# Trude Levi

## 'She isn't worth a bullet'

April 23 is my birthday. Every year it reminds me of my 20th and 21st birthdays.

I was born and brought up in Szombathely, a provincial town on the Austrian border in Hungary. My mother came from Vienna and was a language teacher. My father was Hungarian, a gynaecologist, but he also worked as a general practitioner. We had many books, made music and altogether I grew up in a highly interesting and cultured environment. We had little money because my father was a left-wing socialist and he treated many of his patients without asking them for payment.

From 1938 onwards, when Hitler annexed Austria, and throughout the war when he occupied European countries, refugees came to Hungary. They told us stories about Jews being beaten up and dragged away, never to be heard of again. In those days there was no TV, and without seeing starving children, emaciated and murdered people for ourselves, we simply could not imagine that man's inhumanity to his fellow man could be so great. We didn't believe the stories we were told.

In 1944 I was nearly 20 years old and worked as a nursery school teacher in Budapest. Though we did have restrictions imposed by the anti-Semitic Hungarian Government, the Jews of Hungary were at that time the only ones who had not been deported. It seemed that we had escaped the fate of all the Jews of Europe. It was obvious that Germany was losing the war and we hoped that soon all would be over.

But on 19 March 1944 we found that German tanks, soldiers and machine guns lined the banks of the river Danube. When no one expected it any more, we were occupied. First we had to buy a yellow star and sew it on our garments. Courageous Christian friends offered to hide me in Budapest. However, I decided to go home and join my parents. I had to apply for a special permit to travel. The journey was long and on arrival after the curfew for Jews of 6 p.m., I was subjected to extremely unpleasant treatment while walking home from the station. It ensured that I was never homesick again.

At home I found my 49 year old mother had collapsed into a confused, old woman. Our flat had been searched for subversive literature and my father dragged away as a political prisoner on 22 April. My parents had intended to celebrate my twentieth birthday a day late as I arrived on the 24 April.

A ghetto for Jews was created in the centre of our city. On 7 May my mother and I were moved – with one piece of luggage each – into a small room with four other women. Before that, we had to hand in our bicycles, jewels, savings bank books and cash except a few pennies. We stayed there for seven and a half weeks, with little food, until the end of June when we were marched into our first concentration camp.

Before we were allowed in, we were searched. Some people had sewn some small jewels into their clothes. If these were found on them, they were beaten and thrown into the camp already dead. The ground was polluted and filthy and we slept there. In the morning I heard a call for 50 volunteers to go to a neighbouring town. I dragged my mother to the assembly place and pushed out an older woman to enable us both to get into the group. We travelled by train for an hour and were taken to our next camp where by chance we met my father, of whom we had had no news for the past two and a half months. We did not even know if he was still alive. In pushing away that old lady, I behaved very badly, as never before or since, but it was worth it. We were now together, the three of us.

After two days, we were put into cattle-trucks – 120 of us in one truck. We sat squashed, back-to-back, knees pulled up, tightly. Although men, women, children and strangers were packed together, we had to overcome our inhibitions to use the two buckets for our human needs. The muck spilled over and we sat in it. There was little air and people became dehydrated. They became hysterical, screamed, went mad; some had heart attacks and died. We travelled for five days and five nights. On the sixth day we arrived in Auschwitz. The ramp was near the chimneys. My mother had collapsed and had to be dragged out of the truck. Hopefully she no longer understood what was happening to her. She was taken in the direction of the chimneys – from which smoke and stench poured out from the burning bodies – and this was with us day and night while we were in this extermination camp. Nearly 90 per cent of the Hungarians were killed on arrival. Men and women were separated and this was the last time I saw my father.

We younger women were taken into a very cold hall, stripped naked, and all the hair on our body was shaved by SS men. We were given one piece of clothing, no underwear, no shoes, after which they marched us away into another part of the camp called Birkenau. We were in B camp.

The part of the camp we were in consisted of very large wooden barracks with nothing in them, only powdery, yellowish-greyish soil. Wherever one looked, the same soil surrounded the numerous barracks. Around the entire complex there was electrified barbed wire, watchtowers with soldiers holding machine guns. Not a blade of grass or tree anywhere.

We were 1,200 people in the barracks, squeezed in like in the cattle-trucks. It was not easy to sleep in such a position. Though it was a very hot summer, at night the temperature dropped to near freezing. We had dysentery (severe diarrhoea) and when we had to go to the latrines – which was often – we had to climb in the pitch-dark over the sleeping bodies. Some people didn't remember where they were when they were suddenly woken by people climbing over them in the dark. When they started to scream, the soldiers shot into the barracks. The latrines were guarded by SS men and they found it very funny not to

permit us to finish our business. We became filthy, stinking, disgusting as we had no access to water, either to wash or to drink. The same happened when we menstruated, although this happened only once because the body does not waste its energies uselessly.

