

## **Halina Birenbaum**

### **They do not let us die**

today  
requests applications letters  
searching waiting  
for understanding  
for the memory of remains  
ferreted out miraculously  
scraps of reality  
bygone  
supposedly unnecessary  
I never let them  
die

### **Auschwitz, 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation 27.1.2015**

Auschwitz is a place that used to be unknown, that my father used to scare us with in the Warsaw ghetto, that we would all be sent there – because my brother used to copy articles for the underground newspaper. I was eleven years old at the time and two years later, for me and hundreds of thousands of other Jews and people of different nationalities, this place became the only reality, a bottomless pit of hell that it was impossible to get out of.

All around us, electric barbed wire, rows of grim barracks, stinking mud with some figures desperately miring through it, you cannot tell if they are women or men, if they are old or young. This disgusting mass of people in lousy wet rags with numbers, shaven heads, bulging eyes in grey bony faces, with legs like sticks, wearing huge muddy clogs. Nothing reminding you of anything remotely human, known and familiar. The abyss of fall and unimaginable torment. Hunger, wounds, ulcers, dysentery, diseases which here mean an immediate and merciless death sentence in the gas chamber. Verbal and physical abuse, sophisticated torture and death penalty everywhere, for anything and everything.

You are here in order not to be anywhere in this world soon, to die trampled in this mud, covered with excrements and blood from beating. All this with nature's approval used by the oppressors, in rain, snow, gusty winds and freeze. Labor beyond one's strength and German songs that the columns of the almost dead had to sing, marching rhythmically to labor, from which not everybody would come back alive. And also, like a mockery, the

accompaniment of a German band when leaving for labor and when coming back.

On our way, close contact with columns marching to gas chambers passing nearby. Sometimes they would ask us: “How far is it to a Jewish colony?” because I need to feed my children... Column of fire reaching the sky, thick black smoke from the Nazi “colony” for Jews and piles of clothes of the murdered, sent to the Reich after disinfection. During Christmas, on one side of the camp there was a tall, colorful Christmas tree and opposite, on the other side of the camp – there was fire, fire of gassed human bodies burnt, and trains on the ramp, trains and trains... with more victims, their luggage!...

I was there, so very much there! I was trapped there for two years, the alien to myself in the sudden transformation of hell, an illegal in Auschwitz – a Jewish child that is to go to gas immediately!

Countless times, I was dying, freezing with fear, pain, stress of selection, watching the torment and agony of my fellow female prisoners, my neighbors from overcrowded bunks, who shared the same fate in this indescribable, endless horror, where every minute was a century and an imploring question: will there be another one? Once during a long standing roll call, when the sun was shining and they were not beating us, a pathetic thought flashed across my mind, that they will finally burn me in this fire from the crematorium behind the wires and I will never experience the kiss of love like those that I had been reading about in books in the ghetto in Warsaw before the Auschwitz era... At the age of fourteen, one has those important, supposedly deathbed, ideas and worries.

I survived. I lived to see the demolishing of gas chambers and the effacing of traces of crime by the rulers of this hell. Every morning, before Kommandos left for work, we had to remove the logs from under the crematorium. Now, the Nazis were starting fires, not to burn people any more, but to burn documents before they would lead columns of male and female prisoners for the Death March. I remember that my arm was incapacitated at the time because I was shot by an SS guard from the tower on New Year's Day 1945. The guard aimed at my heart but he missed and “only” my nerve was damaged, incapacitating my arm...

I was liberated by the Russians on May 3, 1945 in Neustadt-Glewe, in the last of two camps in Germany. I lived to see the defeat of those executioners. It was something my mother dreamed of out loud before I was taken away from her and she was burnt at Majdanek.

It is all fresh in my memory and when I am telling you this, I am living those facts again, all that inhuman and superhuman that you breathed in Auschwitz every single day and night for long months and years. The people who were tortured here, mostly Jews, but not only, not even their names remained. All that remained are ashes scattered by the wind as if they had never existed! For me, this is the greatest debt of passing on this memory about their torment, the desire to live, hopeless struggle to survive in their last-ditch effort, only to tell the world about this!

This overwhelming daily terror that I was stuck in and growing up to death, at the age of 10 and 15, it still transports me back to all those places and names together with the pain and longing for loved ones murdered there. I must admit that even if I could, I would rather not forget all that. In my memories only can I be with my loved ones and feel their absent presence next to me. Because even their photos were burnt. Through these images of the Holocaust, etched deep in my mind forever, I can deeply understand the current reality and I can tell right from wrong, unjust, dangerous. Be instinctively vigilant, immediately recognize the evil lurking nearby, warn.

These memories do not allow me to accept the thought that people in the world do not know, are not able to understand – as I still hear it with genuine pain from many of them – what Auschwitz was, what life is for the human being, his own life and the life of his loved ones, the life of his nation, threatened by violence and taken away by all possible means for the sake of cruel theories, hate for the different, lust for power over the others and seizing their belongings. The escape from these memories, reluctance towards them, the fear of reminding, blatant denial of the Holocaust, all that terrifies me, I feel outraged because I know what kind of hell all that can turn into and develop if nobody objects.

The evil of Auschwitz, unacknowledged, unfathomable, flickers peacefully and is reborn in the growing terror, antisemitism, racism, up to the public, unpunished beheading of people in front of the eyes of the whole world just because they are different. I answer myself – often stupefied because of what is now happening around us – that if Auschwitz could have come into being

and functioned legally and unpunishedly for years, then the worst is possible. And one cannot be surprised with anything, but one must recognize early enough, explicitly oppose and hedge up the way to further tragedies, lawlessness and crimes.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum has a great contribution to this crucial issue of understanding and warning – its management, numerous dedicated employees, who during all these years of extremely difficult, strenuous work protect testimonies, documents, remains of documents, record the memories of the victims, eyewitnesses, pass on to millions of visitors from all around the world the knowledge about the people and the life in long-term extreme situations on the verge of death: about human strength of will, the power of friendship, hope and perseverance in the hardest living conditions.

I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart to the management of the Museum and to all of You who are gathered here today for this great privilege of participating in the commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. This day is so important for me personally, as I am just an average inmate, former prisoner of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp number 48693 with a death penalty for my Jewish origins and my young age.

I would like to thank for this sense of momentous significance and the greatest human heart-touching emotion in this place, which used to be so horrifying.