

In the air

## Auschwitz (re)visited

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The trains, the trains... I have just been dragged out of a train at the end of an endless journey. I am standing on the sorting-platform at Auschwitz with my family. Men in uniform in front of us. The cold-eyed appraisal; the jerk of the thumb: to the left, to the right. It is night, always night. And cold. Noise and confusion. Soldiers shouting, clubbing, dragging men, women and children to the left, to the right. The pile of bags and suitcases on the platform grows larger. The lines of human beings, left and right, grow longer.

It is my turn. The appraisal, the thumb.

To the left. My family to the right.

This is the worst thing in the world. Separation. To die unknown, alone.

Rifles thud down on outreaching arms. The tearing apart, cries, tears. To the left. I am alone. Everyone is alone in this endless night. And then...

And now, in real life, we don't come to Auschwitz by train but by car and our time is circumscribed. For us there is life afterwards, elsewhere.

It is daytime, icy bright sun alternating with dark driving snow. Graceful willows in early leaf bend their boughs like long tresses of hair, greenish-yellow.

*Dein goldenes Haar Margarete.*

We follow our guide – and then it is before us: the black iron gateway, ARBEIT MACHT FREI. We go inside.

The barbed wire perimeter fence, yes, the guard-towers, yes, the rows of huts, yes; it's all so familiar. You've been there so often, in films, in dreams, in imagination. Familiar and so utterly, utterly empty, drained of the horror.

Here was where you mustered for roll call. They had to get the figures right, even the dead had to be counted: the living carried the bodies back to the camp at the end of the day's work. You stood there in your thin uniform, bare feet in wooden clogs, while they counted and recounted, until the numbers tallied. Once it took 22 hours.

The wind drives wild through the lines of huts; we shiver in our thick winter clothes.

The huts now harbour the museum: documents, objects, evidence of the literally unimaginable. Memory.

And endless statistics. Auschwitz is about numbers. They turned you into a number when you arrived and you became part of the statistics. So many prisoners, so many canisters of gas. So many minutes to die. So many kilos of hair to sell.

And you walk between ceiling-high glass cases, great grey slag-heaps of footwear, eye-glasses, of bags and suitcases,



„The worst thing in the world. Separation. To die unknown, alone.“

marked with the details of their owner: „Waisenkind Hana Fuchs, 3. Jun. 1936“.

Of human hair. Long tresses, curls, plaits; once raven, Titian, or silver; now ash.

*Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith.*

Of household utensils, religious objects. Families took with them the things they considered necessary for their life: a cheese-grater, a prayer-shawl, shoe-polish. The absurdity, the unbearable irony of taking shoe-polish to Auschwitz. And yet. Is that not precisely the point?

Of children's toys. Of all children born at Auschwitz, 46 survived.

Further on is the prison block with a row of four „standing-cells“, for punishment. They are about 80 cm square and chimney-like, with a gap at the bottom, closed with an iron grating, where they pushed you in. Four of you stood, pressed together, all night. Next day you had to go to work and then they brought you back again the next night.

Outside the prison block is the death wall, where they shot you, for stealing a crust, say. They stripped you first, to spare the uniform. The wall is covered in a special material to deaden the sound.

Gas chamber no 1. There were three, one at Auschwitz, two, much larger, at Birkenau, that were destroyed. A notice asks us to be silent in memory of those who died here. A long grey concrete room; the places in the roof where the gas came down; ash-grey walls, pitted and scarred; I press my hand against one, surely in the same place, someone... But there is no sudden vision of horror, just the utterly drained silence.

The ovens. They had a logistical problem: they could gas 800 people in one session but they could only incinerate some 340 per day. They often just burned the bodies outside. After stripping the human remains of sellable hair, rings

and gold fillings. Other humans, prisoners, were made to do this. The Commandant's house is just a few metres away. He lived there with his family and wrote in his diary every detail of daily life at Auschwitz.

Nearby is the gallows where he was hanged when the camp was liberated.

Our time is running out. On to Birkenau. Birkenau – Auschwitz II – is vast and flat and whipped by an icy wind. The huts are more primitive than at Auschwitz I. They were built as stables for 52 German horses; here they held up to 400 humans. Five of you lay crosswise on each slatted wooden bunk. The rain rained on you through holes in the roof.

There were six sanitary huts for the whole camp. You could use them twice a day, morning and evening. A long low stone block with a double row of holes occupies one half of the hut: this was the lavatories. You had very little time.

It is at Birkenau that the trains ended, at the sorting-platform. The camp-doctors sent you one way, if they judged you could work, and the other, to die in the gas chambers, if you were too old or too young or too weak or too ill to be of use.

This is the worst thing in the world.

We leave Auschwitz, but the sorting-platform, the standing-cells, the gas chamber, the Commandant's diary and the ashen tresses of hair tiptoe after me, whispering their questions in my ear: What kind of men could actually sit down and plan all this? – How do you get humans to do this to other humans? – Could it all happen again today?

And outside, the long yellow tresses of the weeping willows nod in the wind: yes, alas.

*Dein goldenes Haar Margarete.*

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