Judita LEVI

RECALLING THE DAYS OF HORROR

Judita Levi, née Krishaber was born in Subotica in 1920. She has an older sister, Livija Fenyo, who lives in Hungary. In the terrible days of the Holocaust she lost her father Aleksandar and her mother Margita, née Hollander.

Immediately after the war she married Dr Geza Levi in Subotica and began working at the Central Tuberculosis Clinic in Novi Sad before moving to Belgrade. There, Judita first worked at the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Red Cross as an administrator in the social health division, then as a social worker and head of the rehabilitation division of the Institute for Pulmonary Disease until her retirement. She has been an active member of the Red Cross for many years.

By June, 1944, we had been in the ghetto in Subotica for two months, in part of the town evacuated for the purpose. There was a curfew for those who wore the yellow star and those who were not thus branded didn't dare approach us. There were women, children and older men in the ghetto; the rest of the adult males were either in forced labour camps or had been mobilised under duress. Each family had just one room to live in. It was a time of anxiety and despair. All of us expected the worst, because we knew this was only the beginning. I was 23 years of age and had been forced to abandon my studies three years earlier, not being permitted to study or work in the same way as others, because I was Jewish. I lived with my parents in the one, small room allocated to us. They had aged ten years in those two months. My older sister was married and lived with her family in another town. We knew nothing of what had happened to them. Letters no longer reached us.

One sunny day, early in the morning, the police came for us. All the Jews in the ghetto were given half an hour to get ready and told they could take only what could be carried in a rucksack. No one asked any questions. They took us to the station where there were cattle wagons waiting for us. The police beat us mercilessly, breaking the ribs of one elderly woman. It was a short journey and we arrived later the same day at a temporary collection camp where we were to wait for Jews from other towns. We all know that this was only temporary and that they would take us further, but no one knew where. We expected to be taken to a concentration camp, but which one, what kind, where? Why us? We were people like anyone else and we had not done anyone any harm.

During the day we were kept in a fenced off area, watched by guards, Hungarian policemen and a number of SS men. During the night we were locked into a big old mill, stables and storehouses. New convoys kept arriving, and by now there were hundreds of us.

About ten days later we set off again, our belongings on our backs. We passed through a town were people turned their heads away or gazed at us with pity, some of them with curiosity, some hurling insults and epithets. All the time they beat us. Again we were in cattle wagons, each of us with a parcel of food for the trip: bread, margarine and jam. All of us had some canned food as well. The wagons were closed, with just a small, barred window high up in each corner, through which only the sky could be seen. It was hot, stifling in fact. There were a hundred or a hundred and twenty of us in each wagon. For days on end we could only sit, jammed one up against the other. Sometimes the train would stop for a few hours and the soldiers would open the door. We would take the rubbish out, fetch water, breathe deeply and then travel on. We left Hungary and began crossing Poland.

Poland! No, it can't be? I didn't say anything to anyone. I had heard about a terrible camp in Poland, but I remained silent. A few of us younger ones, perhaps ten of us, were trying to make that dreadful trip easier for the others. We were on a train to death, but no one knew that then. Many people had poison with them, but felt that the time had not yet come to use it. Perhaps they would take us to factories where we could work and live. I was young and healthy, nothing would be too hard for me. But what would happen to my parents and the others, the weak, the sick, the elderly? I was furious in my helplessness. I told the other young people that we should try something. In fact I had been thinking about this for some time, but I didn't know what to do about my parents. They only laughed at me. What could we do, they asked, run away perhaps? The guards were armed to the teeth.

After about eight days of the most terrible travel we arrived at a crossroads. The train stopped and the wagons were opened. We thought it was just another short halt. I ran to the door and saw a vast space with barbed wire. Wire, everywhere wire. There were a lot of electric fences, a dense network of high voltage cables. But at this time we still didn't know that. There were guard towers all around, observation posts armed guards and searchlights. Suddenly I saw the sign on the railway station. "Auschwitz"! My worst fears were realised.

Fortunately only a few of us had heard about this place. Now I knew that we had reached our destination. They forced us out of the wagons, but made us leave our belongings behind. The others all thought they would get them later, because these were our only valuables, the few precious memories we still had. I could hear people behind me saying: "Look, there are the chimneys of the factory over there. That means we're here to work. As long as we're working there's nothing to be afraid of." Yes, they were chimneys. The chimneys of the crematorium!

The old hands in the camp tried to help us, whispering to us in various languages, but we didn't understand. When the SS men saw them doing this they were severely beaten. Three officers stood at the very entrance of the camp, surrounded by soldiers. A major on each side and, in the middle, as I later discovered, Dr Mengele himself, in uniform, with patent boots, white gloves and a whip in his hand. The sorting began, children, the elderly and those who seemed sick or weak were sent to "the other side", while we, the young and healthy, stayed on "this side". My father went to the other side. By sheer luck my mother stayed with me, she was 52 years of age but in very good shape. She wept for my father and I comforted her, at least she was with me. I didn't know at the time, nor did it even occur to me, that it would have been better for her to have gone immediately with my father.

