

Kitty Hart-Moxon – Obey and Die

I was born Kitty Felix in a town called Bielsko in Poland, which in 1939 was very close to the German and Czechoslovakian frontiers. My brother Robert was five years older. We had a wonderful and most interesting childhood. Because our town lay at the foot of a mountain range, we had numerous sports facilities and most of the inhabitants spent their leisure time in the mountains. In winter there was skiing, tobogganing, and ice skating. In summer everyone went hiking and climbing. And we also had swimming, athletic and gymnastic clubs.

I was 12 years old at the outbreak of the war in 1939. The German armies invaded Poland very close to our town. Because we were so close to the frontier, most of the population started to flee days before the invasion.

My father decided to head for the centre of the country to a town called Lublin. I was quite unable to grasp what was happening. But as the Germans brought the war ever closer and the town was bombed daily, I began to suspect that there was something terribly serious happening.

Within weeks German troops entered the city. Soon after the occupation, posters were put up, decreeing that the Jewish population had to register. Without registration it was impossible to get ration cards and thus obtain food. Many young people began to flee to the East, including my brother Robert. Every day brought new laws and restrictions. We had to wear armbands with the Star of David clearly displayed. Soon a small section of the town was allocated to the Jews and we all had to move into this section – which became the Lublin Ghetto. Leaving the ghetto area was punishable by death.

Children were not allowed any schooling and my father was no longer able to carry out any work and earn a living. Any man outside in the open was liable to be grabbed and carted off to shovel snow, and often never returned.

Soon the ghetto became overcrowded as the Germans began to bring in people from many parts of Europe and simply dumped them in the ghetto streets. Living conditions worsened day by day; there was total chaos. The newcomers could not communicate with the local population and their currency was not valid in the ghetto. Soon there was an epidemic of typhus and cholera.

But worse was to come. There were almost daily raids into our homes by special action Storm Troopers called *Einsatzgruppen*. They would smash their way in without notice, beat up everyone, confiscate the food they found and often throw people down the stairs and out of windows. Mostly the people in a cordoned-off street were forced to line up,

pushed onto lorries and deported to unknown destinations. They were never seen again. It was often the children who kept life going. My father, for instance, would send me with whatever he still possessed to smuggle my way into the Aryan sector of the city to barter some goods for flour, bread or potatoes. I would go down a manhole through the city sewers and bring back a little food.

My mother, who was a qualified English teacher, made contact with a Catholic priest whose vicarage was opposite the Gestapo headquarters. She gave him English lessons in return for food. Crawling through the city sewers, she too risked her life, but without our endeavours we would have died of starvation.

The ghetto's main street was always patrolled by the SS Action Troops and one had to bow to them and step into the gutter. On one occasion, when nearing a patrol, my 15-year-old friend failed to step off the pavement and was shot dead in front of me. People began to build barricades and hiding places in their homes, but my father thought that the only way to survive was to escape from the ghetto, even though this was punishable by death. Yet we took the chance and attempted several escapes.

The first was in the winter of 1940-41 when we tried to reach the then Russian frontier at the river Bug, east of Lublin. We travelled by horse and cart over several days, mostly cross-country since it was forbidden for us to be outside the ghetto and on main roads – there was a curfew and anyone found after dark was shot dead on the spot. Unfortunately by the time we reached the frontier town of Dorohusk on the river Bug, it had been closed 24 hours before. Unknown to us, the Germans were already preparing for the invasion of the Soviet Union in June of 1941.

We waited for the river to freeze and then attempted to cross it illegally to reach the Soviet Union by horse and sleigh. We had almost reached the far bank when shots rang out from both sides. We crouched in the sleigh, but the guide swung round and took us back to the German side. There was no alternative but to return to the Lublin ghetto.

Conditions were now intolerable there and we could not find anywhere to live even though there were constant deportations. Once again my father decided to take us out of the ghetto. Disguised as peasants with bundles on our backs, we walked out before the ghetto was completely sealed off from the outside world.

We reached a small village south of Lublin called Zabia Wola where we found a small Jewish farming community. It was the summer of 1941. My father found work at a nearby Estate library and my mother once more gave English lessons for food. Soon the Germans began to blackmail the Jewish population to give up articles or food every day – wedding rings, shoes, eggs etc. We were constantly threatened with deportation to unknown destinations unless we satisfied the demands. We did not realise at the time that we were not many miles from the killing centre of Belzec. Most of the Jews from the neighbourhood had been deported there and killed instantly on arrival.

