

CHAPTER II

The Arrival

Today, when I think about our arrival at the camp, the cars of our train appear to me as so many coffins. It was, indeed, a funeral train. The S.S. and Gestapo agents were our undertakers; the officers who later evaluated our “riches” were our greedy and impatient heirs.

We could feel nothing but a deep sense of relief. Anything would be better than this terrible uncertainty. In a prison on wheels, could there be anything more appalling than the oppressive gloom, reeking with foul odors, alive with heart-breaking groans and lamentations?

We hoped to be released from the car without delay. But this hope was soon blasted. We were to spend an eighth night in the train, the living piled on top of one another to avoid contact with the decaying corpses.

No one slept that night. Our sense of relief gave way to anxiety as though a sixth sense were warning us of impending disaster.

With difficulty, I ploughed through the compact mass of animal humanity to reach the little window. There I saw a weird spectacle. Outside was a veritable forest of barbed wire, which was illuminated at intervals by powerful search lights.

An immense blanket of light covered everything within view. It was a chilling sight, yet reassuring, too. This lavish expenditure of electricity undoubtedly indicated that civilization was nearby and an end to the conditions we had endured.

Still, I was far from understanding the true meaning of the

display. Where were we and what fate awaited us? I made educated guesses, but my imagination could not supply a reasonable explanation.

Finally, I went back to my parents, for I felt a great need to talk to them.

"Can you ever forgive me?" I murmured, as I kissed their hands.

"Forgive you?" asked my mother with her characteristic tenderness. "You have done nothing you need to be forgiven for."

But her eyes dimmed with tears. What did she suspect in this hour?

"You have always been the best of daughters," added my father.

"Perhaps we shall die," my mother went on quietly, "but you are young. You have the strength to fight, and you will live. You can still do so much for yourself, and the others."

This was to be the last time that I embraced them.

At last the pale day broke. In a little while an official we learned was the camp commandant came to accept us into his custody. He was accompanied by an interpreter who, we later were told, spoke nine languages. The latter's duty was to transmit every instruction into the native tongues of the deportees. He warned us that we were to observe the strictest discipline and carry out every order without discussion. We listened. What reason had we to suspect worse treatment than we had already received?

On the platform, we saw a group in convict-striped uniforms. That sight made a painful impression. Would we become broken, emaciated like these wrecks? They had been brought to the station to take our luggage, or rather, what remained of it after the guards had extracted their "taxes." Here we were completely dispossessed.

The order came, curt and demanding: "Get out!"

The women were lined up on one side, the men on the other, in ranks of five.

The doctors were to stand by in a separate row with their

instrument bags. That was rather reassuring. If doctors were needed, it meant that the sick would receive medical attention. Four or five ambulances drove up. We were told that these would transport the ailing. Another good sign.

How could we know that all this was window-dressing to maintain order among the deportees with a minimum of armed force? We could not possibly have guessed that the ambulances would cart the sick directly to the gas chambers, whose existence I had doubted; and thence to the crematories!

Quieted by such cunning subterfuges, we allowed ourselves to be stripped of our belongings and marched docilely to the slaughterhouses.

While we were assembled on the station platform, our luggage was taken down by the creatures in convict stripes. Then the bodies of those who had died on the journey were removed. The corpses that had been with us for days were bloated hideously and in various stages of decomposition. The odors were so nauseating that thousands of flies had been attracted. They fed on the dead and attacked the living, tormenting us incessantly.

As soon as we left the cattle cars, my mother, my sons and I were separated from my father and my husband. We now stood in columns that extended for hundreds of yards. The train had discharged from four to five thousand passengers, all as dazed and bewildered as we were.

More commands, and we were paraded before about thirty S.S. men, including the head of the camp and other officers. They began to choose, sending some of us to the right and some to the left. This was the first "selection," in the course of which, as we could not dream could be true, the initial sacrifices for the crematories were picked.

