On the way to Auschwitz-Birkenau

Last Letters:

1. The following note, thrown from a transport to the Auschwitz extermination camp, was written by an unidentified Jew to his family still living in the Warsaw ghetto:

Plonsk, December 16, 1942

Please toss the note in the nearest mailbox. It is now morning. We are in the railroad car with the whole family. We are leaving with the last transport. Plonsk is cleansed [of Jews; German expression]. Please go to the Bam family, on 6 Niska and send them regards.
Yours truly,

2. This letter, thrown from a train that brought a group of Jews to Auschwitz, was written by a Jew named David to his family in the Warsaw ghetto:

Legionowo, December 16, 1942

Additional payment 18 grosze (Polish currency)Warsaw
Nalewki [street] 47/19
Please kindly toss this into a post box. Today we left Plonsk, our whole family, and all the Jews traveled. Be aware, that we are traveling to a wedding.*
See you,
David.

Zwi Bacharach (ed.) *Last Letters from the Shoah*,
(Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and Devora Publishing, 2004) pp. 92, 93.

Personal Testimonies

Cecilie Klein-Pollack

Born in 1925 in Jasina, Czechoslovakia (a region under Hungarian rule at the time), she was on the train with Lili Jacob. From Auschwitz she was take to Holleischen camp in the Sudeten region and was liberated there by the British Army. She married in August 1945, moved to the United States and had three children.

We, were about 80 at least in a boxcar. It wasn't a regular train. It was a cattle train, in which we could almost suffocate. [...] and there were pails for bodily functions. And they would, they stopped a few times.... My brother-in-law was with us, you know my sister, my brother-in-law and their little boy Danny and my mother and me. We were all together on the train because my sister was taken away from Jasina, so she was not with us together. [...] And so finally when the train stopped, they opened up the door; and they told my brother-in-law to take out the pails, to throw out the pails and to bring water. In the same pails they brought water, and we had to drink this water. [...] and they warned him if anybody escapes then we will all be shot. [...] And my mother was — we, were trying just to be as close together and to hug and to and to tell our last — we didn't know where we were going we didn't expect though that we are going to be killed because I knew, our mind could not comprehend that anybody is going to kill little children."

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
From an interview with Cecilie Klein-Pollack,
May 7, 1990, RG-50.030*0107

Livia Lieberman

Born in Oradea, Transylvania in 1922. After months of torture by the Hungarian police in the ghetto where she was held, she was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944.

They loaded 70–75 people into a small boxcar, in the intense heat without a drop of water. The windows were closed; the boxcars sealed. The trains made their way slowly; the journey went on forever. For those locked inside the death cages, it seemed as if the torture would never end. Not one of the Hungarian guards showed the slightest semblance of mercy or desire to help. On the contrary, whenever they could, they added to the suffering. Those who were suffocating from lack of air begged them to open the windows for a few minutes. Those antisemitic policemen would only do so after they had been given a bribe — a gold watch for 5 minutes of air to breathe. Screams announcing that people had died from suffocation and dehydration could be heard from other boxcars. Little infants were crying from hunger, thirst, and lack of air.

The horrible journey to the Land of the Death, to the crematorium in Auschwitz, lasted four days.

Livia Lieberman, Yad Vashem Archives, M49 E/80

Eliasz Skoszylas

Born in Szemeisieza in 1916. Arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943 from the Będzin ghetto. From there he was taken to the sub-camp Gintergrube. In the final months of the war he worked at digging defensive ditches in Grietenberg.

Words cannot convey the tragedy that took place then. There was indescribable chaos. They herded us like cattle while raining down curses and shouting. The groans of those who were trampled mixed with the cries of the children and the sobbing of the women. Yet, to our sorrow, the wailing made no impression on the consciences of those beasts in men's clothing who were totally impervious as they carried out this murderous process. They threw us into the boxcars like bunches of rags. Without food, suffering the terrible stench and lack of air to breathe, we were dragged along, thirsty and hopeless. It seemed as if this journey was lasting forever.

