

DIAMANTE FRANCO

Rhodes Island, Auschwitz-Birkenau

From Rhodes we were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. After 40 days quarantine a selection took place during which I was separated from my parents and my younger sister. I remember my separation from my mother. That was a real problem! I kissed her, and my little sister. I shouted for my mother. A German was hitting me with his baton. She turned around and said,

"My darling, don't ...".

It was terrible! My other sister Rachelle and I remained together and the only luck we had throughout this awful nightmare is that we stayed together until the end. During the quarantine, I was totally exhausted, I could not handle the cold and I pretended to be sick - "Le malade Imaginaire". One morning after the doctor's rounds, I jumped into the line where sick people with temperatures were standing. We did not then realize where that line was heading. Only now do I realise what a great risk it was to pretend to be sick and what a great miracle it was that I was not sent to be killed.

When we arrived at the "Revier" or infirmary, I complained of a headache. They found that I actually did have a temperature! They took me to the hospital. There we saw some of the Rhodeslis who had been taken sick before me, like Allegra Levy from Kos, and Regita Binou. Allegra invited me to share her bunk with her, third level, and told me that she had typhoid fever. Her temperature was more than 40 degrees C and she was delirious. Beneath her was the sister of Rebecca Menashe, Sylvia, just as sick. The nurse came twice a day to hand out pills. I used to hide the pills under the mattress. The nurse would mutter to herself in German as if to say "what on earth are you still doing here alive?" I did this for five or six days.

Rachelle tried to visit me. The only way for her to enter the hospital was to put a square of white fabric on her head so that she could pretend to be a nurse. She came to warn me that very soon they were going to transport the men elsewhere and that we would no longer see our father and brother. She urged me to get out of hospital.

The following morning was Yom Kippur.

I got up and went to block 20 to rejoin the girls I had been with. A few hours later I saw the men leave. My sister and I shouted good-byes to my father but he never saw us. All of a sudden, a German lady guard came calling a number (We had become mere numbers by then). It was my number! I got up. She seemed to ask me who gave me permission to leave an infection area to come and infect this block. I could not figure out what she was asking me. She grabbed me by the ear and threw me hard from one side of the block to another. My head hit the fireplace and I subsequently got a huge infection there. I had a very high temperature. I developed an infection in the ear with lots of pus coming out and had to return to the infirmary to show the nurse. They took toilet paper and bandaged it,

that was it! The infection disappeared all by itself. From then on I never left the block. I pretended to be sick all the time and never went to roll call.

All the time that I was in the camp I managed to keep my old blue cardigan. When it was the call-up, I always had to remove it or they would have taken it away from me. I would hide it! It was covered with body lice all the time. This blue jersey kept me alive. Those lice would suck my blood when I had the jersey on, but kept me warm. There was never time to remove them so I just left them on. Hygiene was such a terrible problem! There was a room with a large hose pipe with a few holes every here and there and that's how we were expected to remain clean; no soap, no towels. (My sister still has today a soap that she stole there, with three initials on it which stood for - PURE JEWISH FAT. I just do not know how she can bear to look at it). I remained there from August to January until the Germans abandoned us.

After eight days they came back. We learnt later that they had dug a huge ditch planning to kill us all in order to destroy any evidence. Our luck was that the Russian troops approached the place where the ditch had been dug between Auschwitz and Birkenau. The Germans put the sickly in the jeeps and forced all the others to walk. All those who were unable to handle the walk were shot dead. Rachelle and I were at the very end of the line. My sister who had always done much for me was totally discouraged. She sat on the side of the road and said,

"Diamante, you go on. If you see our parents tell them that you had to leave me because I just could not go anymore, Go on!"

How could I leave her behind? I decided to stay with her. The German guards would in these cases come near the sufferer and count up to three. If by then the person did not get up, they would shoot her in the head. When one of them came to me and did this, I did not get up in order to give Rachelle a fright and make her get up. She did not want me to die so she got up just in time and then I did also.

After a while, afraid to be captured by the Russians the Nazis simply abandoned us in the middle of the road. We did not know what to do. Rachelle was really weak. We saw a barrack in the distance and headed for it. It was a big building which served as a hotel for the Germans. There we found coal which saved us. There were eight of us girls. The next morning we saw a Hungarian doctor coming out of one of the rooms. He spoke a little Italian and a little French and said,

"Brothers and sisters, we are approaching the liberation! Don't be discouraged now. The Russians will liberate us soon."

We stayed there for three days. Rachelle would go outside every day with a bucket to fetch snow so we had some water. We also had a little bread that we had kept which we shared among us. That is what saved us once again from death.

