strolling down the platform, asking him to have the sick woman moved to a hospital car.

"Patience," the German replied, "patience. She'll be taken there soon."

Around eleven o'clock, the train began to move again. We pressed against the windows. The convoy was rolling slowly. A quarter of an hour later, it began to slow down even more. Through the windows, we saw barbed wire; we understood that this was the camp.

We had forgotten Mrs. Schächter's existence. Suddenly there was a terrible scream:

"Jews, look! Look at the fire! Look at the flames!"

And as the train stopped, this time we saw flames rising from a tall chimney into a black sky.

Mrs. Schächter had fallen silent on her own. Mute again, indifferent, absent, she had returned to her corner.

We stared at the flames in the darkness. A wretched stench floated in the air. Abruptly, our doors opened. Strange-looking creatures, dressed in striped jackets and black pants, jumped into the wagon. Holding flashlights and sticks, they began to strike at us left and right, shouting:

"Everybody out! Leave everything inside. Hurry up!"

We jumped out. I glanced at Mrs. Schächter. Her little boy was still holding her hand.

In front of us, those flames. In the air, the smell of burning flesh. It must have been around midnight. We had arrived. In Birkenau.

THE BELOVED OBJECTS that we had carried with us from place to place were now left behind in the wagon and, with them, finally, our illusions.

Every few yards, there stood an SS man, his machine gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the throng.

An SS came toward us wielding a club. He commanded:

"Men to the left! Women to the right!"

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight simple, short words. Yet that was the moment when I left my mother. There was no time to think, and I already felt my father's hand press against mine: we were alone. In a fraction of a second I could see my mother, my sisters, move to the right. Tzipora was holding Mother's hand. I saw them walking farther and farther away; Mother was stroking my sister's blond hair, as if to protect her. And I walked on with my father, with the men. I didn't know that this was the moment in time and the place where I was leaving my mother and Tzipora forever. I kept walking, my father holding my hand.

Behind me, an old man fell to the ground. Nearby, an SS man replaced his revolver in its holster.

My hand tightened its grip on my father. All I could think of was not to lose him. Not to remain alone.

The SS officers gave the order.

"Form ranks of fives!"

There was a tumult. It was imperative to stay together.

"Hey, kid, how old are you?"

The man interrogating me was an inmate. I could not see his face, but his voice was weary and warm.

"Fifteen."

"No. You're eighteen."

"But I'm not," I said. "I'm fifteen."

"Fool. Listen to what *I* say."

Then he asked my father, who answered:

"I'm fifty."

"No." The man now sounded angry. "Not fifty. You're forty. Do you hear? Eighteen and forty."

He disappeared into the darkness. Another inmate appeared, unleashing a stream of invectives:

"Sons of bitches, why have you come here? Tell me, why?"

Someone dared to reply:

"What do you think? That we came here of our own free will? That we asked to come here?"

The other seemed ready to kill him:

"Shut up, you moron, or I'll tear you to pieces! You should have hanged yourselves rather than come here. Didn't you know what was in store for you here in Auschwitz? You didn't know? In 1944?"

True. We didn't know. Nobody had told us. He couldn't believe his ears. His tone became even harsher:

"Over there. Do you see the chimney over there? Do you see

it? And the flames, do you see them?" (Yes, we saw the flames.) "Over there, that's where they will take you. Over there will be your grave. You still don't understand? You sons of bitches. Don't you understand anything? You will be burned! Burned to a cinder! Turned into ashes!"

His anger changed into fury. We stood stunned, petrified. Could this be just a nightmare? An unimaginable nightmare?

I heard whispers around me:

"We must do something. We can't let them kill us like that, like cattle in the slaughterhouse. We must revolt."

There were, among us, a few tough young men. They actually had knives and were urging us to attack the armed guards. One of them was muttering:

"Let the world learn about the existence of Auschwitz. Let everybody find out about it while they still have a chance to escape . . ."

But the older men begged their sons not to be foolish:

"We mustn't give up hope, even now as the sword hangs over our heads. So taught our sages . . ."

The wind of revolt died down. We continued to walk until we came to a crossroads. Standing in the middle of it was, though I didn't know it then, Dr. Mengele, the notorious Dr. Mengele. He looked like the typical SS officer: a cruel, though not unintelligent, face, complete with monocle. He was holding a conductor's baton and was surrounded by officers. The baton was moving constantly, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left.

In no time, I stood before him.

"Your age?" he asked, perhaps trying to sound paternal.

"I'm eighteen." My voice was trembling.

"In good health?"

"Yes."

"Your profession?"

mained of my strength in order to break rank and throw myself onto the barbed wire. Deep down, I was saying good-bye to my father, to the whole universe, and, against my will, I found myself whispering the words: "*Yisgadal, veyiskadash, shmey raba* . . . May His name be exalted and sanctified . . ." My heart was about to burst. There. I was face-to-face with the Angel of Death . . .

No. Two steps from the pit, we were ordered to turn left and herded into barracks.

I squeezed my father's hand. He said:

"Do you remember Mrs. Schächter, in the train?"

NEVER SHALL I FORGET that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.

Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.

Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.

Never.

THE BARRACK we had been assigned to was very long. On the roof, a few bluish skylights. I thought: This is what the antechamber of hell must look like. So many crazed men, so much shouting, so much brutality.

Dozens of inmates were there to receive us, sticks in hand, striking anywhere, anyone, without reason. The orders came:

"Strip! Hurry up! *Raus!* Hold on only to your belt and your shoes . . ."

Our clothes were to be thrown on the floor at the back of the barrack. There was a pile there already. New suits, old ones, torn overcoats, rags. For us it meant true equality: nakedness. We trembled in the cold.