Eliasz Skoszylas, Yad Vashem Archives, M49E/227

Imre Kertesz

Born in 1922 in Budapest, Hungary. In 1944, he was deported to Auschwitz, and after three days from there to Buchenwald. After the war he worked as a journalist and translator of German literature and philosophy. Kertesz received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2002.

Dawn outside was cool and fragrant. A gray mist hovered over the wide fields, and then unexpectedly, but just like the sound of a trumpet, a thin sharp red ray appeared from behind somewhere, and I understood that I was seeing the sunrise. It was beautiful and quite interesting: at home I usually slept during this hour. I also spotted a building, directly to my left, an abandoned station or perhaps the forerunner of a larger station. It was tiny, gray, and entirely deserted, with small, closed windows and with that ridiculously steep roof that I had been seeing ever since yesterday. Before my very eyes it solidified into a concrete outline in the misty dawn, changing from gray to lilac, and then all at once its windows glistened red as the first rays struck them. Others observed this too, and I recounted it all to the curious. They asked if I could see a name above it. I did: namely, I saw the words in the early light on the narrower side of the building facing in our direction under the roof. Auschwitz – Birkenau was what I read, written in the fancy ornate letters of the Germans, with the two words connected by a double-curved hyphen. I for one canvassed my geographic knowledge in vain; others proved no wiser then I about the place.

Imre Kertesz, *Fateless*
Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1992, 1996, p. 56.

Primo Levi

Born in Torino, Italy in 1919. In December 1943, at the age of 24, the Italian Fascist Militia captured him and he was sent to Auschwitz. On January 27, 1945, with the liberation of the camp, he returned to Italy. Author of many books on Auschwitz, which became classics, among them, If This Is A Man. *In 1987, he died most probably by commiting suicide.*

The doors had been closed at once, but the train did not move until evening. We had learnt of our destination with relief. Auschwitz: a name without significance for us at that time, but at least implied some place on earth....
Through the slit, known and unknown names of Austrian cities, Salzburg, Vienna, then Czech, finally Polish names. On the evening of the fourth day the cold became intense: the train ran through interminable black pine forests, climbing perceptibly. The snow was high.... During the halts, no one tried anymore to communicate with the outside world: we felt ourselves by now "on the other side"...."

Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man*, (New York: Orion Press, 1958) pp. 8–10.

Arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau

Cecilie Klein-Pollack

And we arrived to Auschwitz. As soon as they opened the doors, prisoners in striped uniforms came on to the train and they started to yell that we should all leave everything and go down — we all must go out, leave everything in the train. My brother-in-law by some miracle had still a watch. So he — you know, he asked them first, "tell me what's going on here." And downstairs we just heard a lot of screaming and, yelling in German. [...] My sister — as soon as they opened the door, she ran down with her little boy; because Danny was crying and it was suffocating in that train it was terrible, terrible journey. People were fainting. We were pulling out you know, smelling salts to revive people. It was unbelievable to describe just the journey itself, so we were already very glad when we arrived. We thought, "This is, at least can't be worse than what we experienced.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
From an interview with Cecilie Klein-Pollack,
May 7, 1990, RG-50.030*0107

Helena Cytron (after the war, Ziporah Tahori)

Helena Cytron was born in 1922 in Czechoslovakia. In Spring 1942, when she was twenty years old, she was deported to Auschwitz in one of the first transports from Slovakia. While in the camp, she worked in different labor groups, among them "Kommando Kanada." Because of this work she managed to save her sister, Shoshana, from death. In 1945, she participated in the death marches, and with the liberation she and her sister immigrated to Israel. She had two children, and lived in Tel-Aviv until her death in 2006.

