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Hela: Our journey from Płaszów was over. We had arrived at dawn. The doors were prised open with a loud crash, and my first view was of a red sky, grey smoke, black shadows, and flames.

‘*Raus!*’ screamed the men in striped clothes. ‘Everybody get out! Quickly!’

We jumped down from the train as quickly as we could, trying to avoid the blows of truncheons. As I stood in a line with the others, my eyes adjusting to the light, I could make out the shapes of chimneys in the distance belching smoke — and still I was looking for rational explanations. My nose filled with the smell of acrid smoke, yet my mind refused to think of the source. It’s a smell I can never forget: the smell of burning flesh. We were marched from the train amid the noise of dogs barking, rifle butts hitting flesh, the whistling of truncheons, and people screaming.

We had arrived in Auschwitz–Birkenau.

Auschwitz was a place of mud. The moist clay stuck to our wooden clogs. We were led through a gate with the large words *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work Makes You Free) in metal letters across the top. There were beautiful tall trees, and behind them buildings, row after row. We continued straight ahead, bypassing the tall chimneys billowing smoke. The stench was constantly in our nostrils.

In front of the buildings stood people who looked like corpses, with no expressions on their faces. None of them even raised a head to look at our group. We were halted in front of a grey building. The female guards hit us at random. ‘You Płaszów sluts! We will have order here. You are in Auschwitz–Birkenau. This is not a brothel!’ I trembled. In the ghetto I had thought things couldn’t be worse, and then again in Płaszów. But this ...

First they counted us. One of us was punished for something she had done by having

to squat, up and down many times, and then she was brutally beaten with truncheons. I wondered whether she would come out alive. Other SS men came and counted us again. We had to stand in the mud for hours, our feet numb and frozen. I was past caring. All I wanted was something to drink: for two days we hadn't had a drop. A group of women went by. No one looked at us. Could they see? Did they know whether they were alive or dead?

The guards then attacked us and shouted at us to move. They pushed us through the metal doors of a grey building, down a corridor that led into a larger room with several doors leading off it. We didn't know where we were. We saw some more men in striped clothes, milling around. Some women said we were in the bath-house. Someone had heard rumours about gas, and tremors of panic ran through us.

We were told to undress as quickly as possible. The stares of the SS did not matter. We had to leave our clothes and belongings in a corner and were told we could collect them later. But that was not true. The Slovak women who had been in Auschwitz for some time had told us we wouldn't survive another day. Hadn't we seen the chimneys, the flames?

We were taken to a room to be shaved. The hair under our arms and our pubic hair was ripped and pulled with blunt blades. I couldn't stop my eyes filling with tears. Some of the younger girls, including Niusia and Halinka, had their heads shaved too. This was followed by a stinking wet rag rubbed over the shaved areas, smelling of some kind of disinfectant and stinging our eyes.

We were then taken to the showers. We huddled cold and naked in the large concrete room, eyeing the metal pipes overhead with fear and clutching each other. Someone said they could smell gas. There were ripples of hysteria. The time dragged on interminably and my thoughts were a jumbled panic. Was this where it ended? My vision became blurry. I saw the faces of my sister, my husband. Had all my suffering been for this?

At last a thin trickle of icy water began to fall on us from the metal pipes above. We gasped in shock and relief. I began to laugh hysterically, letting the stream of cold water pour over my head. We emerged from the showers, a sea of naked shivering bodies. There were no towels. I could see that some of the women's bodies were badly bruised, scratched. Everyone was skinny, with bones protruding. Breasts were just folds of

hanging skin. We were all trembling with cold.



My mother knits little woollen hats for me with two points that look like rabbit's ears. She worries about my feeling hungry or cold. She dresses me in hand-knitted woollen dresses and thick woollen stockings in winter. I am often warned not to sit on the ground, especially on concrete, as I might catch a chill. Walking barefoot is also forbidden, even in summer.

My mother's concern for my warmth is particularly evident at bathtime. The little bathroom is filled with steam and the two-bar radiator glows orange in the corner. She bends over me as I splash around in the old-fashioned, claw-footed bathtub. She soaps and rinses me gently, then stands up, her hands on the small of her back as she stretches. Next to the electric heater she spreads out the towel, turning it this way and that to warm it. As I get up out of the water, pink and glowing, the soft roughness of the towel envelops me, as does my mother's love. I feel safe and warm.



Hela: We learnt that other women arriving in Auschwitz who weren't in Schindler's group had numbers tattooed onto their forearms, which meant they would be sent to work. If you were destined for the gas chambers, however, they didn't bother with a number. We weren't tattooed.

They took us to a storeroom set up with tables piled high with clothing. They gave us old clothes to wear, chosen at random and thrown at us: men's shirts, socks, underwear or tablecloths. I was given a light-blue night-dress that was too big for me. Others had ridiculous garments that were much too small. We also had rough wooden clogs thrown to us. They didn't care whether we got two left feet. These clogs gave me terrible blisters.

Then some Hungarian women guards screamed at us and pushed us around. These women were Jewish, but they came from little villages where they were brought up as rough peasants, with much more strength and cunning than we had. They were quite

different from us and they had contempt for the ‘intelligentsia’. They seemed to enjoy tormenting us with their brutality.

