

The Death March



One morning the loudspeaker blared: “Get ready! Get ready! In one hour you will leave the camp!” The thought that the Russians were near and might soon liberate us made our hearts pound. We scrambled about with high hopes.

We were given two pounds of bread each and a quarter-pound of margarine. Nick had taught me on the train to Auschwitz always to save some bread, so I tore mine into small pieces and hid as much as I could under my dress. I tied on my shoes with rags. The guards were rushing around outside as we straggled out. The officer’s room had been hastily evacuated, and some of us darted in as we passed to help ourselves to what they had left behind. I found a towel and tied it into a hat.

Once outside, we were lined up and marched out of the camp, the SS guards watching us closely. Anyone who got out of step was beaten. We were walking through snow that was 15 inches deep. Gitu had been ill even before we left the camp. Now she had a high fever. I slipped my arm through hers and we marched, one-two, one-two. Cannons sounded in the distance. Gitu wanted to stop, but I cried and begged her to keep marching or she’d be shot. Finally we were herded into a barn beside the road to spend the night.

The next morning many could not go on. Those who were too weak or sick just sat down in the snow. The guards shot every one of them. There were no tears. Cold and hunger made it easy to die.

It got to be a routine. Each morning a guard would call out, “Those who cannot walk, just stand together to one side.” We

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would march off and behind us we would hear the shots. I was able to be strong because I wanted to be strong. My spirit forced my body to obey because I had never stopped hoping that I would see Nick again.

Our march took us through towns and villages. I couldn't stand to look at real people with clean houses and clean clothes, whole families walking together. They stared at us, sometimes with pity but usually with no emotion. At night we slept in stables or barns. Our guards were weary, too, and losing control. Each night I thought of escape, but where? Gitu needed me and besides, it was warm in the stable and they fed us warm potatoes that the farmers had prepared for their pigs. The potatoes had been cooked in their dirty peelings but to us they were delicious.

Each morning we received some warm brown water that passed for coffee and then started off again toward our unknown destination. We knew that others had gone before us because every 15 or 20 yards along the road we saw a dead male body in the snow, clad in the familiar striped uniform. I could not resist peeking to see if I could recognize Nick or Bandi, but it was impossible to tell because the bodies were almost all face down in the snow. Each of them had been someone's son, father, brother or husband, and each had been shot in the back of the head by an SS guard. But we had to keep going. We could hear the boom of cannons in the distance, so we knew the Russians were getting closer. Freedom was just a few miles or a few days away.

One morning after about three weeks of marching, my feet became too swollen for me to walk. Hard as my spirit might will it, there was nothing I could do. I realized that I had reached my last morning and did what everyone had done before me, hobbling out of line and standing by the roadside, waiting to be shot. There were eight of us that morning. To my wonder, the girl standing next to me was someone I knew, who had once worked at my father's bank. Somehow, in our final moments, we found much happiness in knowing that we would die together. We embraced each other,

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laughing and crying. That was how we were going to spend our last minutes.

Then a little horse-drawn wagon came into view. It came closer and closer, and stopped in front of us. The driver was a slightly built man, very dignified and very well dressed. He informed the SS officer that he was the mayor of the next village and that he wanted to treat the sick people to a hot meal, anyone who could no longer walk.

The officer began to shout, "It's out of the question. They will be shot like everybody else. That's all there is to it." But the little mayor who barely came up to the guard's chin kept insisting. He raised his own voice saying that he wanted to take us back to his village and he would return us that evening. Then the SS officer could do what he wanted with us.

This was utterly incredible, like some sort of dream. I wondered if we were already dead and this was a vision of heaven. In the end, the SS officer was worn down by the little man's insistence and let him load us on his wagon. There was no place to sit, so we just propped ourselves up, leaning on the sides of the wagon. It took us about half an hour to reach the village. We were taken into a little room in what must have been the city hall and there was a table with hot soup and freshly baked bread waiting for us. I can still smell that warm bread and soup.

That is how we were spared. Instead of being shot that morning, we were treated to a hot meal. As I devoured the soup I kept wondering what the catch was going to be. Would we be shot as soon as we had eaten? My head was going around and around. After we had finished eating, the mayor asked, "Does anyone here speak German?" I replied that I did and he took me to a corner of the room. He pulled out a package of cigarettes and offered me one. I was very moved and reached out, but my hands were shaking too hard and tears were streaming down my cheeks, so I couldn't coordinate taking the cigarette out of the pack. The mayor took one out, handed it to me, and helped me light it.