A few SS officers wandered through the room, looking for strong men. If vigor was that appreciated, perhaps one should try to appear sturdy? My father thought the opposite. Better not to draw attention. (We later found out that he had been right. Those who were selected that day were incorporated into the Sonder-Kommando, the Kommando working in the crematoria. Béla Katz, the son of an important merchant of my town, had arrived in Birkenau with the first transport, one week ahead of us. When he found out that we were there, he succeeded in slipping us a note. He told us that having been chosen because of his strength, he had been forced to place his own father's body into the furnace.)

The blows continued to rain on us:

"To the barber!"

Belt and shoes in hand, I let myself be dragged along to the barbers. Their clippers tore out our hair, shaved every hair on our bodies. My head was buzzing; the same thought surfacing over and over: not to be separated from my father.

Freed from the barbers' clutches, we began to wander about the crowd, finding friends, acquaintances. Every encounter filled us with joy—yes, joy: Thank God! You are still alive!

Some were crying. They used whatever strength they had left to cry. Why had they let themselves be brought here? Why didn't they die in their beds? Their words were interspersed with sobs.

Suddenly someone threw his arms around me in a hug: Yehiel, the Sigheter rebbe's brother. He was weeping bitterly. I thought he was crying with joy at still being alive.

"Don't cry, Yehiel," I said. "Don't waste your tears . . ."

"Not cry? We're on the threshold of death. Soon, we shall be inside . . . Do you understand? Inside. How could I not cry?"

I watched darkness fade through the bluish skylights in the roof. I no longer was afraid. I was overcome by fatigue.

The absent no longer entered our thoughts. One spoke of them—who knows what happened to them?—but their fate was not on our minds. We were incapable of thinking. Our senses were numbed, everything was fading into a fog. We no longer clung to anything. The instincts of self-preservation, of self-defense, of pride, had all deserted us. In one terrifying moment of lucidity, I thought of us as damned souls wandering through the void, souls condemned to wander through space until the end of time, seeking redemption, seeking oblivion, without any hope of finding either.

AROUND FIVE O'CLOCK in the morning, we were expelled from the barrack. The Kapos were beating us again, but I no longer felt the pain. A glacial wind was enveloping us. We were naked, holding our shoes and belts. An order:

"Run!" And we ran. After a few minutes of running, a new barrack.

A barrel of foul-smelling liquid stood by the door. Disinfection. Everybody soaked in it. Then came a hot shower. All very fast. As we left the showers, we were chased outside. And ordered to run some more. Another barrack: the storeroom. Very long tables. Mountains of prison garb. As we ran, they threw the clothes at us: pants, jackets, shirts . . .

In a few seconds, we had ceased to be men. Had the situation not been so tragic, we might have laughed. We looked pretty strange! Meir Katz, a colossus, wore a child's pants, and Stern, a skinny little fellow, was floundering in a huge jacket. We immediately started to switch.

I glanced over at my father. How changed he looked! His eyes were veiled. I wanted to tell him something, but I didn't know what.

The night had passed completely. The morning star shone in the sky. I too had become a different person. The student of Talmud, the child I was, had been consumed by the flames. All that was left was a shape that resembled me. My soul had been invaded—and devoured—by a black flame.

So many events had taken place in just a few hours that I had completely lost all notion of time. When had we left our homes? And the ghetto? And the train? Only a week ago? One night? *One single night?*

How long had we been standing in the freezing wind? One hour? A single hour? Sixty minutes?

Surely it was a dream.

NOT FAR FROM US, prisoners were at work. Some were digging holes, others were carrying sand. None as much as glanced at us. We were withered trees in the heart of the desert. Behind me, people were talking. I had no desire to listen to what they were saying, or to know who was speaking and what about. Nobody dared raise his voice, even though there was no guard around. We whispered. Perhaps because of the thick smoke that poisoned the air and stung the throat.

We were herded into yet another barrack, inside the Gypsy camp. We fell into ranks of five.

"And now, stop moving!"

There was no floor. A roof and four walls. Our feet sank into the mud.

Again, the waiting. I fell asleep standing up. I dreamed of a bed, of my mother's hand on my face. I woke: I was standing, my feet in the mud. Some people collapsed, sliding into the mud. Others shouted:

"Are you crazy? We were told to stand. Do you want to get us all in trouble?"

As if all the troubles in the world were not already upon us.

Little by little, we all sat down in the mud. But we had to get up whenever a Kapo came in to check if, by chance, somebody had a new pair of shoes. If so, we had to hand them over. No use protesting; the blows multiplied and, in the end, one still had to hand them over.

I had new shoes myself. But as they were covered with a thick coat of mud, they had not been noticed. I thanked God, in an improvised prayer, for having created mud in His infinite and wondrous universe.

Suddenly, the silence became more oppressive. An SS officer had come in and, with him, the smell of the Angel of Death. We stared at his fleshy lips. He harangued us from the center of the barrack:

"You are in a concentration camp. In Auschwitz . . ."

A pause. He was observing the effect his words had produced. His face remains in my memory to this day. A tall man, in his thirties, crime written all over his forehead and his gaze. He looked at us as one would a pack of leprous dogs clinging to life.

"Remember," he went on. "Remember it always, let it be graven in your memories. You are in Auschwitz. And Auschwitz is not a convalescent home. It is a concentration camp. Here, you

must work. If you don't you will go straight to the chimney. To the crematorium. Work or crematorium—the choice is yours."

We had already lived through a lot that night. We thought that nothing could frighten us anymore. But his harsh words sent shivers through us. The word "chimney" here was not an abstraction; it floated in the air, mingled with the smoke. It was, perhaps, the only word that had a real meaning in this place. He left the barrack. The Kapos arrived, shouting:

"All specialists—locksmiths, carpenters, electricians, watchmakers—one step forward!"