Children and old people were told off automatically, "to the left!" At the moment of parting came those shrieks of despair, those frantic cries, "Mama, Mama!" that will ring in my ears forever. But the S.S. guards demonstrated that they were moved by no sentiments. All those who tried to resist, old or young,

they beat mercilessly; and quickly they reformed our column into the two new groups, right and left, but always in ranks of five.

The only explanation came from an S.S. officer who assured us that the aged would remain in charge of the children. I believed him, assuming naturally that the able-bodied adults would have to work, but that the old and very young would be cared for.

Our turn came. My mother, my sons, and I stepped before the "selectors." Then I committed my second terrible error. The selector waved my mother and myself to the adult group. He classed my younger son Thomas with the children and aged, which was to mean immediate extermination. He hesitated before Arvad, my older son.

My heart thumped violently. This officer, a large dark man who wore glasses, seemed to be trying to act fairly. Later I learned that he was Dr Fritz Klein, the "Chief Selector."* "This boy must be more than twelve," he remarked to me.

"No," I protested.

The truth was that Arvad was not quite twelve, and I could have said so. He was big for his age, but I wanted to spare him from labors that might prove too arduous for him.

"Very well," Klein agreed amiably. "To the left!"

I had persuaded my mother that she should follow the children and take care of them. At her age she had a right to the treatment accorded to the elderly and there would be someone to look after Arvad and Thomas.

"My mother would like to remain with the children," I said.

"Very well," he agreed again. "You'll all be in the same camp."

"And in several weeks you'll all be reunited," another officer added, with a smile. "Next!"

How could I have known? I had spared them from hard work, but I had condemned Arvad and my mother to death in the gas chambers.

* In 1945, Dr Fritz Klein was one of the main attractions at the trial of the Belsen hangmen.

The road was in good repair. It was the beginning of May and a cool wind carried to us a peculiar, sweetish odor, much like that of burning flesh, although we did not identify it as that. This odor greeted us upon our arrival and stayed with us always.

The "Lager" occupied a vast space of about six by eight miles, as I later verified. It was surrounded by cement posts, ten or twelve feet high and about fifteen inches thick. These stood at intervals of four yards with a double network of barbed wire between them. On each post rose an electric lamp, an enormous bright eye that was leveled at the internees and was never extinguished. Inside the immense enclosure were many camps, each designated by a letter.

The camps were separated by three-foot embankments. On top of these embankments stretched three rows of barbed wire, charged with electric current.

As we entered the grounds of the Lager and the different camps, we distinguished several wooden buildings. The barbed wire which surrounded these structures reminded us of cages. Penned up inside these cages were women in nondescript rags, with their heads shorn, and their feet bare. In all the languages of Europe, they pleaded for a crust of bread or a shawl to cover their nakedness.

We heard wailing cries.

"You will crack too, like so many of us."

"You will be cold and hungry like we are!"

"You will be beaten, too!"

Suddenly a large, well-dressed woman appeared in the midst of this herd. With a massive club, she struck at everyone who got in her way.

We could not believe our eyes. Who were these women? What crime had they committed? Where were we?

It was like a nightmare. Was this the courtyard of a mad-house? Perhaps this woman was a warden resorting to her last recourse—the strong arm. "Evidently," I told myself, "these women are abnormal, and that is why they are isolated."

I was still unable to conceive that women of sound mind and

guilty of no crimes could be so humiliated and so degraded.

Above all, I was far from imagining that before long I, too, would be reduced to the same pitiful condition.

After waiting about two hours in front of a vast, but coarsely constructed building, we were thoroughly chilled. Then a troop of soldiers pushed us inside. We found ourselves in a sort of hangar, 25 or 30 feet wide, and about 100 feet long. Here the guards shoved us into a group so tightly pressed together that it was actually painful to move. The big doors closed.

About twenty soldiers, most of whom were drunk, remained inside. They glared and shouted sarcastic comments.

An officer began to bark orders: "Undress! Leave all your clothing here. Leave your papers, valuables, medical equipment; and form rows against the wall."