In August 1942, we realised that a deportation was imminent. My father decided to leave, but we still had my grandmother with us, and she now refused to go anywhere. There

was no option: she had to be left behind. As dawn broke my father, mother and I escaped into the forest nearby.

We watched in horror from a clearing in the woods as the whole village was surrounded by troops in helmets, carrying pointed guns. There were screams as people were thrown onto carts and lorries and driven away. We now know they were all murdered in Belzec that day, 12 August 1942.

We hid in the forest some three weeks, living mostly on berries. Eventually we made our way back into Lublin – not to the ghetto but to the vicarage of the Catholic priest, who had obtained non-Jewish documents for us that were to help save our lives. I now had a new identity. My name was Leokadia Dobrzynska, born in Lublin.

The priest had worked out a survival plan, but we would have to part, as together we were unlikely to survive. My father was to go to Tarnow to be employed in a sawmill. My mother (now my aunt with a different name) and I would go into a Lublin collection centre where the SS were holding non-Jewish Poles they had grabbed off the streets to dispatch them to work in German factories. We got to the centre and soon found ourselves in a train, on our way with a group of Poles into the German Reich.

Our destination was Bitterfeld, the ammunition plant of IG Farben. As I spoke German well, I was to work in the offices and was given the task of issuing meal vouchers, enabling me to eat in the canteen reserved for the German staff. The women had the dreadful work of shaking aluminium dust from sacks, which was very harmful to the lungs. My mother, being the eldest, did not have to work at all.

We would have survived the war there quite well, but it was not to be. A spy had been planted among us and soon it became clear that we were not the only Jews among our group of 50 women.

On 13 March 1943, I was called to the chief's office. On the table lay a cap with skull and crossbones. I knew at once that we had been betrayed. Thirteen of us were driven to Gestapo headquarters and interrogations began to find out where we had obtained our documents. Our greatest fear was that they would pick up the priest and also my father. Mother and I decided that we would never confess, come what may! We were separated and put into solitary confinement.

Some days later we were charged at a trial. We had committed three offences:

1. we entered the German Reich illegally
2. we were in possession of false documents
3. we were Jewish

These crimes all carried the death penalty.

Our execution was to take place next morning. I was 15 years old and not ready to die.

We were led to a courtyard at dawn and made to face a brick wall. We stood on sawdust to mop up the blood. The guns were in position. The order was given to fire. As the shots rang out, some girls crumpled on the floor beside me and my first thought was that I had been missed. But no! They actually fired into the air. It was a mock execution to show us what was to come if we didn't cooperate. In fact our death sentence had been commuted to hard labour for life in a concentration camp and the camp Gestapo were also to interrogate us by 'special means' about our false documents.

We were moved to prisons in Halle, Leipzig and Dresden, and then travelled in a specially constructed prisoner train fitted with interior cages. We were delivered to the gates of hell – Auschwitz.

Auschwitz is not something that I can possibly describe in a few pages and there is no language that can adequately explain it – other than to say that we were now on a different planet! No one could possibly have imagined what was to come.

Most people who entered through the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau were confronted with an immediate 'selection': either to be admitted to the camp or to be killed by gas on arrival. However, having come from prison, we were not subjected to immediate selection. We were still to be questioned by the camp's Gestapo. This is how my mother entered the camp with me: had there been a selection, she would have been killed on arrival as only young people were admitted into Auschwitz.

Screaming women prisoners with whips, and SS guards with howling Alsatians greeted us on arrival. We were marched to be stripped, shaved of all hair and tattooed on our left forearms. From then on we had no names. I was now number 39934 and my mother 39933. We were thrown khaki breeches, uniform tops from former Soviet prisoners of war who had been murdered the previous week, and wooden clogs for our feet.

Our sleeping quarters, the stone hut called the Block, already held 1,000 women – it had three-tier platforms, each to sleep eight people, but they were all occupied and we sat all night on the stone channel that ran right through the Block.

It was still dark when whistles blew and there were screams of 'Raus' – Out! It was *Zahlappell* – roll-call. This ritual took place twice a day, morning and evening, when the whole camp stood to attention, anything from 2-4 hours, waiting to be counted by SS personnel. There was no water to wash or drink and no lavatories. Latrines were built some time later, but access was restricted and only possible with payment, usually by bartering our bread ration.

The small bread ration was handed out after evening roll-call and the camp soup at midday. This was the only food distributed and it soon became apparent it would not sustain life for very long.