The rest of us were transferred to yet another barrack, this one of stone. We had permission to sit down. A Gypsy inmate was in charge.

My father suddenly had a colic attack. He got up and asked politely, in German, "Excuse me . . . Could you tell me where the toilets are located?"

The Gypsy stared at him for a long time, from head to toe. As if he wished to ascertain that the person addressing him was actually a creature of flesh and bone, a human being with a body and a belly. Then, as if waking from a deep sleep, he slapped my father with such force that he fell down and then crawled back to his place on all fours.

I stood petrified. What had happened to me? My father had just been struck, in front of me, and I had not even blinked. I had watched and kept silent. Only yesterday, I would have dug my nails into this criminal's flesh. Had I changed that much? So fast? Remorse began to gnaw at me. All I could think was: I shall never forgive them for this. My father must have guessed my thoughts, because he whispered in my ear:

"It doesn't hurt." His cheek still bore the red mark of the hand.

"EVERYBODY outside!"

A dozen or so Gypsies had come to join our guard. The clubs and whips were cracking around me. My feet were running on their own. I tried to protect myself from the blows by hiding behind others. It was spring. The sun was shining.

"Fall in, five by five!"

The prisoners I had glimpsed that morning were working nearby. No guard in sight, only the chimney's shadow . . . Lulled by the sunshine and my dreams, I felt someone pulling at my sleeve. It was my father: "Come on, son."

We marched. Gates opened and closed. We continued to march between the barbed wire. At every step, white signs with black skulls looked down on us. The inscription: WARNING! DANGER OF DEATH. What irony. Was there here a single place where one was *not* in danger of death?

The Gypsies had stopped next to a barrack. They were replaced by SS men, who encircled us with machine guns and police dogs.

The march had lasted half an hour. Looking around me, I noticed that the barbed wire was behind us. We had left the camp.

It was a beautiful day in May. The fragrances of spring were in the air. The sun was setting.

But no sooner had we taken a few more steps than we saw the barbed wire of another camp. This one had an iron gate with the overhead inscription: ARBEIT MACHT FREI. Work makes you free.

Auschwitz.

FIRST IMPRESSION: better than Birkenau. Cement buildings with two stories rather than wooden barracks. Little gardens here and there. We were led toward one of those "blocks." Seated on the ground by the entrance, we began to wait again. From time to time somebody was allowed to go in. These were the showers, a compulsory routine. Going from one camp to the other, several times a day, we had, each time, to go through them.

After the hot shower, we stood shivering in the darkness. Our clothes had been left behind; we had been promised other clothes.

Around midnight, we were told to run.

"Faster!" yelled our guards. "The faster you run, the faster you'll get to go to sleep."

After a few minutes of racing madly, we came to a new block. The man in charge was waiting. He was a young Pole, who was smiling at us. He began to talk to us and, despite our weariness, we listened attentively.

"Comrades, you are now in the concentration camp Auschwitz. Ahead of you lies a long road paved with suffering. Don't lose hope. You have already eluded the worst danger: the selection. Therefore, muster your strength and keep your faith. We shall all see the day of liberation. Have faith in life, a thousand times faith. By driving out despair, you will move away from death. Hell does not last forever . . . And now, here is a prayer, or rather a piece of advice: let there be camaraderie among you. We are all brothers and share the same fate. The same smoke hovers over all our heads. Help each other. That is the only way to survive. And now, enough said, you are tired. Listen: you are in Block 17; I am responsible for keeping order here. Anyone with a complaint may come to see me. That is all. Go to sleep. Two people to a bunk. Good night."

Those were the first human words.

NO SOONER HAD WE CLIMBED into our bunks than we fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, the "veteran" inmates treated us without brutality. We went to wash. We were given new clothing. They brought us black coffee.

We left the block around ten o'clock so it could be cleaned. Outside, the sun warmed us. Our morale was much improved. A good night's sleep had done its work. Friends met, exchanged a few sentences. We spoke of everything without ever mentioning those who had disappeared. The prevailing opinion was that the war was about to end.

At about noon, we were brought some soup, one bowl of thick soup for each of us. I was terribly hungry, yet I refused to touch it. I was still the spoiled child of long ago. My father swallowed my ration.

We then had a short nap in the shade of the block. That SS officer in the muddy barrack must have been lying: Auschwitz was, after all, a convalescent home . . .

In the afternoon, they made us line up. Three prisoners brought a table and some medical instruments. We were told to roll up our left sleeves and file past the table. The three "veteran" prisoners, needles in hand, tattooed numbers on our left arms. I became A-7713. From then on, I had no other name.

At dusk, a roll call. The work Kommandos had returned. The orchestra played military marches near the camp entrance. Tens of thousands of inmates stood in rows while the SS checked their numbers.

After the roll call, the prisoners from all the blocks dispersed, looking for friends, relatives, or neighbors among the arrivals of the latest convoy.

DAYS WENT BY. In the mornings: black coffee. At midday: soup. By the third day, I was eagerly eating any kind of soup . . . At six o'clock in the afternoon: roll call. Followed by bread with something. At nine o'clock: bedtime.

We had already been in Auschwitz for eight days. It was after roll call. We stood waiting for the bell announcing its end. Suddenly I noticed someone passing between the rows. I heard him ask:

"Who among you is Wiesel from Sighet?"

The person looking for us was a small fellow with spectacles in a wizened face. My father answered:

"That's me. Wiesel from Sighet."

The fellow's eyes narrowed. He took a long look at my father.

"You don't know me? . . . You don't recognize me. I'm your relative, Stein. Already forgotten? Stein. Stein from Antwerp. Reizel's husband. Your wife was Reizel's aunt . . . She often wrote to us . . . and such letters!"

