

Pages from the Sorrowful Past

July 1939

The entire *shtetl* is filled with the woeful tidings, which are spreading throughout the whole of Poland, making hearts tremble. Our *shtetl* Żarki has always been distinguished for its liveliness and, particularly in the summertime, when many people come here to enjoy the fresh air and the woods are full of guests from the surrounding cities and towns. This time, they have avoided coming.

Unease and desolation can be felt in every street. People go about with worried expressions. Livelihood is scarce. Everybody works and tries to keep busy in order to avoid the hard thoughts of what tomorrow will bring. We sew and prepare garments, shoes [and] caps - not knowing for what and for whom.

The last days of July 1939 looked thus. Everyone spoke of events which were bound to take place here imminently. The fast-approaching storm could already be felt in the air.

Different unsettling news passes from one to another. People cling together - they strive to stay as close as possible with their family, with their parents, sisters and brothers. Young couples put their weddings off until better times, when the sky clears once again.

Between despair and hope - war or peace –the sorrowful date [of] the most horrifying chapter in all of human history approached.

1st September 1939

How suddenly war has broken out! Without knowing from where and how, we are already surrounded from all sides.

People raise their heads to the skies and cannot believe their own eyes. We do not yet know whose these aircraft are flying [above] - and bombs are already falling.

A terrifying bombardment was dropped on the *shtetl* on *Shabbes*, 2nd September. Fire pours down from heaven. People run like mad in the streets. There is nowhere to hide – no underground shelter and no defensive trenches.

We lie face down in the streets and wait for miracles. The houses shake, the window panes fly and the smoke eats at one's eyes. Buildings collapse, as do men in the streets.

The ten minutes of bombing seemed like an eternity. Some streets and buildings were left in ruins.

Following the bombardment, we flee to the surrounding towns and villages. Everywhere - on all the roads and in all the fields - we see refugees running from the Germans, who are spreading over Poland, sowing death and destruction. Without an itinerary, hungry and thirsty, we cover large distances. We wander day and night, but we eventually return to the *shtetl*, because everywhere else - the same fate awaits us.

We live with the feeling that any moment could bring death and annihilation. Weeks and months go by in the struggle for life, for physical existence - until the harsh tidings of Job, regarding the annihilation of thousands of brothers and sisters in the camps and forests, begin to arrive. It is difficult to believe these gruesome accounts, but we see how entire cities and *shtetls* are being emptied. The numbered individuals, who make it out alive, tell of things that make all one's limbs shudder.

We run from one place to another, fleeing from one *akcja* to the next. We hide in attics and cellars. We are pursued like wild beasts in the woods. Hunger torments [and] diseases spread. People lose those closest to them - a mother, a father, a brother, a sister. Tears dry up from seeing the misery every day.