I was soon put onto hard labour – marching many hours in wooden clogs and then digging trenches or carrying heavy stones. I realised that it would be impossible to stay alive very long working outside; somehow I had to find a way out. Fortunately, I managed almost

immediately to get my mother to work in the hospital compound. At least she was not exposed to the elements and hard labour and did not have to stand for roll-call for hours on end. The counting took place within the hospital block.

Newcomers to the camp were considered the lowest form of life and much despised by the ruling prisoners. It was imperative to get proper clothes and give an impression of being 'streetwise' and thus not be at the mercy of the ruling prisoners who had the power over life and death.

For many months I worked in dozens of work groups: carrying shit in buckets to the cesspool, loading dead bodies, working on the construction of the railway, digging trenches, or working in potato fields which enabled me to smuggle some potatoes back into the camp. Whenever possible I hid and did no work at all, just trying to conserve as much energy as possible.

There was an epidemic of typhus and many other infectious diseases and in the later part of 1943 I went down with typhus. Most people did not survive when they fell ill as treatment was non-existent. But I was taken to my mother who looked after me and hid me during the daily selections for the gas chambers.

I had many complications and partially recovered after some three months. I was lucky, and managed to stay and work as an orderly in the dysentery hospital block. The daily death toll was horrendous and my main duty was dragging the dead out of the hut. Every day the SS Dr Mengele – named 'The Angel of Death' – would carry out selections, walking from bunk to bunk pointing to those he sentenced to die.

It was early spring 1944 when he announced that the whole block was to be emptied, which meant that all patients were to die. We, the 'staff', were to be transferred. A new work group, the *Kanada Kommando*, was formed consisting of 400 girls. On a fine spring morning, we were marched out, totally unprepared for what we were about to experience. We had heard about the *Kanada*. It was a nickname given to the group of men and women who sorted the possessions of the people brought to Auschwitz from all parts of Europe. These workers had access (though strictly forbidden) to clothes and food and because of that had a better chance of survival. But they were extremely secretive about the nature of their work.

We were marched to a relatively small wooded area where we saw four brick structures with very tall chimneys. These were the four crematoria housing the gas chambers. Many sections were cordoned off with electrified fencing. There were some 30 wooden sheds and at the top end a large L-shaped building, the Sauna or 'bath house'. We were now in the *Kanada* Section of Birkenau: the extermination centre.

All the wooden sheds were jam-packed with belongings of all descriptions. At the far end was a gigantic pile of jumble some three-storeys high of everything imaginable that the deportees had brought with them. Food of every description was rotting on the pile, yet it was inaccessible to the starving prisoners.

We were housed in the first two sheds, where I had a direct view of Crematorium IV. I was on nightshift. My task was to find men's jackets in the jumble, form bundles of twelve in a given time, sign with my number and hand them in for disinfection. Every jacket had to be searched for valuables. Often by the end of a shift, four of us would carry jewellery and currency that was found in the clothes in blankets and buckets.

Over the other side of the high tension electrified fence was the wooded area. Thousands of people, including children, were gathered there. They imagined they were going to be showered and admitted to the camp and had no conception of what was to come. In fact they were waiting their turn to go into the gas chamber and die of suffocation.

Small groups one at a time were let into the gas chamber. Day in, day out, we observed in horror as men in green uniforms donned gas masks, climbed ladders and emptied tins of white crystals into an opening in the roof of the building. Soon screams could be heard – it varied how long this lasted. Smoke and fire began to belch out of the chimney and soon ash was dumped in the pond behind crematorium IV. Often there was insufficient capacity to dispose of the dead and piles of corpses lay outside the building waiting to be burned.

My time in the *Kanada Kommando* lasted eight months. During that time we witnessed the killing of more than half a million people. We knew how many trains arrived daily and roughly how many people were packed in the numerous cattle trucks. There were days when an unbelievable number of some 10-15,000 people were gassed. All the Jews of Hungary. Everyone in the Gypsy Camp. All the inhabitants of the Lodz Ghetto, the inmates of Majdanek, Theresienstadt and people from many other locations.

We girls could not take in what was happening – even though we heard the screams as people were dying, it was just too unreal and our brains could not accept what we were witnessing. But it sank in eventually when we saw the people disappear before our eyes, never to be seen again except for the piles of belongings left behind.