A murmur of indignation arose. Why should we undress?

"Silence! If you do not want to be beaten within an inch of your lives, hold your tongues!" shouted the officer.

The interpreter translated this into all languages.

"From now on, don't forget that you are prisoners."

The two dozen guards in charge of the unclothing operation started their work.

At that moment, our last doubts vanished. Now we understood that we had been horribly deceived. The luggage we had left at the station was lost to us forever. The Germans had expropriated everything, even to the smallest mementos that could remind us of our past lives. To me the loss of the photographs of my loved ones saddened me most. But our hour of shame had begun.

As we began to undress, weird sensations swept over us. Many of us, doctors or doctors' wives, had provided ourselves with capsules of poison in case of the worst. Why? Because we had lived in an atmosphere of dread and wanted to be prepared for any emergency. Even though I had been optimistic when we left, I, too, had supplied myself with such a weapon of self-destruction. There is some comfort in knowing that, as the last resort, one is master of one's own life or death! In a sense this

represents the ultimate in liberty. In divesting us of every article the Germans knew they were asking us to give such things up, too.

Immediately, a Hungarian woman, Dr G., took her syringe of morphine and, as it was impossible to give herself an intravenous injection, swallowed its contents. However, the poison was absorbed by the buccal duct and did not bring the desired effect.

I was consumed by one thought: how could I hide my poison? We were ordered to the baths. We had to walk into another room, completely in the nude except for our shoes, and with open hands while they inspected us. Then luck was with me. We were told to remove our shoes. However, those whose shoes were shabby were allowed to wear them; the Germans would not bother with valueless articles. I was wearing boots, which, at the beginning of spring, were of no interest to the guards, especially since they were covered with mud and dirt. Quickly, in a slit in the lining of a boot, I concealed my greatest treasure, the poison.

"Up against the wall," cried the guards. They struck our naked bodies with their truncheons, as we had seen the woman doing a short time before to those wretched inmates.

A few of my neighbors tried desperately to keep their papers—some their prayer books, or photographs. But the guards were eagle-eyed. They slashed out with the iron-tipped clubs, or pulled their hair so hard that the unfortunate women shrieked and collapsed upon the ground.

"You won't need identification papers or photos any more!" cried the mockers.

I lined up in my row, completely naked, my shame engulfed in terror. At my feet lay my clothes, and, on top, the pictures of my family. I looked once more at the faces of my loved ones. My parents, my husband, and my children seemed to be smiling at me . . . I stooped and slipped these dear images into my crumpled jacket on the ground. My family should not see my horrible degradation.

Around me the frightful agitation, the weeping and the cowering, continued. In bitterness, I found some satisfaction in ripping my blouse and dress. It may have been a stupid gesture, yet it was a comfort to know that at least my clothing would not be at the disposal of these hideous "supermen."

Now we were compelled to undergo a thorough examination in the Nazi manner, oral, rectal, and vaginal—another horrible experience. We had to lie across a table, stark naked while they probed. All that in the presence of drunken soldiers who sat around the table, chuckling obscenely.

When the examination was over, we were shoved into an adjoining chamber. There followed another interminable period of waiting, before a partition which was marked, "Showers." We shivered from the cold, and from the humiliation. Despite the weariness and the sufferings, many of the women still retained the beauty of their faces and bodies.

Again we had to march before a table where leering German soldiers were seated. We were pushed into another room where men and women, armed with scissors and clippers, waited for us. We were to be clipped and shorn. The clipped hair was accumulated in large sacks, evidently to be utilized for some purpose. Human hair was one of the precious raw materials which German industry needed.*

A few women were lucky enough to be worked on with fast-moving clippers. They were envied by those whose hair was cut with scissors, for our barbers were hardly professional. Besides, they were in such haste that they left irregular tufts on the skulls, as though they deliberately sought to make us look ridiculous.

Long before my turn, a German officer singled me out. "Don't clip that one's hair," he said to a guard. The soldier moved me aside, then forgot about me.

