

Survivor testimonies

This section has been taken from a resource created by the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) to enable students to use real testimonies of Holocaust survivors when reflecting on and remembering the Holocaust.

Over 70 years have passed since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the other Nazi camps.

We must not forget those who were persecuted during the Holocaust and should try and act on the lessons that it teaches us.

This collection of writings is from survivors. All experienced Auschwitz and lived; some describe survival as luck, others are unable to account for their survival whilst friends and family perished.

These accounts give us a unique insight into the Holocaust. For more testimonies, see <https://www.het.org.uk/education/outreach-programme/survivor-stories>

Testimonies

Kitty Hart-Moxon

Kitty grew up in the town of Bielsko 15 miles from Auschwitz-Birkenau. She survived numerous camps and death marches with her mother. In these excerpts Kitty speaks of her memories of arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau. She was a teenager at the time.

There were there other prisoners already there. They told us this was a transit cell where prisoners were collected until there were enough to make up a transport to the camp at Auschwitz. More than that they didn't know. But we could decipher a few scrawls on the walls of the cell. Among pathetic little poems, names and home addresses were odd messages: Meet you in Auschwitz... On our way to hell... If you survive, contact so-and-so... Our cell began to fill up with a mixed lot of prisoners. There were German women serving sentences for murder and other crimes, petty thieves, undesirables who had refused to work hard enough for the Fatherland, and some political prisoners who had spent many years in labour camps... Mother made friends with a German gypsy who had been imprisoned for no other reason than simply being a gypsy. This woman had heard about Auschwitz. There was some sort of camp where people were kept. Had she learnt this from someone who had come back? No; she had never heard of anyone coming back. Just that there were stories rumours, a whisper about the place's existence. That was about all.

We came to a gate with a motto above it in iron lettering, silhouetted against the sky: Arbeit Macht Frei—'Work Brings Freedom'. Men who must have been in a different part of the train were taken in through the gate, along with some women. It was impossible to make out which women were chosen or why.

The rest of us were formed into fives and went staggering on, picking our way with the help of the erratic glare from three layers of illuminated, electrified fencing. Above stood a rank of high watchtowers.

The railway line petered out. We kept going until we were halted at another gate and a guardhouse. This was in fact the entrance to Auschwitz II, or Birkenau, though at which time we knew nothing of the names or the significance of this bewildering place.

A dank chill caught us. The whole area was shrouded in a clinging grey mist. But dawn was breaking. Or was it really the dawn? A reddish glow through the mist was flickering in the weirdest way and there was a sickly, fatty, cloying smell. Mother and I glanced at each other, baffled. Who could be roasting meat, great quantities of it, at this hour of the morning?

I lived through Birkenau without ever understanding how any members of a great nation could indulge in such wickedness. Not only that, but deliberately to set about contaminating everyone else too. For that was a part of their policy: to turn prisoners into beasts and then turn those beasts against one another. Only afterwards did I read the full history of those years and still I cannot fully understand. As it is barely credible to someone like myself who lived through the worst of it, perhaps I ought not to be surprised at members of a younger generation who cannot believe it happened at all. But I did live through it; and I do know it happened.

Excerpt taken from Kitty Hart-Moxon's book, *'Return to Auschwitz'*

Gena Turgel

Gena was born in Krakow in 1923. She survived Plaszow, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen. In her book, *'I Light a Candle'* she describes her arrival at Auschwitz and life in the camp.

We must have been walking for about three weeks and it snowed all the way. Sometimes we were made to walk overnight. We kept wondering: 'When will it end? How much further?'

As we got nearer to Auschwitz and the German border, some people came out of their houses with buckets of water and deliberately poured it on the ground in front of us, to mock us. Some stood eating chunks of bread as they watched us pass by...

The first sight that greeted us as we walked through the massive iron gates into the muddy compound at Auschwitz was a small group of women fiddlers. They came out of a hut on our left-hand side, playing their instruments. I remember thinking: 'this is like a madhouse'. It was too sweet, too good. I was suspicious because I felt that the sweetness of the music was likely to signify a brutal act.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, every last remnant of respect and dignity was squeezed out of us. In our loose, striped, insect-ridden clothing and with our hair cropped or shaven, we felt completely dehumanised.

