



Emaciated survivors of the Nazi concentration camp at Evensee, Austria, liberated by American troops on May 7, 1945

Beltmann

Voices from the Camps

Over six million people died in concentration camps during World War II. Prisoners included anyone the Nazis considered inferior (such as Jews and Gypsies) or possible political enemies (such as Communists and Socialists). Their stories have been preserved in their diaries and letters.

Etty Hillesum

*Etty Hillesum was born in 1914. She was only 29 when she died in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943. During her imprisonment, she kept a diary. The following excerpt is from the book **Letters from Westerbork** which is based on her diary. Westerbork was the labor camp where Anne Frank was first sent.*

18 December [1942]

Of all the shortages in Westerbork concentration camp, the shortage of space is surely the worst.

About two and a half thousand of the more than ten thousand people are housed in two hundred and fifteen small huts, which used to be the main part of

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the camp and which held one family each in pretransport times.¹

Every little hut has two small rooms, sometimes three, and a little kitchen with a faucet and a WC.² There is no doorbell, which makes entering a quick and unceremonious business. As soon as you open the front door, you're standing in the middle of the kitchen. If you're there to visit friends who live in the little back room, then with your newly acquired informality you rush straight through the front room, where another family may be sitting at the table or having a fight or getting ready for bed. And for some time now, these little rooms have usually been crammed with visitors eager to escape for a while from the big barracks. The hut dwellers are housed like princes by comparison, envied and constantly besieged by all Westerbork.

The scandalous shortage of space in Westerbork is really clear in the colossal, hastily built barracks, those jam-packed hangars of drafty slats where, under a lowering sky made up of hundreds of people's drying laundry, the iron bunks are stacked in triple decks....

On these iron beds people live and die, eat, fall ill, or lie awake through the night, because so many children cry, or because they cannot help wondering why so little news comes from the thousands who have already set out from this place.

The beds provide the only storage space there is: suitcases lie under them and rucksacks³ hang over the iron bars. The other furniture consists of rough wooden tables and narrow wooden benches. Matters of hygiene I shall not mention in this modest account, lest I cause you some unappetizing moments.

Scattered through this vast space are a few stoves, which don't even give enough

heat for the old ladies crowded around them. How people are expected to live through the winter in these barracks has not yet been made clear.

All these great human warehouses have been put up in precisely the same manner in the middle of the mud and have been furnished in the same, let us say austere,⁴ style. But the remarkable thing is that while a trip through one barracks may make you feel you are in a squalid⁵ slum, another will give the impression of a solid middle-class district. In fact, every bunk and every rough wooden table seems to radiate its own atmosphere.

Isabella Leitner

*Isabella Leitner, along with her mother, brother, and four sisters, was deported to Auschwitz on May 29, 1944. In the following excerpt from **Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz**, she describes their ordeal.*

We have arrived. We have arrived where? Where are we?

Young men in striped prison suits are rushing about, emptying the cattle cars. "Out! Out! Everybody out! Fast! Fast!"

The Germans were always in such a hurry. Death was always urgent with them—Jewish death. The earth had to be cleansed of Jews. We already knew that. We just didn't know that sharing the planet for another minute was more than this super-race could live with. The air for them was befouled by Jewish breath, and they must have fresh air.

The men in the prison suits were part of the Sonderkommandos,⁶ the people whose assignment was death, who filled the ovens with the bodies of human

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¹ *pretransport times*: before the Jews were taken to concentration camps

² *WC*: abbreviation for water closet, which is another name for restroom

³ *rucksacks*: bags for carrying supplies, usually strapped to one's back

⁴ *austere*: severe, simple, or bare

⁵ *squalid*: dirty; repulsive

⁶ *Sonderkommandos*: special groups of prisoners

Voices from the Camps continued

beings, Jews who were stripped naked, given soap, and led into the showers, showers of death, the gas chambers.

We are being rushed out of the cattle cars. Chicha and I are desperately searching for our cigarettes. We cannot find them.

"What are you looking for, pretty girls? Cigarettes? You won't need them. Tomorrow you will be sorry you were ever born."

What did he mean by that? Could there be something worse than the cattle-car ride? There can't be. No one can devise something even more foul. They're just scaring us. But we cannot have our cigarettes, and we have wasted precious moments. We have to push and run to catch up with the rest of the family. We

have just spotted the back of my mother's head when Mengele, the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele, points to my sister and me and says, "*Die zwei.*" This trim, very good-looking German, with a flick of his thumb and a whistle, is selecting who is to live and who is to die.

Suddenly we are standing on the "life" side. Mengele has selected us to live. *But I have to catch up with my mother.*

Where are they going?

Mama! Turn around. I must see you before you go to wherever you are going. Mama, turn around. You've got to. We have to say good-bye. Mama! If you don't turn around I'll run after you. But they won't let me. I must stay on the "life" side.

Mama!



Scene from concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen

Granger Collection



A group of Hungarian gypsies

Bettmann

Bubili

*European gypsies were also among those persecuted by the Nazis. It is estimated that over 500,000 died in the gas chambers. The following excerpt from **The Other Victims: First Person Stories of Non-Jews Persecuted by the Nazis** by Ina R. Friedman tells of one young gypsy's experience in a labor camp.*

One morning, as we stood at roll call, shivering in the snow, the SS man shouted, "Everyone count out loud from one to seven. Every seventh man step forward." My father was lined up next to my mother's youngest brother. I was near the end of the line.

I began to sweat. Out of the corner of my eye, I tried to figure out whether my father and uncle were safe. I heard my father shout "Five." I breathed a sigh of relief. The counting grew closer. "Three," the man next to me called. "Thank God." I had survived the selections for death this time.

In December 1941 all Austrian Gypsies were shipped to Gusen 1, a labor camp in Austria. There, I was put in a separate barracks from my father and uncle. By luck, I had a good *kapo*.⁷ But I was concerned about my father. Though he was a powerful man, much taller than I, he had been

weakened by lack of food. One day, when I returned from a work detail, I went looking for him. Five times I walked past him as he stood in front of his barracks, but I didn't recognize him. He had shrunk to half his size. I finally recognized him by his big nose. I was shocked when I realized his physical condition. I lifted him in my arms. He was as light as a child.

A week later, the *kapo* assigned me to work in Gross-Rosen, another labor camp. When I saw the Germans were loading my father and one of my uncles onto a truck, I held back, saying "I want to go with them."

"No, Bubili," the *kapo* snapped. "You go where I tell you."

When I came back that evening, I couldn't find my father. I ran into his barracks. He wasn't there. I ran through the grounds like a madman shouting, "Father, father, where are you?"

My block elder⁸ grabbed me. "It's too late, they were gassed on the truck. Calm down, otherwise you're finished."

For several days, I couldn't eat. The block elder talked to me. "If you don't eat, you'll be 'on the road to eternity.' Your father and uncle are gone. You have to do everything you can to stay alive."

⁷ *kapo*: supervisor of concentration camp prisoners

⁸ *block elder*: senior resident of the barracks