Just as we arrived at Auschwitz, the terrible shouting started: "Alles Raus!"' "Everyone out!" "Hurry up!" Everything happened very fast, accompanied by shouting, and by the time we gathered ourselves up, and we could once again stand on our feet (for our feet had become paralyzed from sitting), the beatings began. From the minute we got to the door, anyone who could not jump quickly was whipped, and there were SS personnel and dogs. As soon as we got off the trains, they asked us to throw [the rest of] our jewelry onto the side of the road — whatever people still had: small earrings, a watch — for they had taken away our jewelry long before.

Helena Cytron, Yad Vashem Archives, O3/6766, VT 185

Batya Druckmacher

Born in Lodz in 1914. Before the war, she was a housewife, and in the Lodz ghetto she worked as a nanny. She arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau in August 1944, and by the end of the war had survived Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau and forced labor camps in Germany.

On October 20, 1944, all Jews of the ghetto were sent to Auschwitz. We arrived there late at night, and sat in the boxcars until six o'clock in the morning. From far away we saw how they led men, barefoot and head-shaven, to work. These men begged us to throw them a piece of bread, because we, too, would someday be as they were. Then the panic started among the people. Some began to cry and the German Kapos, who were leading the men, hit them with sticks on the soles of their feet. We threw them bread without paying any attention to the Kapos who walked along accompanied by their dogs.

Batya Druckmacher, Yad Vashem Archives, MIE/555

Feige Sauberman

Born in Klementow in 1922. She was sent from forced labor in a BMW factory for car production in Munich to Auschwitz-Birkenau. From Auschwitz she was sent to Bergen-Belsen, and three other camps until she was liberated.

On May 18, 1944, we arrived in Auschwitz. It was night. Despite the tortures and the despair each one of us was curious about our fate. The only source we had for information was the SS men accompanying us to Auschwitz. They gave evasive answers to our questions. Upon looking at the huge flame, we asked them whether it's a factory? They answered us with a cynical laugh, explaining that this was the kitchen where they make coffee for the workers. As we got closer to these flames, we immediately had the opportunity to understand what kind of a kitchen it was.

Feige Sauberman, Yad Vashem Archives, M49E/2518

Imre Kertesz

Then I was awakened by movements and excitement. Outside the sun shone in its full glory. The train was moving again. I asked the boys about our location, and they replied, "Still there. We just began moving." So I must have been jolted awake. But without a doubt, they added, directly in front of us one could see factories and some kind of settlement. A minute later, those stationed in front of the window reported, and I also noticed by the alteration in light, that we must have slid through some sort of an arched gateway. After another minute the train stopped and than the viewers excitedly let us know that they could make out a station, soldiers, and people. Several persons immediately began gathering up their belongings and buttoning up; the women especially began cleaning up, prettying up, and combing themselves. Outside, however, I heard approaching knocks, the slamming of doors, and the jumbled noise of departing passengers, and I was now forced to realize that without a doubt we had indeed arrived at our destination. I was glad naturally, but I felt that I was glad differently from the way I would have been, let's say, yesterday or, even more exactly, the day before yesterday. Then some tool banged against our car's door, and someone, or rather several people, rolled aside the heavy door. First I heard their voices. They spoke German or some closely related language. It sounded as if they were all talking at once. From what I could gather, they wanted us to leave the cars. But instead, it seemed they squeezed themselves in among us; for a moment I could see nothing. But the news soon spread: suitcases and packages should stay there. Later they explained, as the words were translated and passed around, later everyone would be given back his belongings, of course. [...] Then the natives approached me, and I finally caught my first glimpse of them. I was quite surprised, because, after all, this was the first time in my life that I had set eyes on — at least in such close proximity — real convicts, clad in the striped suits of criminals, with shaven heads and round caps.

Imre Kertesz: *Fateless*, pp. 57-58.