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He said, "Miss, you have a very sad present, but you have a future. I have a satisfactory present, but no future at all." Then he walked away.

True to his word, he drove us back to the marching line and returned us to our guards. I took a loaf of bread with me, torn into pieces and hidden inside my dress. That night in the dark my friends and I shared it.

This bizarre event regenerated me to such an extent that I could go on the next morning. It was plain that the war would soon be over, and my hopes soared. Even so, the march continued for two more weeks. Wherever we went, the sides of the road were lined with more dead bodies in striped uniforms. We were not allowed to stop or rest at all. Anyone who did became one more body beside the road. So we bore the pain and marched on.

We arrived at yet another railroad station. This time we were loaded onto some open coal cars. I was exhausted and my feet were swollen to twice their size from the cold. Snow covered the floor of the car but I paid no attention. I was sure I could sleep anywhere.

But sleep became an obvious impossibility as more and more prisoners were ordered to climb on. Eventually more than 100 people were packed into the small car. There wasn't even room to turn. My feet began to stiffen. The train jerked and began to move along slowly.

I had bread saved but feared to eat it because everyone around me was starving too. I knew many of them would kill for a morsel. Every so often someone would faint and fall and be trampled to death. I felt unbearably weak. Only the thought of Nick kept me from slipping into unconsciousness.

At first, I snuggled in among the dead in order to keep warm. Then the bodies stiffened and grew cold. Gitu whimpered beside me. She was famished but I dared not give her anything. To terrorize us, or perhaps to keep up their own spirits, the SS guards fired continually into the air. We could no longer hear the cannons and knew we were moving away from our liberation. By night we

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had more room. Now we could sit down on the dead bodies under us. In the dark I pulled out my bread and shared it with Gitu.

On our fourth day our train passed through Danzig, and stopped a few miles outside the city in an open field. Of the 100 who had climbed into that car, 43 climbed out alive. The train moved on, carrying its cargo of the dead.

Now we marched again in the snow for hours, still guarded by the SS. We'd spend the nights in barns. Few people were left in the countryside because the front was getting closer and closer again. Some nights there would be animals in the barns we stayed in. Once I tried to milk one of the abandoned cows and actually got a little milk. It was such a thrill to taste milk that I squirted it in my face and on the faces of my friends. Sometimes we would find a moldy beet that the animals had missed or a mildewed, half-rotten potato. These were our pleasures during the death march.

One night we came to a big barn far from any town. We were allowed to lie down in the little hay that was scattered on the floor. No water, no blankets, no food, no hope in my heart. My spirit left me and I no longer cared about anything. I gave up and lay down to die.

Luckily, the march ended that night. Apparently, the SS had run out of places to take us. I lay there unconscious for three days. Later, I learned that Relly had saved my life by forcing me to eat her bread and drink the weak, warm coffee. She watched me day and night until I recovered.

We didn't realize that the march was over. The young guards left. Old ones came on. Frida was covered with tormenting abscesses but no one wanted to help her. We stayed in that barn for the next 10 days, most of us too sick to move, devoured by lice, burning up with typhus, urinating and defecating where we lay. None of us had washed for 10 weeks or taken the clothes off our bodies. Each day there were fewer and fewer left alive. What we suffered there cannot be described. I would never have thought it possible, but our time in that barn was far worse than anything in a concentration camp.

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I felt absolutely finished; sure I could go on no longer. Then, once again, we heard the distant sound of cannons. The Russians were on the way! The boom of the cannon sent an electric shock through my system. I decided to live another day. Somehow, I would get outside for food. To do this, I had to make my way over sick, crying people and dead bodies. But I did it.

I kept myself going with promises. Once I'd lived through all this, I would appreciate every good thing that ever came my way. I would never complain. I would always be grateful. I would have wonderful food and bathe three times a day. I would never be hungry again or dirty again. Ever.

By now we knew that the Germans were finished. I couldn't understand why they hadn't killed us all back at Stutthof and why they half-heartedly bothered to feed us now. The only explanation I can offer is that they were suffering from some kind of collective irrationality, and had been since before the war began.

One morning we woke up and there were no soldiers. There was also no food. Nothing. The Germans had abandoned us because the Russians were coming. Our first reaction was tremendous happiness. We were free at last.

We had left Stutthof with a marching column of 900 women. Only 80 of us were left.