My father had not recognized him. He must have barely known him, always being up to his neck in communal affairs and not knowledgeable in family matters. He was always elsewhere, lost in thought. (Once, a cousin came to see us in Sighet. She had stayed at our house and eaten at our table for two weeks before my father noticed her presence for the first time.) No, he did not remember Stein. I recognized him right away. I had known Reizel, his wife, before she had left for Belgium.

He told us that he had been deported in 1942. He said, "I heard people say that a transport had arrived from your region and I came to look for you. I thought you might have some news of Reizel and my two small boys who stayed in Antwerp . . ."

I knew nothing about them . . . Since 1940, my mother had not received a single letter from them. But I lied:

"Yes, my mother did hear from them. Reizel is fine. So are the children . . ."

He was weeping with joy. He would have liked to stay longer, to learn more details, to soak up the good news, but an SS was heading in our direction and he had to go, telling us that he would come back the next day.

The bell announced that we were dismissed. We went to fetch the evening meal: bread and margarine. I was terribly hungry and swallowed my ration on the spot. My father told me, "You mustn't eat all at once. Tomorrow is another day . . ."

But seeing that his advice had come too late, and that there was nothing left of my ration, he didn't even start his own.

"Me, I'm not hungry," he said.

WE REMAINED IN AUSCHWITZ for three weeks. We had nothing to do. We slept a lot. In the afternoon and at night.

Our one goal was to avoid the transports, to stay here as long as possible. It wasn't difficult; it was enough never to sign up as a skilled worker. The unskilled were kept until the end.

At the start of the third week, our *Blockälteste* was removed; he was judged too humane. The new one was ferocious and his aides were veritable monsters. The good days were over. We began to wonder whether it wouldn't be better to let ourselves be chosen for the next transport.

Stein, our relative from Antwerp, continued to visit us and, from time to time, he would bring a half portion of bread:

"Here, this is for you, Eliezer."

Every time he came, tears would roll down his icy cheeks. He would often say to my father:

"Take care of your son. He is very weak, very dehydrated. Take care of yourselves, you must avoid selection. Eat! Anything, anytime. Eat all you can. The weak don't last very long around here . . ."

And he himself was so thin, so withered, so weak . . .

"The only thing that keeps me alive," he kept saying, "is to know that Reizel and the little ones are still alive. Were it not for them, I would give up."

One evening, he came to see us, his face radiant.

"A transport just arrived from Antwerp. I shall go to see them tomorrow. Surely they will have news . . ."

He left.

We never saw him again. He had been given the news. The *real* news.

EVENINGS, AS WE LAY on our cots, we sometimes tried to sing a few Hasidic melodies. Akiba Drumer would break our hearts with his deep, grave voice.

Some of the men spoke of God: His mysterious ways, the sins of the Jewish people, and the redemption to come. As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice.

Akiba Drumer said:

"God is testing us. He wants to see whether we are capable of overcoming our base instincts, of killing the Satan within ourselves. We have no right to despair. And if He punishes us mercilessly, it is a sign that He loves us that much more . . ."

Hersh Genud, well versed in Kabbalah, spoke of the end of the world and the coming of the Messiah.

From time to time, in the middle of all that talk, a thought crossed my mind: Where is Mother right now . . . and Tzipora . . .

"Mother is still a young woman," my father once said. "She must be in a labor camp. And Tzipora, she is a big girl now. She too must be in a camp . . ."

How we would have liked to believe that. We pretended, for what if one of us still *did* believe?

ALL THE SKILLED WORKERS had already been sent to other camps. Only about a hundred of us, simple laborers, were left.

"Today, it's your turn," announced the block secretary. "You are leaving with the next transport."

At ten o'clock, we were handed our daily ration of bread. A dozen or so SS surrounded us. At the gate, the sign proclaimed that work meant freedom. We were counted. And there we were, in the countryside, on a sunny road. In the sky, a few small white clouds.

We were walking slowly. The guards were in no hurry. We were glad of it. As we were passing through some of the villages, many Germans watched us, showing no surprise. No doubt they had seen quite a few of these processions . . .

On the way, we saw some young German girls. The guards began to tease them. The girls giggled. They allowed themselves to be kissed and tickled, bursting with laughter. They all were laughing, joking, and passing love notes to one another. At least, during all that time, we endured neither shouting nor blows.

After four hours, we arrived at the new camp: Buna. The iron gate closed behind us.

THE CAMP looked as though it had been through an epidemic: empty and dead. Only a few "well-dressed" inmates were wandering between the blocks.

Of course, we first had to pass through the showers. The head of the camp joined us there. He was a stocky man with big shoulders, the neck of a bull, thick lips, and curly hair. He gave an impression of kindness. From time to time, a smile would linger in his gray-blue eyes. Our convoy included a few ten- and twelve-year-olds. The officer took an interest in them and gave orders to bring them food.

We were given new clothing and settled in two tents. We were to wait there until we could be incorporated into work Kommandos. Then we would be assigned to a block.

In the evening, the Kommandos returned from the work yards. Roll call. We began looking for people we knew, asking the "veterans" which work Kommandos were the best and which block one should try to enter. All the inmates agreed:

"Buna is a very good camp. One can hold one's own here. The

most important thing is not to be assigned to the construction Kommando . . ."

As if we had a choice . . .

Our tent leader was a German. An assassin's face, fleshy lips, hands resembling a wolf's paws. The camp's food had agreed with him; he could hardly move, he was so fat. Like the head of the camp, he liked children. Immediately after our arrival, he had bread brought for them, some soup and margarine. (In fact, this affection was not entirely altruistic; there existed here a veritable traffic of children among homosexuals, I learned later.) He told us:

"You will stay with me for three days in quarantine. Afterward, you will go to work. Tomorrow: medical checkup."

