

Images from the Holocaust

A LITERATURE ANTHOLOGY

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Lincolnwood, Illinois USA

Displaced Person's Camp

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A Holocaust survivor, Eichengreen is the author of *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*, from which the following material is taken. For additional biographical information on Eichengreen, see page 340.

For some survivors, liberation from the concentration camp was but the beginning of life in yet another kind of camp, the displaced person's camp. Here Eichengreen describes her attempts to find a way to leave Germany with no passport, birth certificate, or official papers and with limited financial resources.

The war, for me, had ended on April 15, 1945, at Bergen-Belsen when I was liberated by the British Army. Liberation was still almost unbelievable. I had survived. No more beatings, hunger, or killings—yet the realities of liberation were not what I had expected. There was no euphoria or joy. But perhaps I was no longer capable of experiencing joy. I had day-dreamed about life after the war. My dream was of a return to life the way it had been before the war: our sunny apartment, our close family, my friends, a navy silk dress with a full, sweeping skirt. Five years ago, I had been thinking of parties, dances, boys, going to art school. Instead of parties—mass murders. Instead of dances—Mengele's selections. Instead of my full sweeping skirt—a striped rag with a yellow star. Instead of art school—the art of death, dehumanization, and despair.

Until now I had not been conscious of the fact that the one short happy period of my life was gone, never to return. I was physically and emotionally scarred. My family and friends no longer existed. Everything and everyone

important to my life were gone forever. Slowly I realized that I could not turn back to what had been but only toward something different, unknown, and uncertain. Even the future was blocked; I was still not free.

Like so many others, I became ill. We all suffered the aftereffects of malnutrition. Typhus and tuberculosis were the main problems. I vaguely recall drifting in and out of consciousness with a high fever but refusing to go to the hospital. My friend Sabina was dabbing my face, applying cool compresses to my hot forehead, and making me drink water. My kidneys were not functioning well, and I was in constant, almost unbearable pain. Large boils began to appear on my neck and shoulders; they opened, drained, and healed, but new ones took their place. The British doctors had neither explanations nor medication; they thought the combination of dirt, unsanitary conditions, and a "deprived system" might be the cause.

"They'll disappear in six months. All you need is a regular diet," they told me. But when or where could one get it? The food that was cooked for us in army kitchens consisted of a piece of dark bread and a stew made with shredded, dried vegetables. There was no meat, fruit, or fresh vegetables, and no one had heard of vitamins.

Elli was so gravely ill that she was hospitalized. When I visited her, she looked pale and thin between the white sheets.

"Will I make it?" she whispered. "They tell me that I have diseased lungs and might need surgery. The war is over now, but I'm sicker than I ever was."

I held her hands and silently demanded, "Dear God, don't let her die now."

My visit a few days later threw me into a panic. Elli's bed was empty. "Where have you taken her? What have you done with her?" I screamed at the nurses.

They tried to calm me down, explaining that they had sent her to a sanatorium in Switzerland where she would have surgery and the special care she needed. In a daze, I left the hospital feeling tired and sad, wondering if Elli and I would ever see each other again.

We were warehoused in large, red-brick barracks, the former German "Kaserne," which had been used as military housing for the German army. Six or seven women occupied one large room, slept in gray metal bunk beds, and shared a dormitory-type bathroom at the end of the hall. I longed for some privacy.

Although we were allowed free run of the entire camp, the British did not permit us to leave it. Sometimes these rules were ignored, and now and then someone would come back from a "trip" into occupied Germany with stories of the country's total defeat. They would often bring back little trinkets of china or jewelry, some of which had been bartered for, others stolen. "Why pay?" was the attitude. "Didn't the Germans take all our possessions, even the gold teeth from both the living and the dead?" Occasionally, there were incidents, altercations

between displaced persons and German civilians, but the British tried to ignore them.

People were constantly inquiring about missing family members and friends. One woman, Hela, was looking for her father. "He was always tough, indestructible, a hard worker—I'm sure he must have survived."

But not a trace was to be found. He had been seen at Auschwitz. There the trail ended.

