

**P**RESSED TIGHTLY AGAINST one another, in an effort to resist the cold, our heads empty and heavy, our brains a whirlwind of decaying memories. Our minds numb with indifference. Here or elsewhere, what did it matter? Die today or tomorrow, or later? The night was growing longer, never-ending.

When at last a grayish light appeared on the horizon, it revealed a tangle of human shapes, heads sunk deeply between the shoulders, crouching, piled one on top of the other, like a cemetery covered with snow. In the early dawn light, I tried to distinguish between the living and those who were no more. But there was barely a difference. My gaze remained fixed on someone who, eyes wide open, stared into space. His colorless face was covered with a layer of frost and snow.

My father had huddled near me, draped in his blanket, shoulders laden with snow. And what if he were dead, as well? I called out to him. No response. I would have screamed if I could have. He was not moving.

Suddenly, the evidence overwhelmed me: there was no longer any reason to live, any reason to fight.

The train stopped in an empty field. The abrupt halt had wakened a few sleepers. They stood, looking around, startled.

Outside, the SS walked by, shouting:

"Throw out all the dead! Outside, all the corpses!"

The living were glad. They would have more room. Volunteers began the task. They touched those who had remained on the ground.

"Here's one! Take him!"

The volunteers undressed him and eagerly shared his garments. Then, two "gravediggers" grabbed him by the head and feet and threw him from the wagon, like a sack of flour.

There was shouting all around:

"Come on! Here's another! My neighbor. He's not moving..."

I woke from my apathy only when two men approached my father. I threw myself on his body. He was cold. I slapped him. I rubbed his hands, crying:

"Father! Father! Wake up. They're going to throw you outside..."

His body remained inert.

The two "gravediggers" had grabbed me by the neck:

"Leave him alone. Can't you see that he's dead?"

"No!" I yelled. "He's not dead! Not yet!"

And I started to hit him harder and harder. At last, my father half opened his eyes. They were glassy. He was breathing faintly.

"You see," I cried.

The two men went away.

Twenty corpses were thrown from our wagon. Then the train resumed its journey, leaving in its wake, in a snowy field in Poland, hundreds of naked orphans without a tomb.

WE RECEIVED no food. We lived on snow; it took the place of bread. The days resembled the nights, and the nights left in our souls the dregs of their darkness. The train rolled slowly, often halted for a few hours, and continued. It never stopped snowing. We remained lying on the floor for days and nights, one on top of the other, never uttering a word. We were nothing but frozen bodies. Our eyes closed, we merely waited for the next stop, to unload our dead.

THERE FOLLOWED days and nights of traveling. Occasionally, we would pass through German towns. Usually, very early in the morning. German laborers were going to work. They would stop and look at us without surprise.

One day when we had come to a stop, a worker took a piece of bread out of his bag and threw it into a wagon. There was a stampede. Dozens of starving men fought desperately over a few crumbs. The worker watched the spectacle with great interest.

YEARS LATER, I witnessed a similar spectacle in Aden. Our ship's passengers amused themselves by throwing coins to the "natives," who dove to retrieve them. An elegant Parisian lady took great pleasure in this game. When I noticed two children desperately fighting in the water, one trying to strangle the other, I implored the lady:

"Please, don't throw any more coins!"

"Why not?" said she. "I like to give charity..."

IN THE WAGON where the bread had landed, a battle had ensued. Men were hurling themselves against each other, trampling, tearing at and mauling each other. Beasts of prey unleashed, animal hate in their eyes. An extraordinary vitality possessed them, sharpening their teeth and nails.

A crowd of workmen and curious passersby had formed all along the train. They had undoubtedly never seen a train with this kind of cargo. Soon, pieces of bread were falling into the wagons from all sides. And the spectators observed these emaciated creatures ready to kill for a crust of bread.

A piece fell into our wagon. I decided not to move. Anyway, I knew that I would not be strong enough to fight off dozens of violent men! I saw, not far from me, an old man dragging himself on all fours. He had just detached himself from the struggling mob. He was holding one hand to his heart. At first I thought he had received a blow to his chest. Then I understood: he was hiding a piece of bread under his shirt. With lightning speed he pulled it out and put it to his mouth. His eyes lit up, a smile, like a grimace, illuminated his ashen face. And was immediately extinguished. A shadow had lain down beside him. And this shadow threw itself over him. Stunned by the blows, the old man was crying:

"Meir, my little Meir! Don't you recognize me... You're killing your father... I have bread... for you too... for you too..."

