
David PERLŠTAJN

AUSCHWITZ 62183

“The doctor didn’t actually examine the patients, he would only look at them and decide whether they should be sent to the right or the left. One side meant life and the other death.” This is how David Perlštajn survived the Holocaust.

He dictated his testimony to his sister, Ljerka Jagodić on his return to Osijek in 1945. Following her brother’s death, Ljerka submitted this testimony to the Jewish Historical Museum, where it was filed under the number KŽ-715, dated June 8, 1987.

In August, 1942, on the order of the notorious executioner Tolj, I was taken, along with other inmates of the Tenjski Road camp, in a closed wagon to the Loporgrad camp. The brutal torture began immediately, beatings with rifle butts and heavy clubs, so the camp inmates were already exhausted and despairing after the first part of their journey. From Loporgrad, beaten and mistreated, we were dispatched in closed wagons for the trip to Auschwitz. For the three days and nights of the journey we were allowed out of the wagons only once to relieve ourselves and only once were we given a little water to drink.

When we arrived at the camp the wagons were opened and the SS men rushed forward, wielding batons and clubs and shouting like wild animals. “*Los, raus aus dem Wagon!*” “*Move, out of the wagon, fast!*” The wagons emptied in an instant, although there were people in them whose strength was failing and who were near death. We were immediately separated, men from women, mothers from children. It is impos-

sible to forget the desperate sobbing of mothers for their children and children for their parents. The pleas of the mothers not to be separated from their children were met with insults and beatings. Many of them were beaten to death on the spot.

Of the group of four hundred, 45 men and 42 women were kept aside and the remainder, the children and the elderly, were taken to the Birkenau camp, two kilometres from Auschwitz and sent to the gas chambers. The men who remained were taken to the camp where they were stripped naked and shaved and their hair shorn. They waited 24 hours to be given their camp clothes and for their registration numbers to be tattooed on their left forearms. Only those camp inmates who might be expected to stay alive, at least for a short time, were given numbers. The others were executed, with no trace left behind. At this time I, David Perlštajn, became number 62183.



Some children were kept alive to be used in pseudo-medical experiments. Children show the numbers tattooed on their arms after the liberation of Auschwitz

Life in our barracks was supervised by the block and room wardens. These were also camp inmates whose main job was to ensure the new inmates were familiar with the house rules and to maintain discipline, which they did with violent beatings. The first night there no one was able to sleep. Tormented by hunger and thirst, left alone with our hearts breaking, overcome with sadness for the family members we had lost, we wept, without tears.

I was assigned to a group of fifty inmates who worked unloading supplies for the barracks in which we lived. This was done under the eye of the SS *Kommandoführer* and a supervisor known as a kapo. These were usually German inmates, criminals, who carried heavy clubs. They beat the other inmates regularly, first when they got out of the truck and again when they got back in. These beatings were handed out without reason, they shouldn't have happened, but this was how they maintained their privileged position. The food was terrible, black water passed for coffee and brown water for tea in the morning. At noon there was a tepid liquid with no salt or browning and few unwashed and undercooked potato skins swimming in it. This was called soup. Because of their hunger, people would try to get their soup as late as possible, so it came from the bottom of the pot where it was thicker with skins and mud. In the evenings we would be given 250 grams of something they called bread with something minimal spread on it.

Many camp inmates fell ill from the hunger and torture, the heavy work and the unbearable living conditions. Examinations by the SS doctor meant queuing with a group of 150 people in front of the hospital, stark naked in the snow. The doctor didn't actually examine the patients, he would only look at them and decide whether they should be sent to the right or the left. One side meant life and the other death. Nor was being admitted to the hospital any guarantee of life: the SS men would visit and choose victims for the gas chambers according to a quota set in advance.

When I was discharged from the hospital I weighed only 39 kilograms and could barely walk. Fortunately I met some compatriots and they took me to a former Spanish freedom fighter who got me into the carpentry workshop. I worked there until the evacuation of the camp began on January 18, 1945.

The Auschwitz camp was surrounded by a high concrete wall with an electric barbed-wire fence inside it. Many people put an end to their own torment on that wire. People were gassed in the gas chambers of the neighbouring Birkenau camp. When transports arrived, the camp orchestra would give concerts in front of a large building surrounded by parkland. This was where the inmates were released from the wagons. The small children were given sweets and the adults got fresh drinking water. They were all told that they should then line up in groups of two hundred to go to the showers. They would be given soap and a towel and moved on to the "shower block". When the last person crossed the

threshold the door would be hermetically sealed. After a few minutes, the door on the opposite side would be opened and there two hundred inmates from the *Sonderkommand* would be waiting with carts. The bodies would be loaded into these and pushed to the crematorium fifty metres away. There they would be burned to ash. The whole time the orchestra played in the park, cheering on the victims for the next tour.

In Birkenau there were three buildings used as gas chambers, four crematoriums and several large pits in which camp inmates were burned alive, especially those brought in from Hungary in June, 1944, because the crematoriums didn't have the capacity to "process" such a large influx of victims. In Auschwitz there was a scientific institute where the most insane experiments were carried out on living inmates who would soon die in agony.

In January, 1945, when the Red Army offensive began, about eight thousand inmates were evacuated from Auschwitz. They set off on foot towards the Mauthausen camp, a march of four days and nights through snow and bitter cold. There they were put into open wagons. Many of the inadequately dressed inmates died on this trip from exposure, exhaustion and hunger.

In Mauthausen the inmates worked twelve hours a day in shifts of three thousand people for the Messer Schmitt aircraft factory. Because of the overcrowding of the camp the conditions were shocking; there was less and less food while the work became harder and harder and people were tortured all the time. This situation lasted until May 5, 1945, when a small number of us, the survivors, were finally liberated.