

Waking with a start, we rushed to the window. Yet again we had believed her, even if only for a moment. But there was nothing outside save the darkness of night. With shame in our souls, we went back to our places, gnawed by fear, in spite of ourselves. As she continued to scream, they began to hit her again, and it was with the greatest difficulty that they silenced her.

The man in charge of our wagon called a German officer who was walking about on the platform, and asked him if Madam Schächter could be taken to the hospital car.

“You must be patient,” the German replied. “She’ll be taken there soon.”

Towards eleven o’clock the train began to move. We pressed against the windows. The convoy was moving slowly. A quarter of an hour later, it slowed down again. Through the windows we could see barbed wire; we realized that this must be the camp.

We had forgotten the existence of Madame Schächter. Suddenly, we heard terrible screams:

“Jews, look! Look through the window! Flames! Look!”

And as the train stopped, we saw this time that flames were gushing out of a tall chimney into the black sky.

Madam Schächter was silent herself. Once more she had become dumb, indifferent, absent, and had gone back to her corner.

We looked at the flames in the darkness. There was an abominable odor floating in the air. Suddenly, our doors opened. Some odd-looking characters dressed in striped shirts and black trousers leapt into the wagon. They held electric torches and truncheons. They began to strike out to right and left, shouting:

“Everybody get out! Everyone out of the wagon! Quickly!”

We jumped out. I threw a last glance toward Madame Schächter. Her little boy was holding her hand.

In front of us flames. In the air that smell of burning flesh. It must have been about midnight. We had arrived—at Birkenau, reception center for Auschwitz.

Source: Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Translated from the French by Stella Rodway. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960.

## 11.5

### Arrival and Survival at Auschwitz-Birkenau – 1944

#### *Excerpt from an Interview with Holocaust Survivor David Mandel*

*As the following account indicates, the gas chambers were just one aspect of the terror experienced by prisoners at the death camps. Born in 1929, David*

*Mandel was a native of Munkacs (also known as Mukacevo), a town that was part of Czechoslovakia following World War I and later became part of Hungary. In May 1944, he and other Jewish residents of the town were forced into train cars and transported to the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. Mandel was fourteen at the time. With him were his parents, five brothers, and a sister, as well as members of his extended family.*

We arrived. I remember, they started yelling ... “*schnell*. Get out. Leave all your belongings behind. It’s going to follow you. Stand in line. All able-bodied men to the left. All women and children to the right.” And there were these people with striped garb. We didn’t know who they were or where we were. They kept saying ... “go to work.” My father understood. I was fourteen and a half years old. He told me to stand tall and lie about my age—tell them I’m eighteen.

I had my brother who was [two years] younger [with me], and he had this little bag of food. And by that time my mother, my [two youngest] brothers, and my sister, and my aunt, and my cousins went to the right. And my father told my [younger] brother to take over the foodstuff to my mother, cause we didn’t know how long before we’d see one another again. And [after he took the food to my mother] they wouldn’t let my little brother back [to the left side].

And then all these people who went on the right, they marched them off to this building. I remember there was some stench in the air. There was a big chimney. We didn’t know anything. And we know now these people were marched to these buildings. They were asked to undress, to put their clothes neatly [aside]... And they were ushered into this room where it looked like showers. And now we know instead of showers they turned on this Zyklon B gas faucets, and they gassed these poor souls. That’s the kind of death my family met...

With my [older] brother and my dad, we were ushered the other way on the double. We ran to these barracks, following orders, hoping, you know, to see the family. We had to undress. They sheared our hair from all over our body... And we had to take a shower. All we could hold onto was our shoes and our belt. They took all of our clothing away. We were naked. I remember I held onto pictures of my family I dared take along. While in the shower I put them inside my shoe.

Then we had to line up, and they tattooed us. My brother has got A9237, I have A9238, my father was tattooed A9239. They did it with pen and ink. It hurt. Our arms got swollen. Anyone who cried or screamed was beaten. We had to endure. We were branded. No longer David Mandel. I was reduced to a number.

They didn’t feed us [at first]. I remember after a day or so they gave us a bowl of soup, and it *stunk*. There were some fellow prisoners. We were like separated

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David Mandel, Videotaped interview conducted by Elissa Schosheim, 1 February 1996. Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Beverly Hills, CA, USA.

through barbed wire. They extended their skinny arms. They wanted that soup, and they ate it. We couldn't understand how anybody can eat anything like that, that has that foul smell... Later on, we were so hungry, that soup was the most delicious thing we ever had.