We were counted and allocated bunks in barracks without windows in the women’s camp. The floor was of damp clay, seeping water. There were three tiers of bunks here, but they were wide, and eight women had to fit on one bunk. The thin straw pallet was damp and stinking, and crawled with bedbugs. The little bit of grey blanket we had to cover ourselves with was filthy. Four women were sent out to the kitchens for ‘coffee’. They came back with a cold watery liquid, which the female guard dished out into the dented tin cups we were given. All the while, she was hurling insults at us. We were dying to have a drink, despite its taste. I drank it in one gulp. There was no bread, nothing to eat. When it was time to sleep we all had to roll onto our right sides so that we could fit on our bunk. We could hear rats running around.



Our first house in Australia is large and many-roomed, but there are some rooms I seldom go into. There is a dark room at the back of the house, with spiderwebs hanging from the rafters, and empty boxes and newspapers on the floor. There are strange creakings when I go in there and the needles of light that filter in through cracks in the walls show up the dust floating around. I see frightening shapes, which re-emerge in my dreams.

Another place I don’t go near is the woodpile next to the back shed. My mother tells Auntie she has seen a rat there. She doesn’t know I am listening. I’ve never seen a rat, but the word in Polish — *szczur* — embodies all that is ugly and evil and terrifying. I hear the shudder in my mother’s voice when she utters it. There are places you don’t go, things you don’t talk about.



Hela: Everywhere here the wires were electrified. Several people threw themselves onto the wires to kill themselves, unable to stand any more. One of these (I found out later) was Janka’s friend, Kuba Stempel. He was one of the first to be deported from the ghetto,

and was sent to Montelupich, the prison in Kraków, and then to Auschwitz. They even told his parents that they could send a parcel to him, but it was all lies; the Jews all went to Auschwitz to be exterminated. There was nowhere to escape, no way of avoiding the torment. What could you do, when there were Germans with guns and truncheons, ready to beat you and kill you on the slightest pretext? But I don't think I ever considered giving up my life in this way.

The following day was the first selection. Before dawn we were woken to the shrieks and blows of the guards, ordering us to fold our blankets and assemble outside. We stood in rows, silently, and were counted again and again. A drizzling rain was falling. That's when I saw Dr Josef Mengele, the 'Angel of Death', and looked into his terrible eyes; eyes that would haunt me forever. We had heard that he not only murdered people but performed the most appalling medical experiments on them. Beside him stood four women guards with white scarves on their heads. My heart was thumping. Calmly he sorted people, pointing with a baton to the right or to the left, separating the older women or anyone who looked sick from the others, selecting for life or death. I heard later that in a quarter of an hour he could decide the fate of five hundred people. No one was selected from our group.

There were frequent medical inspections, at any hour of the day. We were made to strip and had to run, naked, back and forth in the clammy mud or in the bath-house while we were looked over and examined. We tried to appear healthy, straightening our bent shoulders, pinching our cheeks or rubbing red clay into them to colour them. In daylight we looked grotesque, pale with two red patches on our cheeks. We knew that looking unhealthy meant being selected to die. What instinct of self-preservation made us want to live? With the incessant shouting and screaming and brutality, I thought I was in hell. Where was Schindler now?

We soon lost track of time. Our group was kept separate from the others. Everything here was meant for death. Two and a half million people were killed here, and half a million died from disease, hunger and torture. Our days were spent in fear of being gassed, or shot, or dying of disease. There were no windows in the huts so the icy winds blew straight in; there was no soap, there were no stockings or underwear, no toilet paper or sanitary aids. We spent most of the time standing outdoors in mud up to our calves,

suffering hunger and, above all, thirst. Roll-calls lasted three or four hours, twice a day. At three in the morning and five in the evening, we had to line up in fives to be counted. We would stand for hours, immobile and numb, waiting for the SS to arrive and start counting.

They told us the water was contaminated with typhus and we were not allowed to drink. We were sometimes given a tiny bit of dirty warm water that passed for coffee, in a dented tin mug, or some watery soup in a bowl that five of us had to share. There was nothing floating in it, not even a bit of potato. I don't remember being given anything solid to eat.

When I saw a truck loaded with rotting vegetable-scrap drive past, I noticed that a few decayed old cabbage-leaves fell off and I ran with several other women to pick them up. I shoved a handful into my mouth. Shots suddenly rang out and some of the women fell. I didn't look at them but ran off. Many people died like this because they were overwhelmed by hunger and forgot all precautions. Other women, who had been in Birkenau longer than we had, moved around like shadows with huge eyes. They wore rags and had shaven heads. They were so hungry that they no longer had any control of their actions or emotions, and behaved like crazed animals. That's what terrified me the most; the total hopelessness and loss of human dignity.



Six-thirty, a winter evening in my kitchen as I prepare a meal. I look at the scraps and vegetable peelings I'm throwing into the bin. Once again the thought crosses my mind: you could make quite a nourishing soup out of them, if you boiled them up. How long could you live on scraps, I wonder?