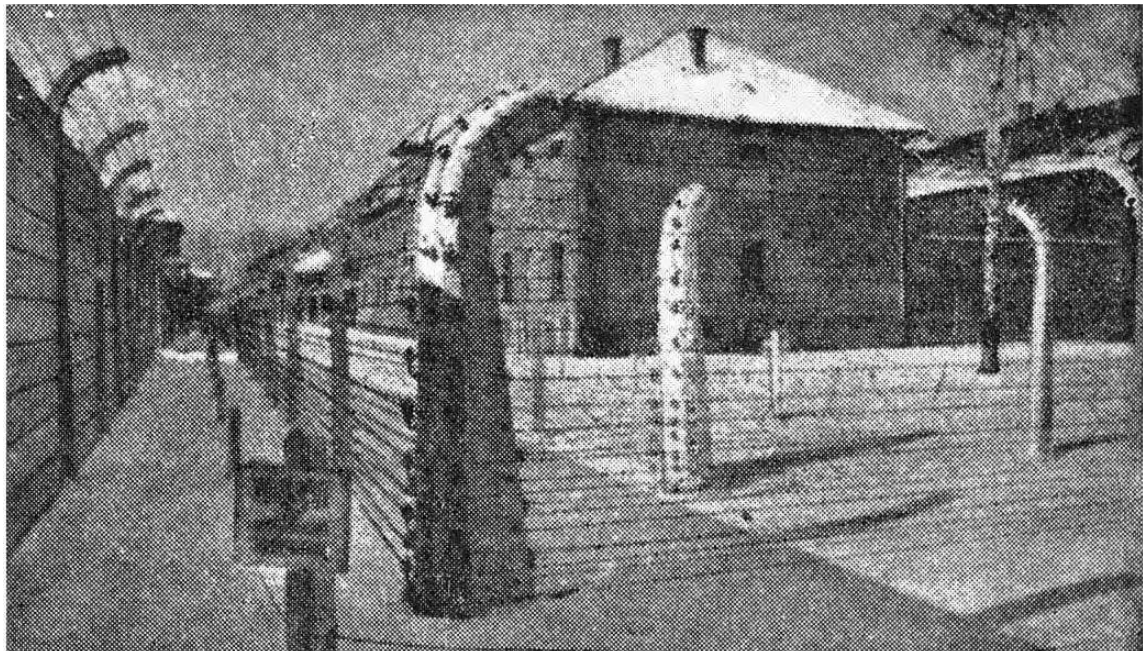
People become indifferent to both life and death. Many turn themselves in - they are already weary of running through borders and guards. They no longer have the strength to fight for life. The murderers [will] find them anyway, if not today - then tomorrow.

Auschwitz, 1939¹

Who could possibly forget those days and nights in Auschwitz? All the words are too pale to give full expression to those difficult experiences, which bore into one's mind and do not give one rest to this day, fifteen years since that time.

We live in our own country as free citizens. Our children are growing. We must bring them up as a healthy generation, without complexes. We must smile, even if we are not always in the mood or have the strength or desire to do so. We tell the world and our children about all that we went through, in order not to allow that tearful past to be forgotten.

More than once, all of us have asked ourselves from where it is that we took the strength to endure all those hard days, months and years?



One of the blocks in Auschwitz

¹ [TN: The author writes on the following page that she arrived in Auschwitz in 1943; it is unclear why 1939 appears in this heading.]

Lone men [and] weak women, hungry and barefoot, tired and faint - we stood day and night, summer and winter and fought for every minute of life, for a chunk of bread, for a gulp of water. From where did we take this strength?

After three years of living like chased dogs, after the constant running from one ghetto to another - Żarki and Pilica, Zawiercie and Będzin - after escaping one deportation to fall into the next - I found myself, in July 1943, in a transport on its way to Auschwitz.

We arrived in Auschwitz at twelve midnight, half dead and fainting, famished and humiliated. The camp was shrouded in darkness. Only the German SS men's electric pocket torches lit up the dead shadows cast by the carriages.

The German soldiers immediately begin a selection. The old men and women and the children are put in one group and the young people in another. The first go to the left and the latter to the right. Both groups are sent away with the motion of a stick - these to death and those to work.

People scramble from the left to the right. To the last moment, each one believed the illusion that perhaps some miracle would happen after all and that he - specifically he - would remain alive.

Early the next morning, we went through all the primary German requirements - our hair was cut off, we washed ourselves, and donned those camp clothes in which we lost our human appearance and worth. We stood looking at one another, not knowing whether to laugh at the strange "clowns" or to weep due to the ghastly faces peering out from the camp uniforms.

Each day seems to last an eternity. In the nights, we lay on our bunks sleepless, due to the exhaustion and hunger. In the morning, we arise from among the corpses of those who perished during the night.

Many did not withstand this difficult test. Many lost all human feeling. It is under such circumstances that human character is put to the test. There were those who thought only of themselves, but there were also those who were prepared to aid others to the last minute and to share every morsel. They fought for each moment of life, for conserving one more soul.

Thus life passed, day in and day out.

I passed through all seven lairs of hell, hunger and illness [and] selections. Each time, I thought that here my last moment was coming and that I would not return.