He collapsed. But his fist was still clutching a small crust. He wanted to raise it to his mouth. But the other threw himself on him. The old man mumbled something, groaned, and died. Nobody cared. His son searched him, took the crust of bread, and began to devour it. He didn't get far. Two men had been watching

him. They jumped him. Others joined in. When they withdrew, there were two dead bodies next to me, the father and the son.

I was sixteen.

IN OUR WAGON, there was a friend of my father's, Meir Katz. He had worked as a gardener in Buna and from time to time had brought us some green vegetables. Less undernourished than the rest of us, detention had been easier on him. Because he was stronger than most of us, he had been put in charge of our wagon.

On the third night of our journey, I woke up with a start when I felt two hands on my throat, trying to strangle me. I barely had time to call out:

"Father!"

Just that one word. I was suffocating. But my father had awakened and grabbed my aggressor. Too weak to overwhelm him, he thought of calling Meir Katz:

"Come, come quickly! Someone is strangling my son!"

In a few moments, I was freed. I never did find out why this stranger had wanted to strangle me.

But days later, Meir Katz told my father:

"Shlomo, I am getting weak. My strength is gone. I won't make it ... "

"Don't give in!" my father tried to encourage him. "You must resist! Don't lose faith in yourself!"

But Meir Katz only groaned in response:

"I can't go on, Shlomo! ... I can't help it ... I can't go on ... "

My father took his arm. And Meir Katz, the strong one, the sturdiest of us all, began to cry. His son had been taken from him during the first selection but only now was he crying for him. Only now did he fall apart. He could not go on. He had reached the end.

On the last day of our journey, a terrible wind began to blow. And the snow kept falling. We sensed that the end was near; the real end. We could not hold out long in this glacial wind, this storm.

Somebody got up and yelled:

"We must not remain sitting. We shall freeze to death! Let's get up and move... "

We all got up. We all pulled our soaked blankets tighter around our shoulders. And we tried to take a few steps, to shuffle back and forth, in place.

Suddenly, a cry rose in the wagon, the cry of a wounded animal. Someone had just died.

Others, close to death, imitated his cry. And their cries seemed to come from beyond the grave. Soon everybody was crying. Groaning. Moaning. Cries of distress hurled into the wind and the snow.

The lament spread from wagon to wagon. It was contagious. And now hundreds of cries rose at once. The death rattle of an entire convoy with the end approaching. All boundaries had been crossed. Nobody had any strength left. And the night seemed endless.

Meir Katz was moaning:

"Why don't they just shoot us now?"

That same night, we reached our destination.

It was late. The guards came to unload us. The dead were left in the wagons. Only those who could stand could leave.

Meir Katz remained on the train. The last day had been the most lethal. We had been a hundred or so in this wagon. Twelve of us left it. Among them, my father and myself.

We had arrived in Buchenwald.

**A**T THE ENTRANCE TO THE CAMP, SS officers were waiting for us. We were counted. Then we were directed to the *Appelplatz*. The orders were given over the loudspeakers: "Form ranks of fives! Groups of one hundred! Five steps forward!"

I tightened my grip on my father's hand. The old, familiar fear: not to lose him.

Very close to us stood the tall chimney of the crematorium's furnace. It no longer impressed us. It barely drew our attention.

A veteran of Buchenwald told us that we would be taking a shower and afterward be sent to different blocks. The idea of a hot shower fascinated me. My father didn't say a word. He was breathing heavily beside me.

"Father," I said, "just another moment. Soon, we'll be able to lie down. You'll be able to rest..."

He didn't answer. I myself was so weary that his silence left me indifferent. My only wish was to take the shower as soon as possible and lie down on a cot.