Excerpt taken from Gena Turgel's book, *I light A Candle*



Elie Wiesel

Elie was born in Romania. He was deported to Auschwitz, where his parents and sister were murdered. Since the war, he has written numerous books reflecting on his experiences.

*The cherished objects we had brought with us this far were left behind in the train, and with them, at last, our illusions.
Every two yards or so an SS man held his tommy gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the crowd. An SS non-commissioned officer came to meet us, a truncheon in his hand. He gave the order: 'Men to the left! Women to the right!'*

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short, simple words. Yet that was the moment when I parted from my mother. I had not had time to think, but already I felt the pressure of my father's hand: we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sisters moving away to the right...I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister's fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. I went on walking. My father held onto my hand...

The SS officer gave the first order:

'Form fives!'

Commotion—at all costs we must keep together.

'Here, kid, how old are you?'

It was one of the prisoners who asked me this. I could not see his face but his voice was tense and weary.

'I'm not quite fifteen yet'

'No. Eighteen.'

'But I'm not,' I said. 'fifteen.'

'Fool. Listen to what I say. ...'

...So this was where we were going. A little farther on was another and larger ditch for adults. I pinched my face. Was I still alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it. How could it be possible for them to burn people, children and for the world to keep silent?

...Never shall I forget that night, the first in the camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even when I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

Excerpt taken from Elie Wiesel's book, *Night*



Josef Perl

Josef was born in Veliky Bochkov, Czechoslovakia in 1930. Josef experienced and survived life in ghettos and camps as well as death marches. The following extract describes his arrival at Auschwitz.

We are in Auschwitz. The doors of our wagons were unlocked. Our section of the train had not stopped at a platform so we had to jump down. As always, everything had to be done in double quick time. There was screaming and shouting, guards lashing out and beating anyone who could not get out of the way. Dogs on the end of short leads were barking and jumping up at the new arrivals, viciously biting many of them. I saw old people, ill people, people so weak that they were almost dead, come tumbling out of the wagons when the doors were opened. Then I saw a baby being born as its mother was pushed out onto the ground. An SS guard grabbed the baby, cut the cord and threw it unceremoniously to one side, like so much rubbish. He pushed the distraught mother to where a smartly dressed Commandant was deciding who was to live and who was to die. Waving a riding crop, he indicated 'links oder rechts' (left or right) with a flick of the wrist in a most casual, almost bored way. Those he sent to the left (over 70 percent) went immediately to the gas chambers, those to the right had been selected, either to work or for experimentation. It was Dr Mengele.

Extracts from Benjamin, Arthur C, *Faces in the Smoke: The Story of Josef Perl*

Trude Levi

Trude was born in Szombathely, Hungary. After the occupation of Hungary in March 1944 she was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and later transferred to Buchenwald. Trude describes her experiences in the camps.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, Birkenau B Lager, everything seemed greyish-yellow to me. Not a blade of grass between the barracks. When we were inside one of the barracks there was no space even to lie down. There were 1,200 women to each barrack. The only way we could be accommodated was by sitting in rows back to back with knees pulled up, feet touching. That was how we slept during the four weeks we were at Birkenau. If you had to go to the latrine- and most of us suffered from dysentery, rumours being spread that some drug had been added to our food- we had to climb over bodies to get to the exit. Some women began to scream and then the guards would shoot into the barrack. Once you had got out, to get in again, to secure another sitting place in a row, was a very difficult feat indeed.

Once a day when our bread was being distributed, our Kapo gave a smaller piece to a twelve-year-old girl who was there with her mother. I told the Kapo to give the child the same as we all received. She refused and I became angry and attacked her. Kapos were the stand-ins for the SS women. They wielded great power. There was silence. Would she send me to my death? If she denounced me to the authorities that could have been the end for me. But Manczi the Kapo gave the child an additional piece of bread and from then on she respected me. I never had any more problems with her.

Excepts taken from Trude's book *A Cat Called Adolf*