One of his aides—a tough-looking boy with shifty eyes—came over to me:

"Would you like to get into a good Kommando?"

"Of course. But on one condition: I want to stay with my father."

"All right," he said. "I can arrange it. For a pittance: your shoes. I'll give you another pair."

I refused to give him my shoes. They were all I had left.

"I'll also give you a ration of bread with some margarine . . ."

He liked my shoes; I would not let him have them. Later, they were taken from me anyway. In exchange for nothing, that time.

The medical checkup took place outside, early in the morning, before three doctors seated on a bench.

The first hardly examined me. He just asked:

"Are you in good health?"

Who would have dared to admit the opposite?

On the other hand, the dentist seemed more conscientious: he asked me to open my mouth wide. In fact, he was not looking for

decay but for gold teeth. Those who had gold in their mouths were listed by their number. I did have a gold crown.

The first three days went by quickly. On the fourth day, as we stood in front of our tent, the Kapos appeared. Each one began to choose the men he liked:

"You . . . you . . . you . . ." They pointed their fingers, the way one might choose cattle, or merchandise.

We followed our Kapo, a young man. He made us halt at the door of the first block, near the entrance to the camp. This was the orchestra's block. He motioned us inside. We were surprised; what had we to do with music?

The orchestra was playing a military march, always the same. Dozens of Kommandos were marching off, in step, to the work yards. The Kapos were beating the time:

"Left, right, left, right."

SS officers, pen in hand, recorded the number of men leaving. The orchestra continued to play the same march until the last Kommando had passed. Then the conductor's baton stopped moving and the orchestra fell silent. The Kapo yelled:

"Fall in!"

We fell into ranks of five, with the musicians. We left the camp without music but in step. We still had the march in our ears.

"Left, right, left, right!"

We struck up conversations with our neighbors, the musicians. Almost all of them were Jews. Juliek, a Pole with eyeglasses and a cynical smile in a pale face. Louis, a native of Holland, a well-known violinist. He complained that they would not let him play Beethoven; Jews were not allowed to play German music. Hans, the young man from Berlin, was full of wit. The foreman was a Pole: Franek, a former student in Warsaw.

Juliek explained to me, "We work in a warehouse of electrical materials, not far from here. The work is neither difficult nor dan-

gerous. Only Idek, the Kapo, occasionally has fits of madness, and then you'd better stay out of his way."

"You are lucky, little fellow," said Hans, smiling. "You fell into a good Kommando . . ."

Ten minutes later, we stood in front of the warehouse. A German employee, a civilian, the *Meister*, came to meet us. He paid as much attention to us as would a shopkeeper receiving a delivery of old rags.

Our comrades were right. The work was not difficult. Sitting on the ground, we counted bolts, bulbs, and various small electrical parts. The Kapo launched into a lengthy explanation of the importance of this work, warning us that anyone who proved to be lazy would be held accountable. My new comrades reassured me:

"Don't worry. He has to say this because of the *Meister*."

There were many Polish civilians here and a few Frenchwomen as well. The women silently greeted the musicians with their eyes.

Franek, the foreman, assigned me to a corner:

"Don't kill yourself. There's no hurry. But watch out. Don't let an SS catch you."

"Please, sir . . . I'd like to be near my father."

"All right. Your father will work here, next to you."

We were lucky.

Two boys came to join our group: Yossi and Tibi, two brothers from Czechoslovakia whose parents had been exterminated in Birkenau. They lived for each other, body and soul.

They quickly became my friends. Having once belonged to a Zionist youth organization, they knew countless Hebrew songs. And so we would sometimes hum melodies evoking the gentle waters of the Jordan River and the majestic sanctity of Jerusalem. We also spoke often about Palestine. Their parents, like mine, had not had the courage to sell everything and emigrate while

there was still time. We decided that if we were allowed to live until the Liberation, we would not stay another day in Europe. We would board the first ship to Haifa.

Still lost in his Kabbalistic dreams, Akiba Drumer had discovered a verse from the Bible which, translated into numbers, made it possible for him to predict Redemption in the weeks to come.

WE HAD LEFT THE TENTS for the musicians' block. We now were entitled to a blanket, a washbowl, and a bar of soap. The *Blockälteste* was a German Jew.

It was good to have a Jew as your leader. His name was Alphonse. A young man with a startlingly wizened face. He was totally devoted to defending "his" block. Whenever he could, he would "organize" a cauldron of soup for the young, for the weak, for all those who dreamed more of an extra portion of food than of liberty.

ONE DAY, when we had just returned from the warehouse, I was summoned by the block secretary:

"A-7713?"

"That's me."

"After your meal, you'll go to see the dentist."

"But . . . I don't have a toothache . . ."

"After your meal. Without fail."

I went to the infirmary block. Some twenty prisoners were waiting in line at the entrance. It didn't take long to learn the reason for our summons: our gold teeth were to be extracted.

The dentist, a Jew from Czechoslovakia, had a face not unlike a death mask. When he opened his mouth, one had a ghastly vision of yellow, rotten teeth. Seated in the chair, I asked meekly:

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"I shall remove your gold crown, that's all," he said, clearly indifferent.

I thought of pretending to be sick:

"Couldn't you wait a few days, sir? I don't feel well, I have a fever . . ."

He wrinkled his brow, thought for a moment, and took my pulse.

"All right, son. Come back to see me when you feel better. But don't wait for me to call you!"

I went back to see him a week later. With the same excuse: I still was not feeling better. He did not seem surprised, and I don't know whether he believed me. Yet he most likely was pleased that I had come back on my own, as I had promised. He granted me a further delay.