On the third day, Rachele went out when the bombardment stopped and saw the first Russian. She tried to alert us that "the Russ .. ". From the excitement, she fainted. He tried to tell us that he would not harm us. He took some sugar cubes out of his pocket and gave them to us. We ate and stayed there waiting. All the places nearby were liberated: the sick were taken to hospitals and the others were taken to Auschwitz. We were stupid, we refused to go with them, afraid that we would then become prisoners of the Russians. We stayed behind for 21 days eating rubbish left over by the sick at Birkenau.

Each day when we hid in the building two of the girls went out to "organize" i.e. steal some food at the old Birkenau blocks. One day, Rachele returned with a piece of mirror. She asked us to look at ourselves. I looked at myself, I saw ugly hair sticking up untidily. I asked her jokingly to find me a clip now that she had made me look at myself. Believe it or not, she brought me one!! A miracle! Another day I asked her for a piece of fish, for a change! She said that I was pushing my luck, we were nowhere near the sea. The next day, as she was on the hunt for food, she found a little fish hidden under the snow! I ate it raw, without the head. We were far from the sea; how did this fish land up there?

One day the girls met Simon Hasson the first cousin of one. He said he was looking for his wife, Rosa, whom he believed was with us. He was going from block to block and asked us which was ours. We explained that we stayed elsewhere. He said that we were silly and should rather join up with the other prisoners. The next day, we arrived at the gates of the camp. We could not go in. A Russian stopped us and forbade us to enter. We showed him our numbers. He said,

"We have been here for three weeks- Where have you been?".

They thought that we were German partisans. It was mid-February. It was cold. We were stuck! All of a sudden, four trucks arrived. One of the men there, an interpreter for the Russians, heard us speak French and asked us our story. When we explained, he promised to help on condition that we went to the end of the road to join the Serbs. He said that he would try to bring us some food. We went there and found an empty building in which we settled. At night he came with three German prisoners who brought us some food: bread and honey. We just could not believe that this was really true!!

He told us that to be safe we would have to be quiet and put out the candles at night. But there were mattresses there, we had food, we were protected from the cold - so we started to have a party!!! At about 2.00 am, a Russian arrived and tried to throw us out. We begged him to wait till the morning. The next day, the interpreter arrived and was cross when we told him the story. He told the Russians that we were prisoners of the Nazis, just like all the others. They eventually agreed to let us into Auschwitz on condition that we worked in the kitchen peeling the potatoes. So we did.

The German prisoners would come in to clean our room two or three times a day. We were given cigarettes, tobacco and paper. I never smoked and so I accumulated quite a lot. One day, I thought I would give some to the German cleaners. A Russian saw me and could not believe his eyes. He grabbed me and said,

"Mama caput! Papa caput!!."

He could not believe that I could be kind to the people who killed my parents.

There were Poles and Hungarians with us.

The first time that we met up with Rhodesis was in Bologna. After the war, all the countries were trying to repatriate their citizens who had been taken prisoners. Italy was the last. Once we returned to Italy, we went with the Italians to Bologna, to a DP camp where everyone was redirected to their home towns. We were standing in the food queue in the evening, chatting in Ladino. Someone heard us and when we said that we were waiting to be sent back to Rhodes, we were told that we would be there a long time,

We escaped the next day to find the Jewish community of Bologna. We were directed to a place out of town; it took us two hours on foot. We were directed to the third floor of a building. We saw some of the people we knew from Rhodes. We started to ask news about our relatives. We were invited to stay there and we were very well taken care of, fed and lodged. That is why I always say that I have eaten charity food and so I will never refuse to give food to someone else, so much did I appreciate it. One lady living there, Marie Candos, an ex-Rhodesli was married to the very religious Jewish engineer who came to Rhodes to build the famous bridge. Her family managed to escape. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, she came to say good-bye to the refugees and give them a little money. She saw us and later on sent us money through her daughter. Thus the first money we touched after the camp was from that lady who had found out who we were. All of us were debating seriously what to buy first. What beautiful charity! Next, we received money from an American society, UNRRA, who gave us 3000 lirettas every month and a voucher to eat at "Mezza popolare", a restaurant for workers, until the time when they could repatriate us.

We were put into contact with people from Elizabethville and there we joined my two older brothers and my husband of one day who was in Abuta. I had not expected him to have waited for me. He did wait!

DIAMANTE FRANCO was born in Rhodes Island in 1920 and educated there. She survived Auschwitz-Birkenau and was liberated on 27.1.1945. Before coming to South Africa in 1978, she lived in Italy and the Congo. She married Bension Franco and has a child.

Source: "IN SACRED MEMORY" Recollections of the Holocaust by survivors living in Cape Town, edited by Gwyne Schrire.