On 7 October 1944, loud explosions were heard from Crematorium IV and the huge chimney toppled to the ground. It was an uprising, but we did not know it. We believed the SS were bombarding the whole area as we had been told they intended to raze the whole camp to the ground and kill all the inmates.

In the ensuing battle many SS personnel and all the male prisoners lay dying. The uprising was started in crematorium IV by the men who worked inside, but it was only made possible because of four girls who worked in the ammunition plant. They supplied the material for the explosives. One girl was from my group and in a way we were all implicated. We supplied many valuables for the purchase of explosives.

Afterwards, there were reprisals and interrogations. The four girls were found, tortured and hanged in full view of the entire camp. I was transferred back into the main camp. The Russian forces were fast advancing from the East. The SS were determined that none of the inmates would be liberated by the Allies, and so they ordered the evacuation of the

whole Auschwitz complex. Prisoners were transferred by cattle truck or on foot westwards to other camps, or to the numerous ammunition plants inside Germany where they were used as slave labour.

On 11 November 1944, I was marched to the cattle trucks with my mother and 100 women to be transported to the base camp Gross Rosen in south-eastern Germany. Over 100 sub-camps had been built in this mountainous area, many situated in caves. We were sent to the nearby town of *Reichenbach* to the *Telefunken-Phillips* electronics factory.

Obtaining any extra food was impossible there and soon many of us were on the verge of collapse due to starvation. But I had a saviour: a German civilian woman working next to me placed herself in grave danger for me. She would bring a sandwich daily and hide it at the back of a shelf. In the three months at the factory, she saved both my mother and me from total starvation.

The Russian Army was advancing and closing in. Gunfire could be heard in the distance and liberation seemed close. Without warning, we were lined up outside our hut on 18 February 1945, on my mother's 55th birthday. We were to be evacuated on foot. Soon we were on the death march, heading into the wilderness of the Sudeten mountain range, the *Eulengebirge*. Our column was joined by hundreds of women from the neighbouring camps and stretched as far as the eye could see. The snow was some two feet deep and it was still snowing heavily. Most of us were barefoot and with hardly any outerwear. Soon we were drenched. No food was issued. By the first evening, most of us were completely exhausted and near collapse, but it was imperative to keep going and be at the front of the column. Everyone who lagged behind was shot dead by the guards at the rear. The nights were spent in the open sleeping on frozen ground, but whenever possible some of us would stray from the column to find shelter in barns or sheds, and forage for food while the guards were asleep.

There were occasions when we attacked passing peasant carts carrying potatoes or other farm produce. Then the guards would lash out and once I was struck with a rifle butt on my head and knocked unconscious. My friends carried me and dragged me along for many hours.

We began to climb the 'High Owl' mountain, the highest peak bordering Czechoslovakia. It was dawn when we reached a plateau and quite unexpectedly met convoys of German refugees asleep in horse-drawn carts. We saw meat and sausages hanging from the sides of the carts. Nearby were cows to be milked! In a flash we attacked and overran them; it was our first sight of food in days.

By this time our column had shrunk drastically. Many women had collapsed from exhaustion and lack of food and did not get up again. Others froze to death during the many nights in the open in temperatures of minus 10-15 degrees. We had covered some 100 kilometres of mountainous terrain by the time we reached Trautenau, a camp in Czechoslovakia.

The very next day those still on their feet were forced into open coal trucks. The few hours in Trautenau enabled me to obtain a loaf of bread bought with the single gold sovereign I had brought from *Kanada* – a huge risk punishable by death. This single loaf saved my mother and me from complete collapse in the next six days.

Our nightmare journey had begun. We were packed like sardines and had to take turns to sit on the floor of the truck that was now also our lavatory. We passed no stations or towns; travelling through open country it was impossible to tell where we were heading for. The Allies mistook us for military convoys and bombed the train, the track was blown up and the train headed backwards. Gradually our truck started to empty as many of our friends began to die of cold and lack of nourishment.

After six days and seven nights in the open, we at last reached a destination. The sign read Porta Westfalica. We had travelled 1,000 miles to the north-west of Germany. By this time only about 200 of us were still alive.

We were marched to a small camp at the edge of a forest and soon the guards took us to our place of work inside a mountain cave. It was another Philips electronics factory. We were lowered down on platforms, 11 levels deep underground. At that depth, breathing became very uncomfortable due to poor ventilation, but we were made to work 12-hour shifts.