A few days after my visit, the dentist's office was shut down. He had been thrown into prison and was about to be hanged. It appeared that he had been dealing in the prisoners' gold teeth for his own benefit. I felt no pity for him. In fact, I was pleased with what was happening to him: my gold crown was safe. It could be useful to me one day, to buy something, some bread or even time to live. At that moment in time, all that mattered to me was my daily bowl of soup, my crust of stale bread. The bread, the soup—those were my entire life. I was nothing but a body. Perhaps even less: a famished stomach. The stomach alone was measuring time.

IN THE WAREHOUSE, I often worked next to a young Frenchwoman. We did not speak: she did not know German and I did not understand French.

I thought she looked Jewish, though she passed for "Aryan." She was a forced labor inmate.

One day when Idek was venting his fury, I happened to cross his path. He threw himself on me like a wild beast, beating me in the chest, on my head, throwing me to the ground and picking me up again, crushing me with ever more violent blows, until I was covered in blood. As I bit my lips in order not to howl with pain, he must have mistaken my silence for defiance and so he continued to hit me harder and harder.

Abruptly, he calmed down and sent me back to work as if nothing had happened. As if we had taken part in a game in which both roles were of equal importance.

I dragged myself to my corner. I was aching all over. I felt a cool hand wiping the blood from my forehead. It was the French girl. She was smiling her mournful smile as she slipped me a crust of bread. She looked straight into my eyes. I knew she wanted to talk to me but that she was paralyzed with fear. She remained like that for some time, and then her face lit up and she said, in almost perfect German:

"Bite your lips, little brother . . . Don't cry. Keep your anger, your hate, for another day, for later. The day will come but not now . . . Wait. Clench your teeth and wait . . ."

MANY YEARS LATER, in Paris, I sat in the Métro, reading my newspaper. Across the aisle, a beautiful woman with dark hair and dreamy eyes. I had seen those eyes before.

"Madame, don't you recognize me?"

"I don't know you, sir."

"In 1944, you were in Poland, in Buna, weren't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"You worked in a depot, a warehouse for electrical parts . . ."

"Yes," she said, looking troubled. And then, after a moment of silence: "Wait . . . I do remember . . ."

"Idek, the Kapo . . . the young Jewish boy . . . your sweet words . . ."

We left the Métro together and sat down at a café terrace. We spent the whole evening reminiscing. Before parting, I said, "May I ask one more question?"

"I know what it is: Am I Jewish . . . ? Yes, I am. From an observant family. During the Occupation, I had false papers and passed as Aryan. And that was how I was assigned to a forced labor unit. When they deported me to Germany, I eluded being sent to a concentration camp. At the depot, nobody knew that I spoke German; it would have aroused suspicion. It was imprudent of me to say those few words to you, but I knew that you would not betray me . . ."

ANOTHER TIME we were loading diesel motors onto freight cars under the supervision of some German soldiers. Idek was on edge, he had trouble restraining himself. Suddenly, he exploded. The victim this time was my father.

"You old loafer!" he started yelling. "Is this what you call working?"

And he began beating him with an iron bar. At first, my father simply doubled over under the blows, but then he seemed to break in two like an old tree struck by lightning.

I had watched it all happening without moving. I kept silent. In fact, I thought of stealing away in order not to suffer the blows. What's more, if I felt anger at that moment, it was not directed at the Kapo but at my father. Why couldn't he have avoided Idek's wrath? That was what life in a concentration camp had made of me . . .

Franek, the foreman, one day noticed the gold crown in my mouth:

"Let me have your crown, kid."

I answered that I could not because without that crown I could no longer eat.

"For what they give you to eat, kid . . ."

I found another answer: my crown had been listed in the register during the medical checkup; this could mean trouble for us both.

"If you don't give me your crown, it will cost you much more!"

All of a sudden, this pleasant and intelligent young man had changed. His eyes were shining with greed. I told him that I needed to get my father's advice.

"Go ahead, kid, ask. But I want the answer by tomorrow."

When I mentioned it to my father, he hesitated. After a long silence, he said:

"No, my son. We cannot do this."

"He will seek revenge!"

"He won't dare, my son."

Unfortunately, Franek knew how to handle this; he knew my weak spot. My father had never served in the military and could not march in step. But here, whenever we moved from one place to another, it was in step. That presented Franek with the opportunity to torment him and, on a daily basis, to thrash him savagely. Left, right: he punched him. Left, right: he slapped him.

I decided to give my father lessons in marching in step, in keeping time. We began practicing in front of our block. I would command: "Left, right!" and my father would try.

The inmates made fun of us: "Look at the little officer, teaching the old man to march . . . Hey, little general, how many rations of bread does the old man give you for this?"

But my father did not make sufficient progress, and the blows continued to rain on him.

"So! You still don't know how to march in step, you old good-for-nothing?"

This went on for two weeks. It was untenable. We had to give in. That day, Franek burst into savage laughter:

"I knew it, I knew that I would win, kid. Better late than never. And because you made me wait, it will also cost you a ration of bread. A ration of bread for one of my pals, a famous dentist from Warsaw. To pay him for pulling out your crown."

"What? My ration of bread so that you can have *my* crown?"

Franek smiled.

"What would you like? That I break your teeth by smashing your face?"

That evening, in the latrines, the dentist from Warsaw pulled my crown with the help of a rusty spoon.

Franek became pleasant again. From time to time, he even gave me extra soup. But it didn't last long. Two weeks later, all the Poles were transferred to another camp. I had lost my crown for nothing.

A FEW DAYS BEFORE the Poles left, I had a novel experience.

It was on a Sunday morning. Our Kommando was not required to work that day. Only Idek would not hear of staying in the camp. We had to go to the depot. This sudden enthusiasm for work astonished us. At the depot, Idek entrusted us to Franek, saying, "Do what you like. But do something. Or else, you'll hear from me . . ."