Everything happened very quickly after that. They herded us into a large concrete building, separating men, women and children under fourteen. Only the older girls and women without husbands and children remained. They took our shoes and our dresses and, with them, the poison sewn into the hems. We were completely naked as they shaved our heads. Suddenly I heard screaming as a door opened onto a vast space. I recognised the faces of those who were with us on the train and who were separated from us on arrival. They were pulling out their gold teeth and taking their spectacles from them, swearing and beating them the whole time. Later it turned out that they were being taken to the gas chambers. We could no longer recognise one another, naked and shaven, we called to one another, some of us sobbing, some laughing hysterically. The Germans were mocking us, beating us. We were all given a piece of soap and a towel and pushed into the showers. Unknown to us, the ones on the other side were also getting soap and a towel, but there they were drenched in poison gas instead of water. After washing we were given torn dresses and worn shoes, with no chance to try them on, no concern for whether they fitted. Some people got shoes which were too big or too small, some got two left shoes, so we swapped them around. Through all this we endured their beating us. The shoes were our greatest treasure. They were distributed by inmates working under the supervision of the SS. They tried to give us the best possible, but it was a poor choice and, in any case, they didn't dare. In this way I managed to get a headscarf. I tore it in two, giving half to my mother.

Judita Levi in younger days

By the time this was over, darkness had fallen. We set off, a long line of us, exhausted, hungry and completely demoralised. We seemed to walk for a very long time before finally arriving inside the camp itself. Birkenau! Wooden barracks, all in darkness. Entering, we fell to the floor, exhausted. There was nothing at all inside the barracks. There were too many of us and not enough space, we crushed together, lying like that. My mother and I held each other's hands.

The first night in camp. We tried to sleep. People were sobbing, but voices in the dark warned us that unless we were silent they would make us kneel outside the barracks. We begged for silence from those who were unable to keep a grip on themselves.

At three in the morning we were woken by a piercing whistle and rough voices and given five minutes to line up outside the barracks. We stood in rows of five for them to count us. The barracks were called blocks. Each block had its own supervisor, the kapo was a women, the *Blockaltester*. They were assisted by four *Stubendiensterei*. These were all inmates who had been in the camp for years. Most of them, but not all, were Polish.

Some of them had been there since 1938 and some from even earlier. They were no longer people but savage beasts. They had put themselves in the service of the Fascists in order to stay alive. Most of them were criminals and there were prostitutes among them as well. Those who had been unwilling to supervise and monitor the other inmates were no longer alive.

The roll call took hours, usually lasting until seven or eight in the morning. Then what they called breakfast arrived. Everyone was given half a mug of coffee, which bore no resemblance to real coffee, a lump of margarine and a piece of dry, stale bread. That was our ration for the whole day.

The day usually began with us kneeling in front of the barracks for hours on the sharp stones. The paths weren't paved and the ground was covered with these stones. There we would kneel, supposedly as punishment for some infraction, but in fact the point was to torture us. We learnt from the older camp inmates that the gas chamber was the fate planned for all of us. These were the last transports, there was not enough room in the factories, they hadn't even recorded us. We were not given numbers and they didn't tattoo us. Many of us refused to believe this story, clinging to hope. I was among them. I tried to cheer people up, even when they beat us and when we were kneeling in tatters in the rain or under the scorching sun. We would stand in the mornings and wait until the SS man or the SS woman arrived. They would take a small number of inmates to the factories, but I was not so lucky. Perhaps I could have gone, but I didn't want to leave my mother. Lunch and dinner was a soup, usually made from turnips meant for cattle, but by the time our turn came there would be almost nothing left.

The days passed. The cold weather of autumn set in. We had no warm clothes and many of us were barefoot because our shoes had fallen to bits. Every second week we went for a bath. When we returned from washing it was like being reborn, because we never knew whether they were really taking us to wash or to the gas chamber. We could see the furnace of the crematorium and every day would note whether there was smoke or not. The barracks roof leaked and we lay in mud. There was one barracks where they put those who could no longer stand or who had gone insane, There were more and more of these people every day. Once a week a truck would arrive and take these living skeletons to the gas chambers. One morning while we were kneeling on the stones, my mother fainted. I begged them to let me kneel longer instead of her. They allowed this: my mother returned to the barracks and I was kept kneeling until the evening.

