into the ground. It seemed like it was an awfully long distance, but it was so close by. When I reached that tree, I embraced it. This tree personified all the life I ever encountered, all the trees in the orchard of my grandparents' yard. I have a love for trees. I said maybe I could be buried next to it, and I could be a part of a root of a tree. I would be just a part of a transformed life.

And then I hoped that my spirit would be liberated because the only freedom I had in that camp was my spiritual freedom. I could think what I wanted. In my imagination I could be everywhere I wanted to be. I could see myself liberated. I could see myself at home. I could see my mother lighting the candles on Shabbat, on Friday night. They can kill you physically, but they can never take away that spirit of freedom. Your spiritual freedom has the most value. You

change in the course of your life; you go through different stages, but this is something that never ages. It always stays with you; it's always fresh. You have to keep it fresh by doing things, by using your creativity, your imagination. That is something that's going to be there whether you are fifty or sixty or eighty years old.

Then I felt a feeling of peace because finally I accepted death. I even whispered, "Death, come and take me." I was ready. I closed my eyes and was wondering what it is like to die. As I was holding, crushing the tree trunk with my hands, suddenly I heard voices and commotion in the camp. I felt I must be on the other side; I'm dead now and there's another world that I have to face. I was scared because I didn't know what I was going to face. But the commotion looked like it was coming from the camps, and I said that maybe I'm in a delirium; I hear things that are non-existent. I couldn't believe that I was going to be liberated. I said, "I'm opening my eyes. Whatever I see, I have to see."

Then the picture I will never forget. First of all, the guards had disappeared from the elevated tower where they kept the machine guns. I thought that maybe they were changing the guards. But then I saw British tanks coming in, and they had a loud speaker: "We are the liberators; you are free, you are free." They threw cans of food from those tanks. They were horrified at what they saw. They came into a nightmare. They were in awe. They saw the ground was littered with corpses. Actually 10,000 corpses were on the ground when they came in, and they saw others dying. They didn't come down from their tanks, but they were throwing food.

There is one thing when I was liberated. I was saying thanks to God for being liberated. But then I asked if my family made it. I looked at all those people around me - some were dead, some were dying, some were sick - and I felt that many of us were crushed by the unkind hand of

fate. I knew one thing, that for them the rewards of victory were too late. I didn't know if I would survive, but I made a vow in that apathetic and weak state that if I do, I'm not going to let all those left behind be forgotten. I didn't know at that stage what was going to happen to me. I was so weak, it took me three months to be able to wobble on my feet. But I saw the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.

The people who came after us and could still walk had what seemed to be a revolution. They were breaking into the warehouses. They brought out food, they brought out potatoes and kettles. They were cooking outside. I couldn't eat. That was my luck because many died from too much food. Then our whole camp was quarantined so the disease wouldn't spread. They had to clear the corpses from the ground, so they brought in bulldozers. They were digging mass graves and pushing the bodies in with bulldozers. We were taken in the SS barracks. The SS complexes were used for our living quarters. The British soldiers were wonderful people.

The British were outraged. They caught some of the German guards and put them in camps, in concentration camps. They had to drag the corpses and do the work that we did. They had to clean their crime, so they got their punishment in that sense. They were dragging corpses, digging the graves and doing all the things that we had to do.

An SS guard who had beaten me up in Bergen-Belsen was captured by the British. Now one of my friends came to tell me she had been caught. At that time I was recovering. She came and said, "You know whom I have seen? The guard who beat you is here, loading the corpses. You can go there now and beat her up. Remember what she did to you?" I was curious to see her. I wanted to look at this guard straight in the eye. So I went there, but I could not beat her. God had punished her already. I could not be violent. I could not beat up somebody because I would

be just like they were. I personally wouldn't behave like that.

There was another wicked guard, a woman who was hiding in prisoner clothing. She wanted to mingle with us. She was recognized by the prisoners, by the inmates, and was beaten to death by the crowd!

Two British soldiers lifted me up. I joined ten other women in a barrack. I couldn't even talk. When you are in a weak state, you don't want to talk. You want to rejoice, but are too weak. You don't even know how to really rejoice. You feel like you are dying. I was on a death bed. I couldn't ask questions. They didn't ask questions because they saw what state I was in.