And he disappeared.

We didn't know what to do. Tired of huddling on the ground, we each took turns strolling through the warehouse, in the hope of finding something, a piece of bread, perhaps, that a civilian might have forgotten there.

When I reached the back of the building, I heard sounds coming from a small adjoining room. I moved closer and had a

glimpse of Idek and a young Polish girl, half naked, on a straw mat. Now I understood why Idek refused to leave us in the camp. He moved one hundred prisoners so that he could copulate with this girl! It struck me as terribly funny and I burst out laughing.

Idek jumped, turned and saw me, while the girl tried to cover her breasts. I wanted to run away, but my feet were nailed to the floor. Idek grabbed me by the throat.

Hissing at me, he threatened:

"Just you wait, kid . . . You will see what it costs to leave your work . . . You'll pay for this later . . . And now go back to your place . . ."

A HALF HOUR BEFORE the usual time to stop work, the Kapo assembled the entire Kommando. Roll call. Nobody understood what was going on. A roll call at this hour? Here? Only I knew. The Kapo made a short speech:

"An ordinary inmate does not have the right to mix into other people's affairs. One of you does not seem to have understood this point. I shall therefore try to make him understand clearly, once and for all."

I felt the sweat running down my back.

"A-7713!"

I stepped forward.

"A crate!" he ordered.

They brought a crate.

"Lie down on it! On your belly!"

I obeyed.

I no longer felt anything except the lashes of the whip.

"One! . . . Two! . . ." he was counting.

He took his time between lashes. Only the first really hurt. I heard him count:

"Ten . . . eleven! . . ."

His voice was calm and reached me as through a thick wall.

"Twenty-three . . ."

Two more, I thought, half unconscious.

The Kapo was waiting.

"Twenty-four . . . twenty-five!"

It was over. I had not realized it, but I had fainted. I came to when they doused me with cold water. I was still lying on the crate. In a blur, I could see the wet ground next to me. Then I heard someone yell. It had to be the Kapo. I began to distinguish what he was shouting:

"Stand up!"

I must have made some movement to get up, but I felt myself fall back on the crate. How I wanted to get up!

"Stand up!" He was yelling even more loudly.

If only I could answer him, if only I could tell him that I could not move. But my mouth would not open.

At Idek's command, two inmates lifted me and led me to him.

"Look me in the eye!"

I looked at him without seeing him. I was thinking of my father. He would be suffering more than I.

"Listen to me, you son of a swine!" said Idek coldly. "So much for your curiosity. You shall receive five times more if you dare tell anyone what you saw! Understood?"

I nodded, once, ten times, endlessly. As if my head had decided to say yes for all eternity.

ONE SUNDAY, as half of our group, including my father, was at work, the others, including me, took the opportunity to stay and rest.

At around ten o'clock, the sirens started to go off. Alert. The

Blockälteste gathered us inside the blocks, while the SS took refuge in the shelters. As it was relatively easy to escape during an alert—the guards left the watchtowers and the electric current in the barbed wire was cut—the standing order to the SS was to shoot anyone found outside his block.

In no time, the camp had the look of an abandoned ship. No living soul in the alleys. Next to the kitchen, two cauldrons of hot, steaming soup had been left untended. Two cauldrons of soup! Smack in the middle of the road, two cauldrons of soup with no one to guard them! A royal feast going to waste! Supreme temptation! Hundreds of eyes were looking at them, shining with desire. Two lambs with hundreds of wolves lying in wait for them. Two lambs without a shepherd, free for the taking. But who would dare?

Fear was greater than hunger. Suddenly, we saw the door of Block 37 open slightly. A man appeared, crawling snakelike in the direction of the cauldrons.

Hundreds of eyes were watching his every move. Hundreds of men were crawling with him, scraping their bodies with his on the stones. All hearts trembled, but mostly with envy. He was the one who had dared.

He reached the first cauldron. Hearts were pounding harder: he had succeeded. Jealousy devoured us, consumed us. We never thought to admire him. Poor hero committing suicide for a ration or two or more of soup . . . In our minds, he was already dead.

Lying on the ground near the cauldron, he was trying to lift himself to the cauldron's rim. Either out of weakness or out of fear, he remained there, undoubtedly to muster his strength. At last he succeeded in pulling himself up to the rim. For a second, he seemed to be looking at himself in the soup, looking for his ghostly reflection there. Then, for no apparent reason, he let out a terrible scream, a death rattle such as I had never heard before

and, with open mouth, thrust his head toward the still steaming liquid. We jumped at the sound of the shot. Falling to the ground, his face stained by the soup, the man writhed a few seconds at the base of the cauldron, and then he was still.

That was when we began to hear the planes. Almost at the same moment, the barrack began to shake.

"They're bombing the Buna factory," someone shouted.

I anxiously thought of my father, who was at work. But I was glad nevertheless. To watch that factory go up in flames—what revenge! While we had heard some talk of German military defeats on the various fronts, we were not sure if they were credible. But today, this was real!

We were not afraid. And yet, if a bomb had fallen on the blocks, it would have claimed hundreds of inmates' lives. But we no longer feared death, in any event not this particular death. Every bomb that hit filled us with joy, gave us renewed confidence.

The raid lasted more than one hour. If only it could have gone on for ten times ten hours . . . Then, once more, there was silence. The last sound of the American plane dissipated in the wind and there we were, in our cemetery. On the horizon we saw a long trail of black smoke. The sirens began to wail again. The end of the alert.

Everyone came out of the blocks. We breathed in air filled with fire and smoke, and our eyes shone with hope. A bomb had landed in the middle of the camp, near the *Appelplatz*, the assembly point, but had not exploded. We had to dispose of it outside the camp.