At the beginning of spring 1945, the Allies were closing in from the west, and we were again evacuated, this time eastwards to Belsen. But because of overcrowding there, we were forced to run into a siding. From the stationary cattle trucks we heard sounds of people's cries for help. Before we knew it, we too were pushed into cattle trucks and the doors were bolted. It soon became apparent that we were sealed inside an airtight truck – to be abandoned and left to die of suffocation.

It was pitch dark inside the truck and panic broke loose; the walls were wet with condensation and soon we were gasping for air. It was not long before many of us became unconscious. I was fortunate to possess a small knife. Pressing to the floor of the truck, I enlarged a small gap which allowed my mother and me to take turns to breathe. The train began to move. It was impossible to know where we were going, but suddenly it stopped. We had been sealed for many hours when we heard footsteps outside. We screamed for help. Someone unbolted the doors and we simply fell out of the truck, onto three men in German uniform. They seemed completely taken aback at what they found and soon we demanded to be taken to the nearest camp.

Much later it came to light that our truck was the only one opened. After hostilities had ceased, 240 bodies had been found in the train and later a memorial was erected to commemorate the horrific event at the siding on the outskirts of Salzwedel.

The soldiers who opened our truck escorted us to a nearby camp in Salzwedel. The women in this camp were brought here from the Lodz Ghetto and had worked for one and a half years in chemical factories.

It was now April 1945. We were told that no more food would be allocated from now on. By this time our group had become too weak to move about as we had been without nourishment for many days. We heard that the camp was mined and the authorities intended to blow us all up.

One day leaflets fluttered down from the sky. They came from French prisoners of war who had already been freed and promised to cut the high tension electricity in the fence and rescue us. Liberation was close. Once more we could hear the gunfire and shells, and bullets passed over our heads. This time the SS abandoned the camp and disappeared.

On Saturday 14 April 1945 strange tanks rolled past and did not notice us! But suddenly a tank swung round and burst through the gates of the camp. The American 84th Division had arrived and saved us just in time from certain death. They immediately announced that they had no food and we would need to find some from the local population. Those still able to walk rushed into the town. There followed a three-day rampage in Salzwedel. We entered homes in search of food and clothing, but also destroyed everything that we could see.

Soon the Americans were due to leave the area and hand over the town to the Russian Army. We panicked, since no one wished to remain under Communist occupation. The Americans took us on their tanks and dumped us in the territory occupied by the British Army.

My mother and I soon began to work as interpreters to the British Military Government, then we moved to the large Displaced Persons Refugee camp to help the Quaker Relief Team to set up and run the camp on the outskirts of Brunswick. Families that were scattered all over Europe had to be reunited. For Mother and me that was not to be. We soon found out that my father had been murdered and my brother Robert killed in action. About 30 members of our family had perished in Auschwitz. It was a year and a half before we finally obtained special permits to join our only relatives who were still alive in the UK.

My uncle was at the quayside in Dover to meet us. His greeting was chilly, 'Welcome to England. Understand that in my house I don't want you to speak about anything that happened to you. I don't want to know and I don't want my girls upset.' Mother and I were stunned!

We realised that a difficult future lay ahead, but we were appalled and unprepared to discover that this attitude of indifference and often antagonism towards survivors was almost universal. Naturally, there were some individual acts of kindness, but little practical help or financial support was available from charitable organisations to the few survivors here in the Midlands. It was a devastating start to our new life.

In September 1946 Britain was an uncaring society, unwilling to listen to survivors. The government too was unhelpful and even imposed restrictions on the type of employment survivors were allowed to take up. There were no government grants, no welfare

payments and no counselling was offered to help survivors come to terms with their traumatic past. We were simply left to cope on our own. I had lost all my teenage years; instead of studying, I had spent six years fighting for my life. For me, Auschwitz was my university. It certainly equipped me to cope with whatever life would throw back at me. Some four decades passed before people recognised the urgent need for lessons to be learned from the Holocaust, if history is not to be repeated. Being the worst example, the Holocaust is central to understanding the causes of the genocides that have occurred in many parts of the world since the end of the Second World War.

I dedicate this chapter to the memory of the grandparents of my sons, David and Peter, as well as to the youth of today. In particular to my grandchildren: Lucy, Jonathan, Sophie, Simon, Daniel, Juliet and Michael.

© Aegis Institute

Testimony from *Survival: Holocaust Survivors Tell Their Story*

(Quill/Aegis, 2003) reproduced with kind permission of Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre. <http://www.holocaustcentre.net/>