Only it wasn't easy to reach the showers. Hundreds of prison-

ers crowded the area. The guards seemed unable to restore order. They were lashing out, left and right, to no avail. Some prisoners who didn't have the strength to jostle, or even to stand, sat down in the snow. My father wanted to do the same. He was moaning:

"I can't anymore... It's over... I shall die right here..."

He dragged me toward a pile of snow from which protruded human shapes, torn blankets.

"Leave me," he said. "I can't go on anymore... Have pity on me... I'll wait here until we can go into the showers... You'll come and get me."

I could have screamed in anger. To have lived and endured so much; was I going to let my father die now? Now that we would be able to take a good hot shower and lie down?

"Father!" I howled. "Father! Get up! Right now! You will kill yourself..."

And I grabbed his arm. He continued to moan:

"Don't yell, my son... Have pity on your old father... Let me rest here... a little... I beg of you, I'm so tired... no more strength..."

He had become childlike: weak, frightened, vulnerable.

"Father," I said, "you cannot stay here."

I pointed to the corpses around him; they too had wanted to rest here.

"I see, my son. I do see them. Let them sleep. They haven't closed an eye for so long... They're exhausted... exhausted..."

His voice was tender.

I howled into the wind:

"They're dead! They will never wake up! Never! Do you understand?"

This discussion continued for some time. I knew that I was no longer arguing with him but with Death itself, with Death that he had already chosen.

The sirens began to wail. Alert. The lights went out in the entire camp. The guards chased us toward the blocks. In a flash, there was no one left outside. We were only too glad not to have to stay outside any longer, in the freezing wind. We let ourselves sink into the floor. The cauldrons at the entrance found no takers. There were several tiers of bunks. To sleep was all that mattered.

WHEN I WOKE UP, it was daylight. That is when I remembered that I had a father. During the alert, I had followed the mob, not taking care of him. I knew he was running out of strength, close to death, and yet I had abandoned him.

I went to look for him.

Yet at the same time a thought crept into my mind: If only I didn't find him! If only I were relieved of this responsibility, I could use all my strength to fight for my own survival, to take care only of myself... Instantly, I felt ashamed, ashamed of myself forever.

I walked for hours without finding him. Then I came to a block where they were distributing black "coffee." People stood in line, quarreled.

A plaintive voice came from behind me:

"Eliezer, my son...bring me... a little coffee..."

I ran toward him.

"Father! I've been looking for you for so long... Where were you? Did you sleep? How are you feeling?"

He seemed to be burning with fever. I fought my way to the coffee cauldron like a wild beast. And I succeeded in bringing back a cup. I took one gulp. The rest was for him.

I shall never forget the gratitude that shone in his eyes when he swallowed this beverage. The gratitude of a wounded animal.

With these few mouthfuls of hot water, I had probably given him more satisfaction than during my entire childhood...

He was lying on the boards, ashen, his lips pale and dry, shivering. I couldn't stay with him any longer. We had been ordered to go outside to allow for cleaning of the blocks. Only the sick could remain inside.

We stayed outside for five hours. We were given soup. When they allowed us to return to the blocks, I rushed toward my father:

"Did you eat?"

"No."

"Why?"

"They didn't give us anything ...They said that we were sick, that we would die soon, and that it would be a waste of food ...I can't go on ..."

I gave him what was left of my soup. But my heart was heavy. I was aware that I was doing it grudgingly.

Just like Rabbi Eliahu's son, I had not passed the test.

EVERY DAY, my father was getting weaker. His eyes were watery, his face the color of dead leaves. On the third day after we arrived in Buchenwald, everybody had to go to the showers. Even the sick, who were instructed to go last.

When we returned from the showers, we had to wait outside a long time. The cleaning of the blocks had not been completed.

From afar, I saw my father and ran to meet him. He went by me like a shadow, passing me without stopping, without a glance. I called to him, he did not turn around. I ran after him:

"Father, where are you running?"

He looked at me for a moment and his gaze was distant, other-

worldly, the face of a stranger. It lasted only a moment and then he ran away.

SUFFERING FROM DYSENTERY, my father was prostrate on his cot, with another five sick inmates nearby. I sat next to him, watching him; I no longer dared to believe that he could still elude Death. I did all I could to give him hope.