Even though typhus was raging, I didn't get it. Because I didn't have typhus, there was no bed for me. Only those with typhus were given beds. I slept on the floor. We had some sheets and blankets - a few things.

There were only British nurses; no more Germans after that. Everything was done by the British. Immediately, they had to delouse and disinfect us because we were littered with lice. There wasn't even enough disinfectant. It took several weeks. I know because I was already walking, and I still had lice. Always itching and scratching; it was very unpleasant. I was always afraid of typhus. Finally we got some kind of powder to get rid of the lice.

At that time, I didn't have the fever. Those who had the fever had very strong symptoms. There's a temporary - I call it madness - with it. Each person is affected differently. There is a delirium, then they hallucinate. One of the girls in my room had that very high fever. The other is that change of moods: uncontrolled laughing - from one mood to the other. But the uncontrolled laughing is like a temporary madness. Two of my friends got it, and they survived. The third one, the one who was sleeping on the floor, developed this later. Nobody wanted to sleep next to her,

and with good reason. I wanted to help her. She was incontinent and in a delirium. At that time, I was better. I could walk and I took care of her. I was with this woman for a long time - half a year. She thought that I was her father, a missionary. She was Jewish, but she was telling me that he's a Christian missionary. It was very painful, but she got out of it.

We got packages from the Red Cross and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. The girl I had helped wanted to give me the first package, but I didn't want to accept it. We had everything. We had cookies and canned food, but we never had coffee in those packages. We got fluids: juices and water. We had to eat, but you had to be very careful how much food you ate. People died by overeating. It was dangerous to give somebody a big meal. You couldn't digest it.

We started recovering gradually. I was recovering. When I started to get up and walk, I realized that I was not going to die. I wasn't sure, though, if I was getting typhus belatedly. It was a fear all along because I was exposed to so many people with typhus. I must have had an immunity because one day I felt like I was getting a fever and I didn't feel good, and I thought, "Oh, no. Oh, God, no, I'm getting typhus." But it passed.

The after-effects of this illness are that your hair falls out. We had public showers, and you could see in the showers that some of the women became half bald. Many envied me because I never had that. My hair grew back. I never had wavy hair, but when my hair grew back, I had beautiful waves. When I went home, the waves grew out, but for a while, it was beautiful, wavy hair.

You could get extra food by cleaning the rooms specially assigned to some translators, those who could translate different languages. When I was cleaning the room, I had one very

trying and sad experience. When I was in Bremen and through Bergen-Belsen, I was with a girl and her mother, which was very special. She was the only one who had her mother with her. They were tremendously close to each other. Both of them were liberated and her mother got typhus. She didn't. I was cleaning the rooms. From the next room, she called me: "Magda, Magda, come, I think some food is caught in my mother's throat." When I came in as she was feeding her mother, I could see she was dead. I had to tell her that, and it was just terrible. She had seen death, but she just couldn't believe it. We had British physicians there, and until the physician was called, she just didn't believe me. After liberation, and her mother was recovering, she died.

In Bergen-Belsen's hospital were those who had a chance to survive. They were not quite as bad as these others, and they were lucky enough to get into that accommodation. One of my fellow prisoners was in medical school before; I think she had one year of medical school. She and her sister had been with me through Auschwitz, through Bremen and through Bergen-Belsen. One of the sisters got typhus and was taken to this hospital. The other one didn't. I did not see the inside of that hospital, but I know it was a two-story building.¹⁶ They said that that was the death place. I never entered that one; I don't know how it looked. She had a very tragic

16 Major General James Alexander Deans Johnston, Q.B.E., M.C., Q.H.P. describes a square area of barracks set up by the British army medical units which would be sufficient for 10,000 patients. This area consisted of a "series of square buildings... each square would accommodate 600 patients in barrack buildings."

"The Relief of Belsen Concentration Camp: Recollections & Reflections of a British Army Doctor." Courtesy of U.S.H.M.M.

end because she was recovering from typhus, but she had still this delirious state; she had fever. It's just like LSD; she visualized that she was flying. She thought she was a bird. She wanted to fly and jumped from the second floor. And she was already recovering, but she died. So it was a dangerous unit. There was no guarantee; all of us were vulnerable.