The head of the camp, the *Lagerälteste*, accompanied by his aide and by the chief Kapo, were on an inspection tour of the camp. The raid had left traces of great fear on his face.

In the very center of the camp lay the body of the man with

soup stains on his face, the only victim. The cauldrons were carried back to the kitchen.

The SS were back at their posts in the watchtowers, behind their machine guns. Intermission was over.

An hour later, we saw the Kommandos returning, in step as always. Happily, I caught sight of my father.

"Several buildings were flattened," he said, "but the depot was not touched . . ."

In the afternoon, we cheerfully went to clear the ruins.

ONE WEEK LATER, as we returned from work, there, in the middle of the camp, in the *Appelplatz*, stood a black gallows.

We learned that soup would be distributed only after roll call, which lasted longer than usual. The orders were given more harshly than on other days, and there were strange vibrations in the air.

"Caps off!" the *Lagerälteste* suddenly shouted.

Ten thousand caps came off at once.

"Cover your heads!"

Ten thousand caps were back on our heads, at lightning speed.

The camp gate opened. An SS unit appeared and encircled us: one SS every three paces. The machine guns on the watchtowers were pointed toward the *Appelplatz*.

"They're expecting trouble," whispered Juliek.

Two SS were headed toward the solitary confinement cell. They came back, the condemned man between them. He was a young boy from Warsaw. An inmate with three years in concentration camps behind him. He was tall and strong, a giant compared to me.

His back was to the gallows, his face turned toward his judge, the head of the camp. He was pale but seemed more solemn than

frightened. His manacled hands did not tremble. His eyes were coolly assessing the hundreds of SS guards, the thousands of prisoners surrounding him.

The *Lagerälteste* began to read the verdict, emphasizing every word:

"In the name of Reichsführer Himmler . . . prisoner number . . . stole during the air raid . . . according to the law . . . prisoner number . . . is condemned to death. Let this be a warning and an example to all prisoners."

Nobody moved.

I heard the pounding of my heart. The thousands of people who died daily in Auschwitz and Birkenau, in the crematoria, no longer troubled me. But this boy, leaning against his gallows, upset me deeply.

"This ceremony, will it be over soon? I'm hungry . . ." whispered Juliek.

At a sign of the *Lagerälteste*, the *Lagerkapo* stepped up to the condemned youth. He was assisted by two prisoners. In exchange for two bowls of soup.

The Kapo wanted to blindfold the youth, but he refused.

After what seemed like a long moment, the hangman put the rope around his neck. He was about to signal his aides to pull the chair from under the young man's feet when the latter shouted, in a strong and calm voice:

"Long live liberty! My curse on Germany! My curse! My—"

The executioner had completed his work.

Like a sword, the order cut through the air:

"Caps off!"

Ten thousand prisoners paid their respects.

"Cover your heads!"

Then the entire camp, block after block, filed past the hanged

boy and stared at his extinguished eyes, the tongue hanging from his gaping mouth. The Kapos forced everyone to look him squarely in the face.

Afterward, we were given permission to go back to our block and have our meal.

I remember that on that evening, the soup tasted better than ever . . .

I WATCHED other hangings. I never saw a single victim weep. These withered bodies had long forgotten the bitter taste of tears.

Except once. The *Oberkapo* of the Fifty-second Cable Kommando was a Dutchman: a giant of a man, well over six feet. He had some seven hundred prisoners under his command, and they all loved him like a brother. Nobody had ever endured a blow or even an insult from him.

In his "service" was a young boy, a *pipel*, as they were called. This one had a delicate and beautiful face—an incredible sight in this camp.

(In Buna, the *pipel* were hated; they often displayed greater cruelty than their elders. I once saw one of them, a boy of thirteen, beat his father for not making his bed properly. As the old man quietly wept, the boy was yelling: "If you don't stop crying instantly, I will no longer bring you bread. Understood?" But the Dutchman's little servant was beloved by all. His was the face of an angel in distress.)

One day the power failed at the central electric plant in Buna. The Gestapo, summoned to inspect the damage, concluded that it was sabotage. They found a trail. It led to the block of the Dutch *Oberkapo*. And after a search, they found a significant quantity of weapons.

The *Oberkapo* was arrested on the spot. He was tortured for weeks on end, in vain. He gave no names. He was transferred to Auschwitz. And never heard from again.

But his young *pipel* remained behind, in solitary confinement. He too was tortured, but he too remained silent. The SS then condemned him to death, him and two other inmates who had been found to possess arms.

One day, as we returned from work, we saw three gallows, three black ravens, erected on the *Appelplatz*. Roll call. The SS surrounding us, machine guns aimed at us: the usual ritual. Three prisoners in chains—and, among them, the little *pipel*, the sad-eyed angel.

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more worried, than usual. To hang a child in front of thousands of onlookers was not a small matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was pale, almost calm, but he was biting his lips as he stood in the shadow of the gallows.

This time, the *Lagerkapo* refused to act as executioner. Three SS took his place.

The three condemned prisoners together stepped onto the chairs. In unison, the nooses were placed around their necks.

"Long live liberty!" shouted the two men.

But the boy was silent.

"Where is merciful God, where is He?" someone behind me was asking.

At the signal, the three chairs were tipped over.

Total silence in the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.

"Caps off!" screamed the *Lagerälteste*. His voice quivered. As for the rest of us, we were weeping.

"Cover your heads!"

Then came the march past the victims. The two men were no longer alive. Their tongues were hanging out, swollen and bluish.

But the third rope was still moving: the child, too light, was still breathing . . .

And so he remained for more than half an hour, lingering between life and death, writhing before our eyes. And we were forced to look at him at close range. He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

"For God's sake, where is God?"

And from within me, I heard a voice answer:

"Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows . . ."

That night, the soup tasted of corpses.