All of a sudden, he sat up and placed his feverish lips against my ear:

"Eliezer... I must tell you where I buried the gold and silver... In the cellar... You know..."

And he began talking, faster and faster, afraid of running out of time before he could tell me everything. I tried to tell him that it was not over yet, that we would be going home together, but he no longer wanted to listen to me. He *could* no longer listen to me. He was worn out. Saliva mixed with blood was trickling from his lips. He had closed his eyes. He was gasping more than breathing.

FOR A RATION OF BREAD I was able to exchange cots to be next to my father. When the doctor arrived in the afternoon, I went to tell him that my father was very ill.

"Bring him here!"

I explained that he could not stand up, but the doctor would not listen. And so, with great difficulty, I brought my father to him. He stared at him, then asked curtly:

"What do you want?"

"My father is sick," I answered in his place... "Dysentery..."

"That's not my business. I'm a surgeon. Go on. Make room for the others!"

My protests were in vain.

"I can't go on, my son... Take me back to my bunk."

I took him back and helped him lie down. He was shivering.

"Try to get some sleep, Father. Try to fall asleep..."

His breathing was labored. His eyes were closed. But I was convinced that he was seeing everything. That he was seeing the truth in all things.

Another doctor came to the block. My father refused to get up. He knew that it would be of no use.

In fact, that doctor had come only to finish off the patients. I listened to him shouting at them that they were lazy good-for-nothings who only wanted to stay in bed... I considered jumping him, strangling him. But I had neither the courage nor the strength. I was riveted to my father's agony. My hands were aching, I was clenching them so hard. To strangle the doctor and the others! To set the whole world on fire! My father's murderers! But even the cry stuck in my throat.

ON MY RETURN from the bread distribution, I found my father crying like a child:

"My son, they are beating me!"

"Who?" I thought he was delirious.

"Him, the Frenchman... and the Pole... They beat me..."

One more stab to the heart, one more reason to hate. One less reason to live.

"Eliezer... Eliezer... tell them not to beat me... I haven't done anything... Why are they beating me?"

I began to insult his neighbors. They mocked me. I promised them bread, soup. They laughed. Then they got angry; they could not stand my father any longer, they said, because he no longer was able to drag himself outside to relieve himself.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, he complained that they had taken his ration of bread.

"While you were asleep?"

"No. I wasn't asleep. They threw themselves on me. They snatched it from me, my bread... And they beat me ... A g a i n ... I can't go on, my son... Give me some water..."

I knew that he must not drink. But he pleaded with me so long that I gave in. Water was the worst poison for him, but what else could I do for him? With or without water, it would be over soon anyway...

"You, at least, have pity on me ... "

Have pity on him! I, his only son ...

A WEEK WENT BY like that.

"Is this your father?" asked the *Blockälteste*.

"Yes."

"He is very sick."

"The doctor won't do anything for him."

He looked me straight in the eye:

"The doctor *cannot* do anything more for him. And neither can you."

He placed his big, hairy hand on my shoulder and added:

"Listen to me, kid. Don't forget that you are in a concentration camp. In this place, it is every man for himself, and you cannot think of others. Not even your father. In this place, there is no such thing as father, brother, friend. Each of us lives and dies alone. Let me give you good advice: stop giving your ration of bread and soup to your old father. You cannot help him anymore.

And you are hurting yourself. In fact, you should be getting *his* rations...

I listened to him without interrupting. He was right, I thought deep down, not daring to admit it to myself. Too late to save your old father... You could have two rations of bread, two rations of soup...

It was only a fraction of a second, but it left me feeling guilty. I ran to get some soup and brought it to my father. But he did not want it. All he wanted was water.

"Don't drink water, eat the soup ... "

"I'm burning up ... Why are you so mean to me, my son? ... Water..."

I brought him water. Then I left the block for roll call. But I quickly turned back. I lay down on the upper bunk. The sick were allowed to stay in the block. So I would be sick. I didn't want to leave my father.

All around me, there was silence now, broken only by moaning. In front of the block, the SS were giving orders. An officer passed between the bunks. My father was pleading:

"My son, water... I'm burning up... My insides..."

"Silence over there!" barked the officer.

"Eliezer," continued my father, "water..."