Sabina was luckier. She located her younger sister, Dzuta, through the Red Cross. She had been sent with a children's transport to Sweden. Sabina now concentrated on getting permission to enter Sweden.

Lola was looking for her mother. We heard that she had worked under horrible conditions in Mauthausen and had died there of hunger and exhaustion. Two women in her group had managed to survive, and the news of her death, passed from person to person, finally reached Lola.

I kept searching for any scrap of information about my sister and about Julie and Julius, the elderly couple who had befriended me in the ghetto. My inquiries always met with the same response: all of the children and old people deported from the ghetto in 1942 had been murdered by the Germans. Memories of Karin¹ and of my unfulfilled promise to Mother haunted my nights and days. Karin's frightened, tearstained face kept reappearing. Coming to terms with the loss of Karin, of Mother and Father, was impossible. My desolation and despair over their deaths made me question my own right to survive. And I was alone with my guilt.

Almost daily, visitors from other camps arrived, straggling men and women who were traveling from camp to camp in search of their families. Some stayed, others made their way west, and some even returned to Poland. One morning an old friend, Chawa Levi, whom I had not seen for more than a year, stopped me on my way to work. We had worked together in the same office in the Lodz ghetto. She told me that she had walked and hitched rides from a camp in southern Germany in search of her younger sister, Dorka. She asked me if I had any information, but I could not help.

"I have talked to many of our former friends," she said, "and I heard that Szaja² is alive. He is supposed to be traveling back to Poland." Chawa's information took me by surprise. The mention of Szaja's name dredged up a mixture of feelings. I remembered our closeness, our walks through the ghetto streets, the love, the abandonment, his saving my life. It all seemed so very long ago, yet the feelings were alive, and the images remained vivid.

¹ Her sister.

² Her former boyfriend.

"Did he ask about me?" I queried.

"I have no idea," Chawa replied.

I still wanted him to care. I wondered if he would pass through Bergen-Belsen and look for me. I wished he would, but a little voice inside my head told me that he would not. As the months passed, I often thought about Szaja, but I never heard from him. I reasoned that he had probably returned to Lodz—a place I never wanted to see again. I resigned myself to memories.

Fortunately, my work forced me to confront each day and to live in the present. I hoped that this would keep me sane. I knew English and German, could manage Polish and French. I was working for Major Brinton, a burly man, dark-haired, dark-eyed, about six feet tall, with a bellowing voice. I worked as an interpreter and translator from 8:00 to 6:00, six days a week. Whenever he needed conversations and letters translated, he would call on me. He demanded fast, spontaneous translations and asked that they be only more or less accurate. Speaking English was a challenge, and my work and contact with the British helped me, at least for a few hours, to forget the past.

Displaced persons (DPs) were paid little, and the money we received, "Occupation marks," had been issued by the army for interim use until a stable currency could be established. The marks were worthless; one could buy very little with them. The real currency in occupied Germany was food, coffee, and cigarettes.

Most of my friends spent their days visiting, gossiping, and waiting for charitable organizations, such as the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS) or the Joint Distribution Committee, to come and send them to a new home—that is, to any country willing to accept DPs. Few were willing. Furthermore, because we lived in a displaced persons' camp, it was almost impossible to obtain entry visas.

I had hoped to emigrate to Palestine or the United States where I had family and friends, but the war had left me without any documents—no passport, no birth certificate, no proof at all that I existed or that I was the person I said I was. Paris and London, the two cities with embassies from which one could obtain visas, were far away, and I lacked both the financial means and the proper documents to get there. I felt trapped in a bureaucratic nightmare. Nevertheless, my hopes for pursuing a normal life depended on getting out of Germany—Europe, if necessary—as quickly as possible. I had no intention of waiting.

I began to devise various schemes for leaving Germany. Since I had only limited power over my own destiny, my plots always involved contacting friends or family abroad, although this approach had its own obstacles. Postal service out of the country was not available to anyone except military personnel. I asked one of my British coworkers if I could use his name and APO number to write to family and friends in Palestine and the United States. He agreed. I immediately

dashed off several letters, one to my uncle Herman, my father's brother in Palestine, others to friends in the U.S. and Great Britain. I wanted them to know that I was alive and, more importantly, that my parents and my sister had been killed.