The Selection Process

Cecilie Klein-Pollack

So my brother-in-law asked them, "What's going on here". So he, of course, didn't answer. So he had a watch, and he goes and he slips him the watch; and he tells him—and my sister was in the meantime downstairs, and I was always sticking next to my mother. So he said to her, "Listen, if you have, children, then give it away to either older people or the women with children, because women and children and anybody older is going to be killed. They are killing the same night, the same day. There is no chance for these people to survive. "I couldn't even believe it. And my mother had the presence of mind to, as soon as she, heard that—she didn't know, this was my mother—then this man said it, she ran down with me, and I ran after her; and she goes over to my sister, and she has the presence of mind to tell her, "Listen, Darling, I just found out that women and children will have it very easy. All they will, all they are going to do is take care—is take care of the children. But, and if I don't have a child, then they will send me in hard labor. And you know I will never survive hard labor. But you are young, and you'll be able to survive." And before my sister has a chance, you know, to go not to give the child, my mother moved the child from her arms. And as soon as she removed—she had the child in her arms, she was pushed to this other side, you know, with all the women and children.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Interview with Cecilie Klein-Pollack,
May 7, 1990, RG-50.030*0107

Livia Lieberman

They told us to leave the bundles in the boxcars. They put the elderly on one side and the younger people on the other side, men and women separately. They separated the children from their mothers, the wives from their husbands. We were forbidden to take leave of each other, so we were parted from our dear ones without a word. They hit us, they beat us mercilessly.

Livia Lieberman, Yad Vashem Archives, M4 9E/80

Batya Druckmacher

One of the bullies asked me whose child was standing next to me; my sister, who was standing close by, wanted to save me, and she said the child was hers. When I yelled out that the child was mine, I was beaten for lying. Then they took away my child, and my sister also went....

Batya Druckmacher, Yad Vashem Archives, MIE/555

Regina Widawska

Born in Lodz in 1913. Before the war, she worked as a nurse in the Jewish hospital in the city. She arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau in August 1944 from the Lodz ghetto. After the evacuation from Auschwitz she was in Freiburg and Mauthausen camps.

On the twenty-eighth of August, we were sent to Auschwitz. When they opened the boxcars, the "Canadians" appeared immediately. That is how the Jews who worked in the warehouses were called. We were ordered to leave everything in the boxcars, and to hand over our valuables. Then we understood that we were going to be killed. I immediately threw down my bundles, but my mother did not want to hand over her knapsack. They told us to line up single file. I stood next to my mother. One of the "Canadians" came up to me, and told me: "Move away from your mother, because two hours from now, she will no longer be alive." My mother heard what he said. Before I could make sense of what was happening, an SS man pushed me towards one side, and my mother to the other side. They immediately organized the selection, and I never saw my mother again.

Regina Widawska, Yad Vashem Archives, M49E/4123

Eliasz Skoszylas

The Gestapo man who was running everything was so skillful that we did not manage to make sense of what was happening, and almost immediately some of the elderly and the children found themselves in cars taking them in the direction of the crematorium. I do not know what went on in those cars. I only felt that I had ceased to absorb impressions and that everything had died inside me.

Eliasz Skoszylas, Yas Vashem Archives, M49E/227

Olga Elbogen

Well, with my sister, with my younger sister next to me, they put us to the right side, only the two of us, and we didn't even say goodbye to Mother and the little ones. We just had some food yet from home and I gave it to my mother, "We'll see you tonight." And that was it and I never saw them again. It was such a commotion there in Auschwitz that we didn't know.

Olga Elbogen, Yad Vashem Archives, O3/10335

Transformation into a Prisoner (*Haftling*)

Cecilie Klein-Pollack

This is where my mother and all the others were, in that gas chamber. And we were in another place that we had to undress and dress and they took everything away from us. And they shoved us into the showers, that we have to—but what they did is, they first opened the hot water so we got scalded and then they opened the cold water; so as we were running out we were all so—and first they shaved us. […] we were completely, you know, they shaved our hair and they shaved our, our private parts; […] and then they gave us—each one got some rag to put on. […] as if somebody could get a size six that needed a size 15, and somebody got a six—and vice versa. And so that when we, were lined up, we didn't even recognize each other."

