

The Crematorium

Tova Grossman's Story

Numbers are strange. I can't remember my Social Security number. Sometimes I forget my telephone number. Even my house number I have to think about. But I will always remember my camp number. Some things are so much a part of you that you just never forget them.

For me, the real war began at the *Kinderlager*. I wasn't yet six, and I was completely on my own. I no longer had Mama to protect me. How I missed her—and Papa too. Most of the children brought to the *Kinderlager* were teenagers. A few like Rutka and me were much younger than the other children, but I was the youngest, at least the smallest.

The teenagers talked about horrible things a doctor named Mengele was doing to twins in the camp next to ours, things like dipping one twin in boiling water and the other in ice water and seeing how they reacted. They called him the Angel of Death. One night some SS men came into the barracks and walked up and down the aisle looking at the sleeping children. Petrified, I lay in my bunk, afraid they would hear my pounding heart and take me away.

Children all around me were dying of starvation. You could always tell when they were dying. The Germans called these people *Musulmänner*—an expression, I found out later, that derived from praying Muslims. That's how they looked: bent over as if they were praying. Their bodies were as thin as skeletons, and their eyes looked like saucers.

The girl I shared the bunk with was one of those *Musulmänner*. She was only twelve, but to me she seemed an adult. Every day I expected her to die. Then one morning I woke up and she was dead, right beside me. What do I do now? I thought, I knew the guards would be calling our numbers again, and she wouldn't be there for the count. Then we'd have to start all over again, and that meant we'd be there for hours. So I dragged her out by the feet for the *Appell*. At least I knew she would be accounted for.

Although we had been bunk mates for months, I didn't mourn the girl's death. I felt only two things: hunger and fear. I no longer had the extra piece of bread my mother had been giving me, and every day I thought Mengele would come into my block and select me for one of his experiments.

I didn't know it was my sixth birthday until a woman came to the *Kinderlager* and handed me a cloth bag that was sewn shut. When I opened the bag I found a piece of bread wrapped in a note: "Tola," it said, "tomorrow is your birthday. I love you. Mama."

That night I hid the treasured food under my dress. I would eat it the next day, on my birthday. In the middle of the night, I woke up to the sound of squeaks. Rats were crawling all over me. Terrified, I lay frozen until they finished nibbling the bread. After they crawled away, I looked at my dress; it was torn. But my visitors left me without a scratch . . . or a spare crumb.

The days were getting colder and shorter. Smoke billowed constantly over the camp, squeezing out what little sunlight we had left. The acrid, ash-laden air left my throat so parched and raw I wanted to choke. The smell of burning permeated everything. Every day, Rutka and I saw fewer and fewer children in the *Kinderlager*. I sensed we too were waiting for something.

Rutka had just scooped a drink out of the rain barrel when two SS guards entered our barracks. All the children filed out. The guards motioned us to follow them. We crossed the railroad tracks and headed toward my mother's camp. I looked at Rutka and said, "Where are we going?"

"Someone said we're going to the crematorium." She look scared.

"What's a crematorium?" I asked.

She didn't reply. We looked at the smoke.

A few minutes later we passed the women's camp. I spotted my mother in a line of women behind the fence and yelled, "Mama!"

"Tola! Rutka! Where are you going?"

"To the crematorium," I said.

A chorus of screams rose from behind the fence. I thought, Why are they screaming? So we're going to the crematorium. Doesn't everybody go to the crematorium? Don't all Jews go to the crematorium? I knew that something happened to you and you never came back. This one went to the crematorium, that one went to the crematorium, all Jews went to the crematorium. Jews always would be going to the crematorium, and they would not be coming back.

When we arrived, the guards told us to undress. Then they gave us towels. They gave me an orange towel. And we waited and waited. It was freezing cold. People came, people left. Finally an SS guard came in with a clipboard, flipped some pages, and screamed at another SS guard in German, "*Daraus!*" [Get them out!] "This is the wrong block! Send them back! We'll take them next time!"

So we put our clothes on again and marched back. The women in my mother's camp were still standing at the fence. I saw my mother again and she saw me.

"What happened?" she yelled.

"They couldn't do it now. They'll take us next time."

I remember saying those words: *They'll take us next time.*

Back at the *Kinderlager* my friend from Tomaszów, Frieda Tenenbaum, showed up. I hadn't seen her since I had gotten on the truck to go to the labor camp. Frieda looked so much older now; somehow that made me feel less alone. But I wondered where her little sister, Dorka, was, the one I played dolls with under the kitchen table.

Fear is strange. If I experienced it when I went to the crematorium, I don't remember it. What I do remember is what I did with it: I numbed myself. I just said, "I'm going to float." When I "floated," my head became light, my fears disappeared. I wanted nothing and missed no one, not even my parents. Even my hunger abated. I wonder how many adults can "float" when fear overcomes them. I wonder if I can do it now. Maybe it's easier for children who don't understand what death really means.

Yet I sensed that every passing day brought me closer to something terrible. So I waited my turn, wondering if I would ever see Mama again. Then to my great surprise she showed up at the *Kinderlager*. She was very agitated. "They're sending us on a march. They're taking us all to Germany."

"Where's Germany?" I said.

"About three hundred miles away. I know what's going to happen. I will die but you will probably survive."

I looked at her swollen feet.

"I don't want you to survive in a world like this all by yourself," she said. "I want us to die together. Let's try to hide. We'll stay here. If we die, we'll die here together."

Mama took my hand and we ran into a building that I recognized as the hospital barrack where the woman had given me the white shoes. In the hospital, people lay moaning in their beds. Some were already dead.

Mama found a female corpse and laid me beside it. Then she pulled a blanket over me and said, "Don't move! No matter what, don't move! I'm going to climb under another blanket, and then we'll just wait."

I felt the need to cling to someone, something. I wish I had my doll, I thought. I hugged the corpse; it was still warm. And so I waited, and waited. A peaceful sensation drifted over me as I lay there hugging the corpse, even as it grew colder.

Then suddenly, shouts: "*Raus! Raus!*" [Out! Out!] Those able to walk were dragged out of the hospital. Those who couldn't were shot on the spot. There was lots of shooting. I lay deathly still under my covers. I smelled smoke.

But I still didn't move. Mama had told me not to move. Finally she came over to me. "The building is on fire," she said. "We've got to get out."

Other people had been hiding with corpses too. When we went outside we saw SS guards in the distance marching people away and setting buildings on fire behind them. People started coming out.

Snow covered the ground. The Germans were gone. The only ones left were Mama and I and the others who had found places to hide.

Not an SS guard was in sight. Then someone exclaimed in Yiddish, "The Russians are coming!"

We stood by the fences and waited. We were careful not to touch the barbed wires in our excitement.

An army of horses and trucks poured through the gate. Then we saw a red flag. When the soldiers arrived, they disconnected the wires and immediately unloaded huge cooking kettles.

Mama and I hugged each other and cried. Everywhere people were hugging and crying. But I wondered about all the other people who were marching to Germany. And I wondered about my father, who had gone on that train to the place called Dachau.