I tried to analyze my predicament. What did the officer want from me? I was fearful. Why should I have been the only one

* They used it to fill cushions and mattresses. The families of the Third Reich slept on the hair of its victims.

whose hair was not cut? Perhaps I would get better treatment. But no, from this foe one could expect no mercy, except at an ugly price. I did not want to be preferred; it was better to stay with my companions. So I disregarded the order, and got into line to be shorn.

Suddenly the officer reappeared. He gazed at my bare skull, grew angry, and slapped my face as hard as he could. Then he reprimanded the guard, and ordered him to give me a few lashes with his whip. That was the first time I was beaten in the camp. Each blow cut my heart as it did my flesh. We were lost souls. God, where art Thou?

I arrived at that state of numbness where I was no longer sensitive to either club or whip. I lived through the rest of that scene almost as a spectator, thinking only of my boots and of the poison in the lining. Nothing but the thought and the hope that the last word could still be mine bolstered my waning strength.

Once the "formalities" of the search were ended, we were herded into the shower room. We passed in rotation, under faucets which sprinkled us with a trickle of hot water. The whole affair did not last more than a minute. Then we were smeared with disinfectant on our heads and on the usual parts of the body. We were not yet dry, when we were led into a third room. The windows and doors were wide open. But, after all, we were in their clutches and our lives obviously meant nothing to anyone.

Here we received our prison clothing. I cannot think of any name that would fit the bizarre rags that were handed out for underwear. We asked ourselves what this "under-clothing" was supposed to be. It was not white nor any other color, but worn-out pieces of coarse dusting-cloth. And still we could not be choosy. Only a few of the select were awarded underwear. The majority had to wear their dresses next to their skins.

The dresses, too, made one think of a fantastic masquerade. A few blouses were of convict-striped material. The rest were of rags that may have come from brightly colored gowns, but were

now in tatters.

No one cared whether these rags fitted the internees. Large, buxom women had to wear little dresses that were too short and too tight and did not come to their knees. Slender women were given huge dresses, some with trains. Yet, despite the absurdity of the distribution, most of the internees, even those who had the chance, refused to exchange their "dresses" with their neighbors. And there was no way to alter them. Buttons, thread, needles, and safety pins were nonexistent.

To complete the style, the Germans had an arrow of red paint, two inches wide and two feet long, on the back of each garment. We were marked like pariahs.

I drew an ordinary assortment. My new outfit consisted of one of those formerly elegant dresses of tulle, quite tattered and transparent, and without a slip. With that, I was handed a pair of men's drawers of striped fabric. The dress was open in the front down to the navel and in the back down to the hips.

In spite of the tragedy of our situation, we could not help but laugh as we saw the others so ridiculously outfitted. After a while, it was a struggle to overcome the disgust we felt for our companions, and for ourselves.

Thus attired, we were driven into rows in front of the shower building. Once more, we had to wait long hours. No one was permitted to stir. The weather was cold. The skies were lowering. A wind had risen. The dresses, which we had put on while we were still wet, became damp. This first test in endurance was to claim many victims. Cases of pneumonia, otitis, and meningitis were soon to appear, many to prove fatal.

From the old inmates we learned that we were about forty miles west of Crakow. The place was called Birkenau, after the nearby forest of Birkenwald. Birkenau was five miles from the village and camp of Auschwitz, or Oswiecim. The post office was eight miles away in Neuberun.

At last we were marched away. We tramped past a charming forest on the outskirts of which stood a red brick building. Great flames belched from the chimney, and the strange, sickening,

sweetish odor which had greeted us upon our arrival, attacked us even more powerfully now.

Logs were piled against the walls for nearly a hundred yards. We asked one of the guides, an old inmate, about this structure.

"It is a camp bakery," she replied.

We accepted that without the slightest suspicion. Had she revealed the truth, we simply would not have believed her. The "bakery" which gave off the sickeningly sweetish odor was the crematory, to which the young and the old and the sick had been consigned, and to which ultimately we were all doomed.