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## *The Winter at Stutthof*



*(Editor's note: In 1939, the Germans built a civilian internment camp near the northern Polish town of Stutthof (Sztutowo). By 1942, it was a concentration camp. As many as 100,000 persons were deported there, among them Polish Jews from Warsaw and Bialystok, as well as from several forced labor camps in the Baltic states.)*

The new transport train was even more crowded. Most of us had to stand the whole night. I wanted to sleep so badly, but it was impossible. Whenever I sank down I was kicked in the head, in the abdomen. There was no air and it was a real fight just to breathe.

"Three days ago," I told myself, "I had a mother, a husband, family and friends. I was full of hope, eager to work even in slavery, until we could be free again. I was prepared for many things, but never for this, never for what I have seen. Lord, help me to forget or I shall never be able to stand life!" Only my memory of that last glance of Nick, of his smiling, hopeful face, kept me going that night.

Gitu was in my boxcar. The rest of the women were of many different nationalities. The second day, the train stopped and about half the passengers were ordered off. Gitu clung to my arm until it was obvious that we would both go on with the train. Now there was plenty of room to stretch out. We flopped down on the floor, not speaking, Gitu and I, just happy for not being kicked and having no chimneys to watch.

We traveled five days this time, Gitu clinging to me mutely all the way. She was my responsibility now, like a baby sister. She

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threatened to kill herself if I abandoned her. I accepted the burden, even though I had no particular love for her. She was a relic of my old life, which made her like family. Aside from that, I had fallen into the habit of doing whatever people asked of me. Everyone needed help. If I could do something for them, I did.

Our destination was Stutthof, a concentration camp in northern Germany. At Stutthof by pure accident and good fortune, I was assigned to a barracks with many of my acquaintances. As prison camps went, we were relatively well treated. The regular German soldiers were in charge, and we had clean straw to sleep on and a blanket to protect us against the fierce winter cold. Once every four weeks we were taken to a shower and allowed some soap. The food, however, was not sufficient and we grew weaker and weaker. Dysentery and exhaustion were the main causes of the rapidly growing mortality rate. Still, we were forced to work 14 hours a day and stand endlessly in the snow for regular countings.

SS guards and kapos (as the privileged non-Jewish prisoners were called) stood guard behind the wire barriers that encircled us, huge bloodhounds by their sides. The most feared guard was a kapo named Max. He killed one or two women every day, usually by kicking them to death—always the ones who feared him the most. Everyone loathed and dreaded him and tried to avoid him. I decided that since I was going to die anyway, there was no point in being afraid. Ironically, this attitude kept me safe. Cowardly bully that he was, he would not take on anyone who did not fear him.

One day Max killed a particular friend of mine, a Czech woman named Velanka. As a non-Jewish prisoner, she had been allowed to grow her hair. Velanka cut off a strand for me so that I could wear bangs with my turban. A few days later, we were together when Max approached. Terrified, Velanka shrank behind me. He pulled her out and beat her to death in front of my face. Then he ordered me to dispose of her body.

One of the girls I knew had sex with Max. He paid her off each

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time with an apple. Once I said to her, "How can you?" She shrugged. "I don't know anything. I just eat my apple."

Sex was always a dangerous matter. There were two beautiful sisters in camp. One was put to work in the office, where she started an affair with a Polish kapo. Soon enough, she became pregnant. Since pregnant women were immediately gassed and burned, she begged me for something she could use to abort herself. Before I could come up with anything, someone else apparently did, because she injured herself badly and bled to death.

One night when it was particularly cold and dark and my thoughts were even colder and darker, when my morale was as low as it could be and hunger was tearing at me and the lice were driving me to impotent rage, I had a flash of inspiration. I suddenly realized that I could distract myself and maybe do others some good by boosting the morale of the other prisoners. From then on, I became the Mad Clown of the barracks. Nothing was sacred. I could make a joke about anything. I would mimic our guards, our old friends from Uzhorod, our teachers back in school. I would joke about how the German officers' fat wives must look in the clothes and jewels we had left behind, and how they showed off our furniture and what they did in our beds. Mud applied to ease the pain of virulent boils became a beauty treatment at a famous spa. A filthy towel was a chinchilla lap robe. Nothing was too outrageous or ridiculous if it brought a few moments of laughter.

I now had a mission—a purpose for existence. Of course, I didn't think of it that way. I didn't really understand what I was doing until long after liberation.

I had another purpose too, to steal from our captors everything I could, to cheat them in every way possible, in order to feed my friends and me and keep us warm. I knew I was taking my life in my hands but it didn't matter. My life was forfeited in any case. I had nothing to lose.

Years later, someone told me that the traditional Japanese

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samurai was trained to take the same attitude. He was going to die in any case, so he might as well go about it with a light heart.

Soon afterwards, I was given real work to do. My main job was repairing uniforms taken from wounded and dead German soldiers. I would clean them up and mend them so they could be reissued to other soldiers at the German front. This meant I was now indoors all day, a tremendous boon as winter came on. My mother's insistence that I learn to sew was saving my life.