The officer came closer and shouted to him to be silent. But my father did not hear. He continued to call me. The officer wielded his club and dealt him a violent blow to the head.

I didn't move. I was afraid, my body was afraid of another blow, this time to *my* head.

My father groaned once more, I heard:

"Eliezer..."

I could see that he was still breathing—in gasps. I didn't move.

When I came down from my bunk after roll call, I could see his lips trembling; he was murmuring something. I remained more than an hour leaning over him, looking at him, etching his bloody, broken face into my mind.

Then I had to go to sleep. I climbed into my bunk, above my father, who was still alive. The date was January 28, 1945.

I WOKE UP AT DAWN on January 29. On my father's cot there lay another sick person. They must have taken him away before daybreak and taken him to the crematorium. Perhaps he was still breathing....

No prayers were said over his tomb. No candle lit in his memory. His last word had been my name. He had called out to me and I had not answered.

I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I was out of tears. And deep inside me, if I could have searched the recesses of my feeble conscience, I might have found something like: Free at last!...

I REMAINED IN BUCHENWALD until April 11. I shall not describe my life during that period. It no longer mattered. Since my father's death, nothing mattered to me anymore.

I was transferred to the children's block, where there were six hundred of us.

The Front was coming closer.

I spent my days in total idleness. With only one desire: to eat. I no longer thought of my father, or my mother.

From time to time, I would dream. But only about soup, an extra ration of soup.

ON APRIL 5, the wheel of history turned.

It was late afternoon. We were standing inside the block, waiting for an SS to come and count us. He was late. Such lateness was unprecedented in the history of Buchenwald. Something must have happened.

Two hours later, the loudspeakers transmitted an order from the camp Kommandant: all Jews were to gather in the *Appelplatz*.



This was the end! Hitler was about to keep his promise.

The children of our block did as ordered. There was no choice: Gustav, the *Blockälteste*, made it clear with his club... But on our way we met some prisoners who whispered to us:

"Go back to your block. The Germans plan to shoot you. Go back and don't move."

We returned to the block. On our way there, we learned that the underground resistance of the camp had made the decision not to abandon the Jews and to prevent their liquidation.

As it was getting late and the confusion was great—countless Jews had been passing as non-Jews—the *Lagerälteste* had decided that a general roll call would take place the next day. Everybody would have to be present.

The roll call took place. The *Lagerkommandant* announced that the Buchenwald camp would be liquidated. Ten blocks of inmates would be evacuated every day. From that moment on, there was no further distribution of bread and soup. And the evacuation began. Every day, a few thousand inmates passed the camp's gate and did not return.

ON APRIL 10, there were still some twenty thousand prisoners in the camp, among them a few hundred children. It was decided to evacuate all of us at once. By evening. Afterward, they would blow up the camp.

And so we were herded onto the huge *Appelplatz*, in ranks of five, waiting for the gate to open. Suddenly, the sirens began to scream. Alert. We went back to the blocks. It was too late to evacuate us that evening. The evacuation was postponed to the next day.

Hunger was tormenting us; we had not eaten for nearly six

days except for a few stalks of grass and some potato peels found on the grounds of the kitchens.

At ten o'clock in the morning, the SS took positions throughout the camp and began to herd the last of us toward the *Appelplatz*.

The resistance movement decided at that point to act. Armed men appeared from everywhere. Bursts of gunshots. Grenades exploding. We, the children, remained flat on the floor of the block.

The battle did not last long. Around noon, everything was calm again. The SS had fled and the resistance had taken charge of the camp.

At six o'clock that afternoon, the first American tank stood at the gates of Buchenwald.

OUR FIRST ACT AS FREE MEN was to throw ourselves onto the provisions. That's all we thought about. No thought of revenge, or of parents. Only of bread.

And even when we were no longer hungry, not one of us thought of revenge. The next day, a few of the young men ran into Weimar to bring back some potatoes and clothes—and to sleep with girls. But still no trace of revenge.

Three days after the liberation of Buchenwald, I became very ill: some form of poisoning. I was transferred to a hospital and spent two weeks between life and death.

One day when I was able to get up, I decided to look at myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto.

From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me.

The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me.