The guards would cook potatoes for themselves. I would clean their barracks every day so that I could get some of these. Three times I managed to take a few cooked potatoes, running to the barracks for the sick and sharing the potatoes out among them. The third time I was caught in the act by a German guard: they beat me and shaved my head again and deprived me of food for three days as punishment. The others gave me a slice of bread from their portion.

My mother suffered a heart attack.

We saw terrible sights. Every day someone would be caught on the barbed wire, someone who didn't know about the high voltage current passing through it. There were also some who did this deliberately, unable to endure any more.

One afternoon in November there was a commotion throughout the camp. We were all taken out of the barracks, lined up and moved out. Where were we going? Nobody knew. The guards took us to another camp. Some people said we were being sent to work, others that we were being taken to the gas chambers. A lot of people just didn't care: it couldn't be worse! We arrived at the same place as we had on the first day, in front of the vast bathroom, the crematorium and storehouse. They let us sit on the ground, it was cold, but at least we could sit. Then the speculation began: what was going to happen to us? I insisted that we were going to somewhere better, saying over and over again that we should hang on, that it would soon be over. A few days earlier a camp inmate who worked in the kitchen had told us about the situation on the front and this had given us hope. Every day there were more and more aircraft flying overhead. The Germans were in terrible fear but, for us, these were the only heartening moments. Everyone wanted to believe me as I assured them that the worst was over. Childishly, they asked me questions, as though I knew more than they did. And I just kept talking, trying to convince myself as well. The guards were running back and forwards, many of us could speak German and we would catch fragments of their conversation. They were saying that they didn't know what to do with us because they had run out of poison gas! We sat the entire night in the icy wind, stricken with panic. That night, many people lost their sanity. The guards were furious with us because they had to stay awake all night; they beat us and told us it would be best to burn us alive.

By the time the morning came, only about fifty of the hundreds of us retained any semblance of calm, if this word can be used at all. They asked me if I still believed we would be free. Obsessively I told them that we would be liberated by the spring at the latest. I thought it would come on March 11, my birthday, I had made my mind up that this would be the date. Most of them thought that I had lost my mind. The winter had only just begun and it would be impossible to endure any longer, even if they didn't kill us there and then. But still, we were taken to the bath, not the crematorium, and given clean, grey dresses of sackcloth, shoes, a blanket and food for the trip. Those blankets saved the lives of many people. It was time to say farewell to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

This time we were in passenger wagons, sitting in compartments on wooden benches, travelling we knew not where. We clung for a long time to the memory of this trip. For a little while we were human beings again, we could look through the windows and see life. We passed villages and towns, one after another, and couldn't believe that the rest of the world had continued to live normally. Every time we were close to a village it crossed my mind that, when the train slowed down a little, I should jump out of the window, because the guards were watching the doors. But how could I leave my mother? What if I were to break my leg or arm when I jumped? We saw the Baltic Sea, we passed through beautiful areas of countryside, summer resorts and villas. Suddenly I realised that we were heading towards Danzig (Gdansk), where there were also camps. We didn't go into Danzig itself but to the nearby camp of Stutthof.

The first sight to meet our eyes was the huge furnace of the crematorium.

Life in Stutthof was much the same as in Auschwitz, but here we had to walk several kilometres a day, under the gaze of the guards and their dogs, to dig trenches. We dug in the rain, snow and freezing temperatures, always poorly dressed and hungry. Somehow I managed to get my mother into the kitchen to peel potatoes, which meant she didn't have to go out to work in the open. The food in Stutthof was similar to that in Auschwitz. The camp commandant's name was Max, at least that's what they called him. He was a sadist who would regularly beat inmates with an enormous whip, before we set off for work, while the food was being handed out, before we went to sleep. He would whip whoever was handy, for no reason at all, whenever it crossed his mind to do so. People became sicker and sicker with typhus, diphtheria and other diseases. Afterwards they would be taken to the crematorium. Here at least we were able to hold furtive conversations with the men, our fellow inmates, whose barracks were next to ours. They would go out to work in the fields and would talk to the local farm workers, sometimes getting some news. They told us which countries had been liberated and where the fighting was still going on. I thought about Yugoslavia, about our people who had won their liberty, but for us the darkest days were just beginning.

But we had to hold on. I kept telling myself, as I stood in a trench half full of water, lashed by the wind and snow of the harsh Polish winter, that I must hold on. Max kept on beating us and those no longer able to work were being taken to the crematorium.