After that I did something that everyone thought, "No, you are crazy." I volunteered for the typhus hospital - to help, and I really risked my life. After three months, I didn't get typhus. They said, "You didn't get typhus; you are disinfected now. You don't have to come in contact with people who have typhus and get it from them." I said, "God protected me up until now. For that privilege, I had to do something for the others." It was truly my desire to help. I wasn't thinking of myself. Nobody could stop me from doing that.

I worked for three weeks in the typhus hospital. Each person was in her own bed with linens, pillows, and blankets. There were two British nurses, and they had assistants. They had medication too. I was feeding the sick who were so weak they couldn't feed themselves and giving them comfort - maybe changing their things. Maybe carrying the pot [bedpan] after them. I'm glad I did because I heard stories. I was like a rabbi. I closed the eyes of those who died, and I listened to their stories - confessions you make in the last moments of your life. It was terrible for me when they died because they were my fellow prisoners and I felt a great kinship to them. I think God rewarded me for that - helped me find my mom and granted me a new life. I heard secrets that you don't tell anybody, but when you are in the last hour of your life, you want to get them off your chest. I held their hands and comforted them and gave them hope when I knew it was hopeless. I tried to help them die in peace. There was nothing else I could do for them.

After liberation there was sex going on in the camp - in the forest area. Sometimes people

found their mates there, and they came home and got married. They were young people, men and women of all ages thrown together. I was not interested. I grew up with certain values. Because of that, sometimes some of the women were really nasty: "Oh, you act like an old maid. Here comes the old maid." It hurt me. I didn't like that, but they wanted me to conform.

I was in the camp six months. We were disinfected and got other clothing. I don't know what happened to my blue dress. Probably it was thrown out. I don't think that anybody wanted to use it after I did.

I worked for three weeks in that hospital. Then we were repatriated by the AJDC. I had to wait for the Hungarian quota. I had very important decisions to make. I could go to Israel, the United States, or Hungary. It was very confusing. But my intuition said to go home and track the relatives. If you don't find them, you can wash dishes. So when my turn came, I decided to go home.

We traveled by freight train, some of the same trains that took us to the concentration camps. It increases your suffering when you are in a cattle wagon that you were transported in with your family to the concentration camp. No luxuries. The cattle wagons still had the odor. Primitive accommodations. We had to sleep on the floor. The joint organization, AJDC, was extremely helpful to us. I don't know what we would have done without them. We traveled through German cities that were in ruins. It looked like a cemetery. I thought, how are they ever going to rebuild this country?

I went home with very little clothing. One thing I saved was my overcoat. The best clothing was my overcoat. I still had nothing else, not a penny. That's the way I came home.

The train stopped in Budapest, which was about two or three hundred miles from my

native city of Cluj. We were told that there would be no way to go further until the next morning. The Red Cross and Joint Organization provided us with primitive accommodations for the night. Then, in the afternoon, we had to pick up packages of food from a distribution center several blocks from where we were located. This was all the food they provided for us.

I went with a group to pick up my package. After that, I wanted to walk back by myself because I wanted to gather my thoughts. Deep in thought, I lost my way. I did not know where I was. I went from one side street to another, and then I thought that I would ask directions from the first person who came. As he approached, I said, "My God, this face looks familiar." As he came closer, I realized that he was our next door neighbor from Cluj. He stopped, and I said, "My God, you are still alive!" The first thing he said was, "Your mother is going to be so happy to see you." I said, "My mother? Did you see my mother?" And he said, "Yes." I said, "Where did you see my mother?" He said he came back earlier. His family was wiped out, and therefore, he moved to Budapest. "I met your mother on the square in Cluj. I talked to her, and I know where she lives. She's moved." "Do you have the address of my mother?" And he said, "Sure, I have it." I was white as a sheet! I was in shock. The most wonderful thing happened to me. I found my mother. Isn't it a miracle? I had to get lost on a street. The first man I met, the first person to get directions from was my next door neighbor who had my mother's address!

