

children were led to the "infirmary" and shot there. The "infirmary" was also for us, the Treblinka slaves, the last stop. Not the gas chamber. We always ended up in the "infirmary."

**Rudolf Vrba (New York), survivor of Auschwitz**

There was always an amount of people who could not get out of the railroad cars, those who also died on the road, or people who were sick to such a degree that even persuasion with violent beating wouldn't get them moving fast enough. So those people remained in the wagons. So our first job was to get into the wagons, get out the dead bodies—or the dying—and transport them in *laufschrift*, as the Germans liked to say. This means "running." *Laufschrift*, yeah, never walking—everything had to be done in *laufschrift*, *immer laufen*. So, very sporty—they are a sporty nation, you see.

We have to get out those bodies, and on the ramp, running, to get them on a truck which was at the head of the ramp. There were already trucks prepared; the trucks were ready. Say, five, six, sometimes ten standing there—there was no iron rule. The first truck was for the dead and the dying. There was not much medical counting to see who is dead and who feigns to be dead, I mean, you know, who is only simulating. So they were put on the trucks; and once this was finished, this was the first truck to move off, and it went straight to the crematorium, which was about two kilometers to the left from the ramp.

*At the time it was two kilometers? Before the construction of the new ramp?*

It was before the construction of the new ramp. This was the old ramp. Through the old ramp, the first one, three quarters of a million people died. This was the old ramp. I mean the majority. The new ramp was only built for the expected murder in a very short time of a million Jews from Hungary.

The whole murder machinery could work on one principle: that the people came to Auschwitz and didn't know where they were going and for what purpose. The new arrivals were supposed to be kept orderly and without panic marching into the gas chambers. Especially the panic was dangerous from women with small children. So it was important for the Nazis that none of us give some sort of message which could cause a panic, even in the last moment. And anybody who tried to get into touch with newcomers was either clubbed to death or taken behind the wagon and shot, because if a panic would have broken out, a massacre would have taken place on the spot, on the ramp. It would already be a hitch in the machinery. You can't bring in the next transport with dead bodies and blood around, because this would only increase the panic. The Nazis were concentrating on one thing: it should go in an orderly fashion so that it goes unimpeded. One doesn't lose time.

**Filip Müller, survivor of the five liquidations of the Auschwitz "special detail"**

Before each gassing operation the SS took stern precautions. The crematorium was ringed with SS men. Many SS men patrolled the court with dogs and machine guns. To the right were the steps that led underground to the "undressing

room." In Birkenau there were four crematoriums, Crematoriums 2 and 3, and 4 and 5. Crematorium 2 was similar to 3. In 2 and 3 the "undressing room" and the gas chamber were underground. A large "undressing room" of about three thousand square feet, and a large gas chamber where one could gas up to three thousand people at a time. Crematoriums 4 and 5 were of a different type in that they weren't located underground. Everything was at ground level. In 4 and 5 there were three gas chambers, with a total capacity of at most eighteen hundred to two thousand people at a time.

As people reached the crematorium, they saw everything—this horribly violent scene. The whole area was ringed with SS. Dogs barked. Machine guns. They all, mainly the Polish Jews, had misgivings. They knew something was seriously amiss, but none of them had the faintest of notions that in three or four hours they'd be reduced to ashes.

When they reached the "undressing room," they saw that it looked like an International Information Center! On the walls were hooks, and each hook had a number. Beneath the hooks were wooden benches. So people could undress "more comfortably," it was said. And on the numerous pillars that held up this underground "undressing room," there were signs with slogans in several languages: "Clean is good!" "Lice can kill!" "Wash yourself!" "To the disinfection area." All those signs were only there to lure people into the gas chambers already undressed. And to the left, at a right angle, was the gas chamber with its massive door.

In Crematoriums 2 and 3, Zyklon gas crystals were poured in by a so-called SS disinfection squad through the ceiling, and in Crematoriums 4 and 5 through side openings. With five or six canisters of gas they could kill around two thousand people. This so-called disinfection squad arrived in a truck marked with a red cross and escorted people along to make them believe they were being led to take a bath. But the red cross was only a mask to hide the canisters of Zyklon

gas and the hammers to open them. The gas took about ten to fifteen minutes to kill. The most horrible thing was when the doors of the gas chambers were opened—the unbearable sight: people were packed together like basalt, like blocks of stone. How they tumbled out of the gas chamber! I saw that several times. That was the toughest thing to take. You could never get used to that. It was impossible.

*Impossible.*

You see, once the gas was poured in, it worked like this: it rose from the ground upwards. And in the terrible struggle that followed—because it was a struggle—the lights were switched off in the gas chambers. It was dark, no one could see, so the strongest people tried to climb higher. Because they probably realized that the higher they got, the more air there was. They could breathe better. That caused the struggle. Secondly, most people tried to push their way to the door. It was psychological: they knew where the door was; maybe they could force their way out. It was instinctive, a death struggle. Which is why children and weaker people, and the aged, always wound up at the bottom. The strongest were on top. Because in the death struggle, a father didn't realize his son lay beneath him.