By January, 1945, cannon fire could be heard: the front was moving closer and the camp had to be evacuated without delay. Only a small number of people still remained. We set off, but to where? We heard that the Red Army was advancing from every side! Whether we should wait for them or whether they would shoot us along the way was the only question. Before we left there was a selection. I tried to hide my mother, but they pushed her roughly out of the line. She was weak and old, they said, she could not come with us. I begged, I told them she was very tough, that she could come with us. My mother then weighed about 36 kilograms and could barely stand. All my entreaties were in vain. I knew the fate that awaited her. Then I begged them to let me stay with her. There was a moment's hesitation, but then an SS officer slapped me and pushed me back in the line. I could read the thought behind his ironic smile: "Why should we let them die together?" I said farewell to my mother. I tried to smile, we told each other that we would be together again soon, knowing full well that we would never see each other again. Everyone had already set off: she stood there, immobile; the other women on whom the death sentence had been passed came to her and held her so that she would not fall. I could no longer watch. I set off, but then I heard my mother's shriek: "Take care! You must stay alive, because someone has to remember all of this!" I turned back again, but all I could see was the tall chimney, belching smoke.

How I managed to endure everything which had happened, and everything which was yet to come will remain my secret, secret even from me. With no supernatural force, a human body could certainly not endure all this. That supernatural force was a strong will and faith in the future. This real Golgotha lasted about six weeks.

For six weeks we walked on snow and ice, across frozen rivers and streams, in the harshest of Polish winters, in torn shoes, with no stockings, wrapped in a thin blanket, and with no food. We walked more than thirty kilometres a day. At night they would put us into deserted barns or stables. Every two or three days, if we were lucky, we would get a potato or a slice of bread from passing rural people who took pity on us. Our guards, the SS men and their dogs, were also short of food. Whenever we chanced upon a dead animal, a horse or anything else, both the people and the dogs would fall on the meat in a frenzy. I couldn't do it. Every day there were less and less of us. People would fall, and anyone who could go no further would be shot on the spot. By the end of the third week only half of us remained.

The SS men were beginning to panic. They realised there was no escape for them. Some of them fled after forcing local peasants to give them civilian clothes. They disguised themselves for fear of the Russians. The dogs became savage and had to be shot.

The peasants told us that March had arrived. Our strength had gone, but we dragged ourselves on. There were now very few of us left, only about sixty female inmates. Just seven fanatical SS men remained. Now we were also travelling by night. We heard cannons nearby, but we knew that they would not hand us over to the Russian army, that instead they would shoot us at the last possible moment. I was feverish, completely exhausted, feeling I couldn't walk even another few kilometres. We passed beside a forest in the night. I told the two girls beside me that I could not go any further, that I had a temperature, I couldn't see anything, but that I wouldn't give up. I had decided I would try to hide in the forest, if they see me, let them shoot. They other two said they would join me.

Group of new female arrivals in Auschwitz after having their personal data recorded and their camp numbers tattooed on their left arms.

The forest was right beside us. It was dark, but the snow was white and the forest not so dense in the winter. I couldn't run, so I huddled behind the closest bush. The other two made a break for the wood. I heard a shot, and then another one. I turned to look: one of them had been hit. The other lay beside her, as though she too had been hit. The SS men didn't check and they didn't even notice me. In that way, two of us saved ourselves. I never saw her again and I know nothing about what happened to her. The column continued on. I crawled towards the road, hoping the Russians would find me when they arrived. But would they arrive on time? Or would I freeze in the snow, unable to stand up? The last thing I heard before I lost consciousness was cannon fire rocketing around me.

I awoke lying on pillows. I felt as though I was in a cart. Someone was rubbing my feet and hands, trying to pour something into my mouth. I opened my eyes, but could see nothing. I could only hear someone speaking to me. I tried to make out what he was saying, and then realised he was speaking Russian. Peering harder I managed to recognise the silhouette of a soldier. A Russian soldier! I was saved! I wept, my tears flowing of their own accord. The soldier told me not to cry, that everything would be all right now. I tried to speak but didn't have the strength. I realised they must have found me half-frozen in the early dawn. They immediately saw that I was a camp inmate and thought I was dead, because they had found others shot by the Nazis on the road along their way. When they realised I was breathing, they put me into the cart. I managed to ask them what the date was. March 11, came the answer. My birthday! Again I lost consciousness. When I came around again I had already been in hospital for several days, in Katowice. The Polish Red Cross had taken care of me. I was in a critical condition and lay in the hospital for three months with typhoid fever, hovering between life and death.

I wasn't aware of Victory Day dawning. I didn't know where I was nor even who was lying beside me. I was delirious for a very long time. The utter suffering, the terrible tension, the months of stress, the hunger and especially this acute illness, all contributed to the complete collapse of my whole body. I was listless, unable to be happy about anything. Bit by bit, in my hospital room, I recovered. Every day around me someone would die of typhoid fever or other diseases. But those who recovered would go home.

Home! The word filled me with fear. Would it be possible to find peace after all this? But I had to live. My mother had told me as we parted that someone had to remember all of this. Would I lose heart now, after everything I had endured? Once again, for the final time, I gathered the strength for my recovery.