When I came home to Cluj, I looked for the address of my mother that had been given to me by my neighbor, but was frightened to go there by myself, thinking that he may have been mistaken. I asked another woman who had been repatriated with me to accompany me in order to give me moral support.

We came to this big apartment house. There was a gate. You had to ring the bell."Who is

it?" "It's your daughter coming home." She said, "My daughter!" I heard my mother's voice, and I saw a window opening on the second floor. She ran down like crazy. I ran up and we couldn't believe what was happening. I went in. It was a small apartment, one room really. But it was a big room with a little kitchenette in the back. When we wanted to take a bath with warm water, we had one of those old fashioned sinks - those wooden things.

My mother is a very neat person, and she is very good in crafts. She has homemade curtains and homemade tablecloths. Everything was homemade. On a chair, second hand clothing, in second hand shoes were prepared on a chair for the time I come home. The neighbors said, "If you wouldn't have come home, we were worried that your mother is going to break down totally."

When I came home, I really had to cope with loss and grief. I had lost my father. I had lost eighty percent of my family. I had frostbite on all my fingers and all my toes from the camps - gangrene, and at that time there was no antibiotic. My mother would fry some onions in the oven, then put them on me. They were supposed to extract pus. That didn't help. I needed treatment and was under treatment for a year for all my fingers and all my toes. After that I had such a sensitivity; when we go skiing, my big nightmare is not to get frostbite. I had an abnormal retention of water when I came back. This was due to the starvation that I experienced in Bergen-Belsen when I was dying.

I did get into medical school after I came back from the German concentration camps. We had to study for a big exam. I met my husband at a lecture at the university; he was in his last year of medical school. I told him that I really wanted to go to medical school. We really didn't have any money, and he said I could borrow his books. He said there must have been nine

hundred students for one hundred-fifty places; I would have to fight if I wanted to get in. He got me some books on anatomy, physiology, biology, chemistry, and physics, and said, "I can give you some tutoring." Two days before the exam, he asked me to marry him. I passed the exam and got into medical school. It was my dream come true.

At that time Rumania was an authoritarian Communist state. It was getting worse, so we decided a year later, in December 1947, to emigrate to Israel. As a result, I was unable to complete my medical training. The mass Jewish emigration took place at that time, 16,000 people on two cargo ships. Palestine was under British mandate. No free immigration was allowed. Our immigration was organized by the Mosad, the Committee of Illegal Jewish Immigration (Jewish Palestine Underground). Our ships were exiled on the island of Cypress for a year, where we lived in tents on the seashore. Our camps were surrounded by barbed wire fences, and we were guarded by the British. My husband, Dr. Eugene Herzberger, worked as a physician and I as a nurse. In the spring of 1948, the Jewish state of Israel was proclaimed. In February 1949, we entered Israel. Two weeks after our arrival my son Henry was born, and five years later, my daughter Monica was born. At the end of October 1957, we, along with my mother, emigrated to the U.S.A., where my husband continued his neurosurgical practice.

After I was liberated from the German concentration camps, I said thanks to God. God had saved me for a purpose. I had made a vow in my very apathetic and weak state that if I survive, I'm not ever going to forget all those left behind. I have to be their spokeswoman. I have to do things for them, not come back and feel sorry about myself. It's important that I keep their memory alive so that they shouldn't have died in vain. I'm not going to let that happen.

Wake up my friend,

Be thankful
That you are alive-¹⁷

Let's go outside
This room is small
The world is wide.¹⁸

Magda and her husband have recently moved from Dubuque, Iowa to Arizona. She is a member of the American Poets Fellowship Society, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, The National Library of Poetry, and other organizations. She continues to be an athlete and placed first in the 1979 , 1980, and 1981 LaCrosse Maple Leaf Marathon.

Magda has kept her promise to remember those who died. She has written several books of poems describing her experiences as well as a requiem commemorating those who lost their lives during the Holocaust. She lectures and teaches about the Holocaust at schools and churches, as well as for various other groups.

¹⁷Herzberger, "Hymn of Gratitude," Waltz, 84

¹⁸*ibid*, "A Song Is Born," 96.