I worked in the shoe squad, together with another 250 women and girls. Our work consisted of taking the soles off old shoes and sorting [the components] - soles on one side and soft leather on the other. Whole mountains of shoes, of all descriptions, lay en masse in huge piles, which grew steadily higher and higher. It was as if they were mutely conversing with us - who knows whose little infants' feet or those of other close ones wore these shoes? Now, they all lay torn, crumpled [and] trampled, and stare at us as we cut them up mercilessly - and forget them.

I was in Auschwitz for almost two years, wrangling with death every minute.

There were six of us girls, from different cities and *shtetls* in Poland. We became very close friends. [We] stuck together, slept as a group and shared every morsel of bread. If one of us was not feeling well, we all took care of her [and] tried to keep her illness from the kapos. It is thanks to this, that we were all able to survive and endure, with all our strength, until the Liberation.

Once the Germans comprehended that the War was taking a new direction and that the front was moving ever deeper into Poland, they decided to abandon Auschwitz.

One certain evening, when we returned from work, the Germans gave out a command for us to present ourselves for roll call. On 18th January 1945, we were led out of Auschwitz. There was a harsh frost, deep snows lay on the roads, and we set out on our way - half barefoot and with light clothing. This was a trek of pain and victims. We walked for three days and three nights on foot, weakened and famished. Whoever was exhausted from walking and wished to repose for a few minutes was immediately shot on the spot. On the fourth day, we were loaded onto open freight wagons. For twelve days, we travelled around different camps, [but] every place was full of people and was unwilling to take us in. On 2nd February 1945, we arrived in Bergen-Belsen, where we remained until the Liberation.

We said goodbye to our best of friends on a daily basis. Every day, we witnessed hundreds - thousands - disappearing. No one saw any hope [or] any prospect. But, when all the heavens were already black with smoke, a light of hope manifested itself.

15th April 1945 – Bergen-Belsen

The Day of Liberation!

It is hard to believe that this day has finally come - that we have lived to see it.

We lie on the ground, starving and fainting, and trembling from any rustle. From a distance, we hear the boom of the cannons. The Germans, however, are still guarding us - as if nothing had happened. They [continue] doing their thing to the very last moment. Will they obliterate us before the great victory or is their end to come before that? The minutes drag on forever, the last strengths run out. No one is able to withstand the cruel drudgery of [whether we will] live or die any longer.

Different things are heard in camp - the Red Army is coming, the English-American troops are nearing, soldiers from the Land of Israel are surrounding the walls of Bergen-Belsen ... More long hours pass and we dare not move from our spots. Our hearts beat quickly, as if they are about to burst.

Suddenly, we hear soldiers marching in step with a song. The girls, who come from Romania, recognise them as Romanian soldiers. They think that they are singing Romanian songs, because they are coming to tell us about the liberation. When the girls run to the window and applaud the liberation - shooting ensues. These were the Romanian soldiers, who were abandoning the camp together with the Germans. Thus, even in the last minute before the liberation, [more] victims fell to the Nazis and their servants.

Eventually, the German soldiers standing on guard run away, leaving us free. Tears of joy choke our throats. Only with nightfall do we first emerge from the rooms. We are still crawling on all fours, so that no one should notice us. We seek food with which to appease the hunger, from which we have been suffering these last days in particular.

There are already English soldiers in the camp. Military bands play dancing music ... and we go about like shadows from the world beyond, who are seeing normal people for the first time.

They behold us in our horrifying appearance - skeletons which have risen in the Resurrection, like the dry bones in the valley in Ezekiel's prophecy², which were resurrected. We are alive! We are free! No longer slaves, once more human beings! If only we had enough strength left to start life anew...

Today, fifteen years since those mournful events, one already wishes to almost not believe that such things could happen in the 20th century, while the civilised world looked on in silence!

But we shall never forget it. Always, always we shall remember!

Cypora Szporn-Ajzenberg

² [TN: Ezekiel 37:1-14.]