Finally, after a month's wait, my uncle's first letter reached me. I was overjoyed. As I mulled over his letter, I hit upon an idea. If I married a Palestinian citizen, I would be able to leave. In my reply, I asked my uncle if he would please, please, help get me out of Germany and into Palestine by marrying me.

A month passed before I received an answer. Uncle Herman wrote that he was old and ailing, no longer able to travel. However, he had contacted my cousin Fred, a cousin on my mother's side, who was stationed in Holland and serving in the Palestine brigade of the British army. He said that Fred had consented to marry me and that I could expect to hear from him soon. I would have preferred my uncle, but in desperation I was willing to marry anyone to get out. A divorce later would take care of such a marriage.

Returning from work one evening in July, I found Fred waiting for me. I recognized him by his striking resemblance to my mother and knew who he was before he even got up to embrace me. He was good-looking—my friends even thought handsome—in his late twenties, pleasant and well-mannered. We took a long walk that evening; there was much I wanted to know about the family in Palestine, but mostly I wanted to know if he would indeed marry me.

"Of course I will," he answered immediately. "My parents think this is a very good idea." I was delighted with the news—but only for a moment. Casually, he continued, "Even though we are cousins, we can still have a wonderful life together."

I was stunned. Did he and his parents actually think that our marriage was to be permanent? For some reason, I had assumed that Fred knew that this arranged marriage was merely a device to get me out of Germany. Although his attitude promised to be yet another obstacle, I said nothing and decided to go ahead with my plan for a temporary marriage. Everything else could be worked out later; first, I simply had to get out. As we continued walking, I asked about his work as a civilian, what he did in his spare time, if he was interested in music or the theater, and whether he had any hobbies.

He said he worked as a carpenter, did not care for books, museums, or the theater. He spent his free time helping his parents around the house and garden and in their small food store. He did not have a car but rode a bike. He closed by telling me that I would enjoy their quiet little place in Palestine and that we would, of course, live with his parents.

He stayed only three days, but at the end of that time, I knew that if I did go through with the plan, I definitely would not stay married to him. He was kind but uninteresting. We had nothing in common other than the fact that his

father and my mother were brother and sister. To think that the family had already decided on our marriage and had determined our future made me angry. I began to panic, but I tried to put all these feelings aside and concentrate on my main goal: getting out of Germany.

"I'll make the necessary arrangements with my commanding officer so we can marry as soon as possible. I'm sure the request will be granted." He looked happy, and I could tell that he fully intended to make this marriage a real and permanent arrangement. I was relieved when he left—and apprehensive about the future.

For the next six weeks, Fred's letters arrived regularly from Holland. The more he wrote, the more I knew that I could not possibly live with him. Still, he represented my best hope for getting out of Germany.

One morning, several weeks after Fred's visit, two British officers appeared in the office.

"Are you Cecilia Landau? We would like to talk to you."

"Of course," I replied quickly, pulling up some chairs. I knew that everyone who worked for the British was being investigated for security reasons, and I wanted to keep my job.

"Where were you born?" one of them continued.

"Hamburg, Germany," I replied.

"Your nationality?"

"Polish," I replied.

"How is that possible when you were born in Germany?"

"My parents were Polish nationals living in Germany, and I also held a Polish passport since birth," I responded.

"That does not seem likely; can you prove it?"

"I was born in Hamburg, Germany, but held a Polish passport, like my parents, since birth. I spent the war years in Poland, but after Auschwitz I was left without documents of any kind."

"You were born in Germany, and that, in our eyes, makes you a German national."

"Maybe in your eyes, but I'm not a German. I always had Polish papers." Being Polish was not such a bargain, I thought to myself, but it was infinitely better than being German.

The two officers thanked me politely, got up, and left the office. I was worried about losing my job. Had I given the right answers?

Several weeks later, Fred called from Holland. He sounded upset and disappointed. "My application to marry you has been rejected. No reason was given. I am angry and so very, very sorry."

I was crushed. My plan had failed. But in the back of my mind, there was also a tiny speck of relief—I wouldn't have to marry Fred.