We were there for a few days, then they marched us off from Birkenau to Auschwitz, which was about maybe three kilometers. I remember going through this gate. It said "*Arbeit Macht Frei*"—"Work Makes You Free." Another lure to keep us calm...

About the second or third day my father was pulled out as a strong man [to do work in another camp]. He was put on a truck and carted off. And my brother and I were left there. My brother was seventeen. I was fifteen years old. We were just a couple of skinny kids. My brother found a piece of moldy bread, and he ate it, and he got violently ill. They took him to a *krankenbau*, which is a hospital like. Meantime I was alone while he was in the *krankenbau*. A truck came. They put the remaining group onto a truck, and they carted me off to a nearby satellite camp of Auschwitz, near Krakow...

So I was fifteen years old—not quite fifteen years old—all by myself. I was on a detail. I worked in a power plant. I was unloading brick. I remember we had to hand four bricks at a time, like a chain gang, and the brick was like sandpaper. The tips of my fingers became nothing but flesh...

Our regime consisted of, we had to get up about four o'clock in the morning, and we had to stand in line, and they counted us. They called that *appell*. And they gave us some kind of a hot substance, a tea-like, a grassy type of water, and that's all we had for breakfast. And after that, we had to line up again as we were heading for work. And as we left the gate they counted us. While we arrived to the workplace they counted us. As they broke us down into the details they counted us.

At noon we had to assemble again in the middle of the workplace. They counted us. We had to line up, and they dished out a bowl of soup. I remember, if we were lucky, we got the bottom of the barrel that was thicker. If we were unlucky, we got the watery part of it that was on the top. And anybody who moved out of line and in and out got a terrible, cruel beating. We didn't dare move up.

At night, while we came back, ... after work, they counted us. When we left the place of work, they counted us. As we entered the camp again, they counted us. We had to line up in front of every barrack. They counted us. And after that they gave us our bread, which was a piece of black bread. Sometimes it had a slice of margarine with it, sometimes a slice of liverwurst. And that was our meager rations. It was a starving rations. I don't know how many calories, but it just wasn't enough to survive on.

I was one of the youngest ones in the camp. Eventually I moved from this power plant. I worked in a coal mine. I was switching tracks. I was a kid [so] there was a civil

Polish engineer who would give me a piece of bread once in a while. I would help out in the kitchen [to get extra food]. Now that I look back, maybe fellow inmates saw to it that I get a [good] job, that I survive. We didn't think that anybody would survive these unsurvivable conditions, but I was given a chance, and I was a little bit better off than most. And they wanted me, perhaps, [to] be an eyewitness to what took place.

I witness father and son fighting over a piece of bread—son stealing from the father. I witness what went on. I was sort of glad that I wasn't with my father and my brother. It reminds me of a drowning man, somebody trying to save him and they both drown.

Source: Mandel, David. Videotaped interview conducted by Elissa Schosheim, 1 February 1996. Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation Testimony 11722.

## 11.6

### A French Political Prisoner at Auschwitz – 1943-1945

#### *Excerpt from the Nuremberg Testimony of Marie Claude Vaillant-Couturier*

*A native of Paris, Marie Claude Vaillant-Couturier became a member of the underground French Resistance after Germany invaded France in 1940. She was arrested in 1942 by agents of the Nazi-controlled Vichy government of France and was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1943 with a group of other non-Jews. Though the treatment of these political prisoners was slightly better than that afforded the Jewish inmates, they still experienced most of the dangers and horrors of camp life. Vaillant-Couturier also witnessed a variety of atrocities that were directed at other prisoners. The following is an excerpt from her testimony before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1946. She is being questioned in this excerpt by French prosecutor Charles Dubost.*

**MME. VAILLANT-COUTURIER:** We arrived at Auschwitz at dawn. The seals on our cars were broken, and we were driven out by blows with the butt end of a rifle, and taken to the Birkenau camp, a section of the Auschwitz Camp. It is situated in the middle of a great plain, which was frozen in the month of January. During this part of the journey we had to drag our luggage. As we passed through the door we knew only too well how slender our chances were that we would come out again, for we had already met columns of living skeletons going to work; and as we entered we sang "The Marseillaise" [the French national anthem] to keep up our courage.

We were led to a large shed, then to a disinfecting station. There our heads were shaved and our registration numbers were tattooed on the left forearm. Then