My work made it easy to steal. I took small items—scarves, gloves, hats—that I could carry out of the workroom under my dress, between my thighs or even in my vagina. A bullet in the head would have ended my existence if anything had been found during the daily searches. Time and time again, I saw it happen to my fellow workers. Yet I continued to get away with it and take great pleasure in the process.

Some of what I stole went to other prisoners and some went with me to the outside fence. Potato fields surrounded the camp. These fields were worked by farmers who had long since worn out their pre-war garments. They were eager for any kind of warm clothing and we prisoners were eager for food. I stood at the fence, knowing I could die at any moment, and showed the farmers what I had to trade that day for a potato. Then I would waddle back to our barracks, the potato held tightly between my thighs, and we would roast it over our tiny fire and feast like kings.

I found particular delight in tossing clothes over the fence into the men's section. I took insane risks doing it, but so long as I could make their lives a little better, who cared? They looked so cold standing behind the fence in their flimsy striped uniforms. I felt privileged to bring them some warmth and happiness. I always had Nick in my mind—Nick, who might be going through the same hardships. I felt that I was helping him by proxy. I never thought of what I did as heroic. I was just creating a purpose to keep going from one day to the next.

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As time passed, the women in charge of us turned more brutal. Their beatings became as bad as the men's and sometimes worse. The commander of our barracks was a woman I had known in Uzhorod. Her name was Frida and she was a beautiful redhead, the wife of a professor. One evening, my friend Relly accidentally spilled another girl's soup. Frida began beating her with a large ladle until she fainted. Then, still furious, Frida grabbed what was left of the soup and threw it on the floor, shouting, "Today none of you will eat!" Is it possible for a human being to lose all human feeling? I wondered. Surely there must be some trace in her of the lovely person she used to be.

Because I spoke German, I was often taken from my assigned work to act as interpreter. The next morning, I was summoned to translate for some incoming prisoners. Afterwards I found myself alone near Frida's room. No one was around, so I confronted her.

"Why did you do that yesterday?" I asked. "Why would you want to make a miserable situation even worse?"

"Shut up. Mind your own business," she snapped.

I went on. "I hope to be free again some day and so do you. How will you face people after what you have done here? Aren't you afraid of your husband? Of God?"

She laughed bitterly. "God? Where? My husband? Maybe in ashes. Nothing matters anymore. Get out!"

"I remember when you were my husband's patient," I persisted. "You used to come to the office with your pretty little girl. Don't you want to remember those days? Aren't you afraid that after our liberation we will kill you like we're going to kill the SS guards?"

"You! As if I'd be afraid of the likes of you!" she scoffed. Then, suddenly, she put her head down on the table and cried bitterly. The next day when the roll was called my assignment had been changed. I was sent outdoors to do heavy work again.

It was the final year of the war. German military trains continued to arrive but now they held fewer uniforms, which meant less work

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and less food too. My new job was to carry bales of repaired uniforms to the train and bring back the dirty, damaged ones. This was really a man's job because the loads were heavy, but I was still relatively strong. To reach the train, I had to walk through the village of Krottingen, where we were guarded by Russian prisoners. Fortunately I could speak a little Russian. When I brought my load to the storehouse, I would steal whatever I could: shoes, sweaters, boots, and once even a fur-lined jacket. We were inspected many times and many times my heart was in my throat, but I continued to accomplish the impossible.

My Russian guards got first choice, and then on my way back to camp, they would look the other way while I bartered for some food in Krottingen. Village food was more varied, and getting it past the guards was half the pleasure. Life meant so little and these small comforts meant so much.

Thanks to Mother Nature, the best place for an egg was in my cleavage. Butter I pressed flat against my back or stomach, but bread or potatoes had to be tied in a sack between my legs. I could not walk naturally that way, but I would have risked anything for a morsel of food for my starving body. Each time I went to the storehouse, my friends waited anxiously for my return, hoping I was safe, hoping there was something to eat.

The only thing more important than bread was hope. One day I traded some bread for a silver spoon. How the spoon got into the camp, I don't know. But I wanted it for Nick. Some day I would hand it to him and say, "I kept this for you, all that time in the camps."

That image inspired me and gave me a purpose beyond merely getting through another day. I kept the spoon safe in my vagina.

Now, fewer German personnel were being seen around the camp. Male prisoners replaced them on the clean-up crews that disposed of the dead. The Russian army was pushing closer, so the storehouses had to be cleared out. Our work stopped. So did the

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regular Saturday formations where, from 6:00 a.m. to noon, the ones to be destroyed in the gas chambers were selected.

It was January 1945, in the midst of a terrible winter. No coal was to be had, so we kept from freezing by sleeping on top of each other. We no longer dared talk to each other because our commander, Frida, was getting crazier and crazier. The slightest movement or sound might provoke her into a beating. Yet by that time we feared neither her nor death. We simply wished to avoid the unpleasantness of a beating if possible.

*(Editor's note: More than 60,000 died at Stutthof. In late 1944 and early 1945, toward the end of the war, the SS forced some 50,000 prisoners out of the camp into death marches. More than half of them were killed, or died in brutal winter conditions.)*