We had to stand for hours to be counted in rows of five next to the barrack. The SS women were not very good at counting and it took a long time. Afterwards we received our so-called coffee, a brownish lukewarm liquid, vital for us because in the intense heat we needed liquid and we had none. It was given to the first in the row of five in a medium-sized pot. There was very little left when it arrived at the fourth or fifth row where I usually stood. Yet every drop was absolutely vital for us – it meant survival.

After coffee we could disperse, but there was nowhere to hide from the sun. We did not even have our hair to protect us from sunstroke and sunburn. At midday we had to stand again to get our lunch. It consisted of a tasteless soup, but it was liquid and that was important. Then a piece of bread – it should have been an eighth of a loaf, but a slice of bread meant money – one could buy cigarettes, a scarf, maybe water, maybe underwear or shoes with it. Some aggressive mates who distributed the food kept a lot for themselves and their closest family or friends, and did not worry about those whom they robbed. We sometimes received a piece of sausage and/or cheese which were salty and made us even more thirsty. This was our only meal in 24 hours.

Many collapsed from illness, dysentery, thirst, hunger and other causes, and if they were seen to be weak, they were dragged away and never heard of again.

We arrived in Auschwitz on 7 July and were put through a large ‘selection’ on 2 August when we were either sent to the right or the left by the camp commandant Hoess and the principal camp doctor Mengele. I was sent with others to the left. We were allowed to go on living; those sent to the right were exterminated. Then there followed a shower – it could have been gas – we did not know which until the water started to flow. We felt happy to be able to clean ourselves and drink even if the water had been poisoned. We were shaved again on our whole body in the ice-cold hall, thrown one piece of clothing and chased out.

We were told to sit down – oh, miracle – we were given a plate of real soup and a chunk of bread. Then we were put into cattle-trucks once again. We travelled through the night and nearly the entire next day and arrived in Hessisch-Lichenau, a small town, five and a half kilometres from Hirschagen, the second-largest munitions factory near Kassel in mid-west Germany. We had come to be slave-workers in the factory.

The camp was beautiful; there were trees and grass and flowers. The barracks were divided into rooms with 16 two-tier bunks in each. All of us received a bunk with a prickly straw-sack and a rough blanket. The sack was full of bedbugs that had a feast on me regularly. We received clothing and underwear and women with normal-size feet received shoes. I had large feet and received wooden clogs from time to time, but they broke soon and most of the time I was barefoot. Walking barefoot in pine forests and ice or snow is not to be recommended. We also received a number printed in large figures on a brick-size

piece of white cloth, which we had to sew on the back of our garment. We had no names, no faces, only numbers. I was 20607.

Our commandant Willy Schaefer was not a sadist, but did everything according to the rules. We arrived in Hessisch-Lichtenau, one of the 136 out-camps of Buchenwald concentration camp, on 3 August. He made a speech: anyone trying to escape would be caught and shot. Two women escaped in September. They were brought back and given a spade to dig their own graves. They were shot into them and we had to watch all the time, then bury them. This was according to the rules.

Schaefer always stood by when the bread was distributed to see that every piece was cut exactly the same. The bread got smaller as time went by but we always had our bread, except for two days. Our second commandant, Ernst Zorbach, was a sadistic creature with a whip in his hand when in camp, and we tried to make sure that we were nowhere near him.

In camp we also had to work occasionally. Our two SS women guards came and asked for the appropriate number of women for any job. If you volunteered, there was a chance of extra soup and you were treated decently. If no one came forward, they chose the number anyway and the people were treated badly. The job had to be done, so it made sense to volunteer. One day, they needed two people, and a campmate and I went with the guards. We were taken to a small hill. Schaefer, the commandant, stood there with his beautiful dog dead at his feet, and we had to bury him. This was at the beginning of October; it had been snowing and the soil was nearly frozen. It was hard work. When we had finished, the commandant thanked us, and from then on he greeted me when he saw me in camp. I had become a person once again, at least for this man.

A few days later, he was called back to Buchenwald to get new orders. During the two days he was away, we had no bread. On his return the bread distribution continued, though the slices became thinner and thinner.

A few days later I was standing near the two SS women guards and they were talking about how they had sold our bread and how much they earned for it. One of them said, 'Don't speak, she – pointing at me – might understand'" 'Oh, that one is an absolute idiot, I even tried to teach her some words in German but she can't retain a single word.'

Was it my facial expression that gave me away? I am a bad liar. My mother tongue was German and I understood. But I always denied it and made myself look like an idiot. I didn't want to have any dealings with the guards, men or women. A sort of personal resistance. Now they asked one of the collaborators and she gave me away. They wanted to bribe me, to make me a work leader who had privileges. It was tempting, but work leaders also had duties. To push around their mates, to spy on them, denounce them. I wanted to survive but not at any price – I had a choice about how to behave. I did not want to live without my integrity.

I thanked them but said no. Before they left, they said 'You'll pay for this.' A few days later, they returned and sent me to the assembly place. We were counted there every day, but

this was not the normal counting time. I did as I was told and went. Many women came from all directions. When we were all there, our *Kapo* (supervisor) fetched the camp doctor and the commandant Schaefer. They counted us. We were 208. I was only told later that one of Schaefer's orders after going to Buchenwald was that the camp doctor had to count how many had been to her surgery during the past week. That week, there were 206. As Schaefer did everything according to the rules, he only had to deal with 206. So he took two people out. In the document I have which proves this, you can see that one of the altered numbers was 20607: my own number. The 206 were sent back to Auschwitz, never to be heard of any more. We two were to continue to survive.