*And when the doors were opened?*

They fell out. People fell out like blocks of stone, like rocks falling out of a truck. But near the Zyklon gas, there was a void. There was no one where the gas crystals went in. An empty space. Probably the victims realized that the gas worked strongest there. The people were battered. They struggled and fought in the darkness. They were covered in excrement, in blood, from ears and noses. One also sometimes saw that the people lying on the ground, because of the

pressure of the others, were unrecognizable. Children had their skulls crushed.

Yes.

How?

*It was awful.*

Yes. Vomit. Blood—from the ears and noses, probably even menstrual fluid. I'm sure of it. There was everything in that struggle for life, that death struggle. It was terrible to see. That was the toughest part.

It was pointless to tell the truth to anyone who crossed the threshold of the crematorium. You couldn't save anyone there. It was impossible to save people. One day in 1943 when I was already in Crematorium 5, a train from Bialystok arrived. A prisoner on the "special detail" saw a woman in the "undressing room" who was the wife of a friend of his. He came right out and told her: "You are going to be exterminated. In three hours you'll be ashes." The woman believed him because she knew him. She ran all over and warned the other women. "We're going to be killed. We're going to be gassed." Mothers carrying their children on their shoulders didn't want to hear that. They decided the woman was crazy. They chased her away. So she went to the men. To no avail. Not that they didn't believe her: they'd heard rumors in the Bialystok ghetto, or in Grodno, and elsewhere. But who wanted to hear that! When she saw that no one would listen, she scratched her whole face. Out of despair. In shock. And she started to scream.

So what happened? Everyone was gassed. The woman was held back. We had to line up in front of the ovens. First, they tortured her horribly because she wouldn't betray him. In the end she pointed to him. He was taken out of the line

and thrown alive into the oven. We were told: "Whoever tells anything will end like that."

We in the special detail kept trying to figure out if there was a way we could tell people, to inform them. But our experience, in several instances where we were able to tell people, showed that it was of no use, that it made their last moments even harder to bear. At most, we thought it might help Jews from Poland, or Jews from Theresienstadt (the Czech family camp), who'd already spent six months in Birkenau. We thought it might have been of use in such cases to tell people. But imagine what it was like in other cases: Jews from Greece, from Hungary, from Corfu, who'd been traveling for ten or twelve days, starving, without water for days, dying of thirst; they were half crazed when they arrived. They were dealt with differently. They were only told: "Get undressed, you'll soon get a mug of tea." These people were in such a state, because they'd been traveling so long, that their only thought was to quench their thirst. And the SS executioners knew that very well. It was all preprogrammed, a calculated part of the extermination process, that if people were so weak, and weren't given something to drink, they'd rush into the gas chambers. But in fact, these people were already being exterminated before reaching the gas chambers. Think of the children. They begged their mothers, screaming: "Mother, please, water, water!" The adults too, who'd spent days without water, had the same obsession. Informing those people was quite pointless.

#### **A survivor of Auschwitz (Corfu)**

These are my nephews. They burned them in Birkenau too. Two of my brother's kids. They took them to the

crematorium with their mom. They were all burned in Birkenau. My brother, he was sick, and they put him in the oven, in the crematorium, and burned him. That was at Birkenau.

**Moshe Mordo**

The oldest boy was seventeen, the second was fifteen. Two more kids kaput with their mom. Yes, four children I lost.

*Your father too?*

. . . My Dad, him too.

*How old was your father?*

He was eighty-five years old.

*And he died in Auschwitz?*

Auschwitz, that's right. Eighty-five and he died at Birkenau. My father.

*Your father made the whole trip?*

Yes, the whole family died. First the gas chamber, then the crematorium.

**Armando Aaron, president of the Jewish community of Corfu, with four other Jewish survivors of Corfu**

On Friday morning, June 9, 1944, members of the Corfu Jewish community came, very frightened, and reported to the Germans. This square was full of Gestapo men and police, and we went forward. There were even traitors, the Recanati brothers, Athens Jews. After the war they were sentenced to life imprisonment. But they're already free. We were ordered to go forward.

*By this street?*

Yes, by this street.

*How many of you were there?*

Exactly 1,650.

*Quite a crowd?*

A lot of people. Christians stopped there. Christians, that's right. And they saw.

*Where were the Christians? At the street corner?*

Yes. And on the balconies. After we gathered here, Gestapo men with machine guns came up behind us.

*What time was it?*

It was six o'clock in the morning.

*A fine day?*

Yes, the day was fine.