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,
Interview with Cecilie Klein-Pollack,
May 7, 1990, RG-50.030*0107

Helena Cytron (Ziporah Tahori)

So they immediately led us to a place, to some building, on which was written "Sauna," in other words, bathhouse. We stood in line for hours, still in our own clothes with long hair, with everything, and in truth, we huddled close to each other, because they were from all over Slovakia, not just us, so we stayed close to our friends from home, we felt safer when we were together. And thus, after we had stood for hours, we saw that behind this house, behind the wall, there were some strange figures wandering around, and we decided that there must be an insane asylum there. That they had opened some door there, and all kinds of crazy people had gotten out.

When we emerged from the other side, we understood that in reality those crazy people were us, and from every point of view, we had suddenly become animals, since we no longer could identify each other, and in that moment, we lost our spark of humanity, and we lost our friends. Even my best friend stood next to me, and I could not recognize her. Afterwards, after the bath, and after they had washed us—they inscribed us with numbers.

They took all our valuables from us. We were curious about what sort of work clothes they would give us. Finally, a Jewish woman came with a pile of rags that were meant to replace the dresses they had confiscated from us. I was given a worn out black skirt and a worn out crepe blouse. No one was given undergarments. The shoes were not intended for both feet. One woman could not even put on the shoes she had been given because they were too narrow. A German came over to her and asked why she was not wearing her shoes. When he heard her answer, he kicked her a few times, and she was not able to get up."

Helena Cytron, Yad Vashem Archives, O3/6766, VT185

Primo Levi

Häftling: I have learnt that I am a Häftling. My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry a tattoo on our left arm until we die."
We Italians had decided to meet every Sunday evening in the corner of the Lager, but we stopped it at once, because it was too sad to count our numbers and find fewer each time, and to see each other ever more deformed and more squalid. And it was so tiring to walk those few steps and then, meeting each other, to remember and to think. It was better not to think."

Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man* (New York: Orion Press, 1958), pp. 22, 34

The Last Way: To the Gas Chambers

Feiser Silberman

We saw a long window stretching the length of the monstrous structure that was hermetically closed with wide iron bars. Along the length of the window stood naked figures from groups that had earlier been taken off [the boxcars] with beatings and dogs.... These misfortunate people were apparently aware of the fate awaiting them. With shouts of despair and heart-wrenching cries they called to God and their relatives.... After we saw what happened here, we no longer doubted that the Auschwitz camp was Hell.

Feiser Silberman, Yad Vashem Archives M49E/2948

Haya Pomeranz

Born in Kresnik in 1910. Arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau from Majdanek. From there she was sent to Bad-Achen, and Bergen-Belsen.

They took the children from their mothers, everyone was screaming, but the heavens did not open and God did not help them. The clouds wept small drops, but no one paid attention to the cries of the children. They led them to the gas chambers and from there to the crematorium. The flames licked the sky, but nothing happened, because God and the angels were asleep.

Haya Pomeranz, Yad Vashem Archives, MIE/1385, MIE/1339

Meir Wieseltier

Words

Years after the Holocaust, the Israeli poet Meir Wieseltier wrote in his poem, "Milim" — (Words):

Two years before the destruction
They did not call 'destruction' 'destruction'
Two years before the Holocaust
It did not have a name.
What was the word 'destruction'
Two years before the destruction?
A word for something bad, that should never happen.
What was the word 'Holocaust'
Two years before the Holocaust?
It was a word for a great upheaval
Something with a tremendous din.

Meir Wieseltier, "Words." Translated by Gabriel Levin
***Tel-Aviv Review,* edited by Gabriel Moked, 4 (Fall 1989–Winter 1990), p. 191.**

Meir Wieseltier is an Israeli poet and translator. Born in Moscow in 1941, he came to Israel in 1949. He studied law, philosophy, and general history, and was awarded the Bialik Prize in 1995, and and the Israel Prize for poetry and literature in 2000.