We were a group of a thousand Hungarian Jewesses, sent to Hirschhagen to be slave-labourers. When we arrived, the factory foreman came to inspect us and said, 'We requested workers not skeletons.' So for the first couple of weeks, we were better fed and didn't have to work. We had to walk five and a half kilometres to the factory, which was in a forest on top of a steep hill. We walked about two hours, then worked a ten hour shift, then walked home exhausted and hungry because there was no food for us at the factory.

The part of the factory where I worked produced flying bombs. They were pear-shaped, with a round rod and seven wings. They were shells which had to be filled with explosives. The people in the mixing room were mainly chemists chosen for their profession. These chemists and the workers in the filling room soon turned yellow from the materials they worked with. They were called 'canaries'. Some of them died a terrible death through poisoning. Some of us decided that we did not want to help the German war effort and we organised a sabotage group. The bombs were soon filled with a mixture that would not explode and we inflicted other damage to the bombs as we worked. We had to be very careful. It was very dangerous because if we had been found out, we would have been tortured to reveal who else was part of the group, and then killed.

My work was to screw a Bakelite (plastic-like) cap very tightly onto two of the bombs simultaneously as they passed by on the conveyor belt. When there was no supervision, I put the cap on the slant or very loosely. The monotonous work drove me crazy. I volunteered for another job and became 'the horse'. I had to take two of the finished bombs as they came off the belt – they weighed 25kg each – and, catching the wings, place them on a heavy flat iron trolley. Sometimes they fell and I had a toe and a nail damaged. I had to pull the trolley out of the hall, set it on rails and let it go slowly down a steep hill. In the offloading bay I tried to damage the bombs: smash the cap and bend the wings. It was quite dangerous work and depended on the person working the brakes. At the beginning a German worker operated them. He hated everything about Hitler's ideas and helped us when he could. When he was on the brake, I had no fear; I knew that he was looking after me. He also brought in tiny bits of bread or onion wrapped in newspaper when there was news of a German defeat, the advance of the Allies, anything that gave us hope. Sadly, he was transferred soon after he was discovered helping another mate. I had partial amnesia at the end of the war and could not remember his name. I have tried to find out but to no avail. I would have liked to thank him for his humanity. Any decent gesture meant a tremendous lot to us.

At the end of March 1945 there was no more material in the factory and our camp was evacuated. We were taken back east, to Leipzig. In the first camp we were bombed out and I lost a good friend. It had been an SS camp up to a few days earlier. The Americans obviously did not realize that the SS had moved out and we were now there. It was cold and snowing. I was barefoot and in a sleeveless flannel shirt. We were taken to the next camp called Tekla, where there were already many other men and women prisoners from various camps. There were approximately 15,000 of us. We arrived there on 7 April 1945. On 12 April, we were put onto the road for our death march. Someone gave me a threadbare striped jacket.

The German guards put their belongings onto wooden trolleys which we had to push and pull. We were made to walk fast in rows of five. A small American plane often accompanied us. When they saw a German uniform, they shot. The German guards put striped prisoners' jackets over their uniforms.

They marched us to the river Elbe in the direction of Dresden. The Americans were drawing near from the west, the Russians from the east. We walked in an elliptical circle, on each side of the river, nearly the same route six times. The ground was still frozen where we slept. We received no food at all. Anybody who could not get up in the morning, or who collapsed, was shot on the spot. There were fewer and fewer of us. On the tenth evening, we were on the Russian side of the river. A Russian plane flew in a circle round us in a forest clearing not far from the river. On that night, 22 April, we were given something to eat. The Germans shot a horse in front of us and we were thrown bits of raw horsemeat as if to dogs. Then we had to queue for a handful of uncooked rice which we couldn't bite. Our teeth were falling out – the gums could no longer hold them. We slept there. Very early in the morning, the guards got us up and led us to the bridge. I could hardly drag myself. It was dark. When we got there, the sun started to rise and I experienced one of the most beautiful sunrises of my life. When we got to the American side of the river, the sun was up and I collapsed. I knew that this was the end and I no longer minded. Two guards came, they shouted at me to get up, but I could not. They butted me with their guns and then one of them said, 'Oh, leave her, she isn't worth a bullet any more.'

And they actually left me to chase those who could still walk. It was 23 April, my 21st birthday.

Because I did not return to Hungary, I lost my nationality. I became stateless. An outcast. No papers, no residence permit, no work permit. I often worked illegally, was cold and hungry, travelled with a false passport. It took me 12 more years to obtain a nationality and become a recognised civil being again.

I dedicate this story to the future, namely to my grandson Jonathan, my granddaughter Marina and my great-grandson Paul Ilan Fernand, having the luck still to enjoy them.

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