

MY PRAYER

Great and mighty God, Ruler of the Universe:
I pray on behalf of Your people
A small remnant, barely still alive
Impoverished, weakened, with no future
Hear my prayer, O Lord, One and Only
Extinguish the fire, blow away the smoke
Destroy the gas chambers and crematoria.
Why must we suffer, alone, abandoned?
God, see the pain of your children
They are being starved, beaten, gassed, and burned
Sh'ma Yisrael, Hear O Israel, they call out for help from You – they
raise their arms
Father in Heaven, hear the desperate cries
See the tears of the mothers and fathers, the grandparents and
little children
As they suffocate and perish
Hoping to the end for a miracle.
Dear God, the perpetrators, the murderers are the followers of Amalek,
Your enemies too
They will destroy us all
Time is running out, O Lord, Eternal
But Yours is the power to rescue Your beleaguered remnant
And to curse the forces of evil to destruction.

Isaia Eiger
Birkenau 1942-1943

INTRODUCTION

“And that is why I had to change my mind about writing it all down, what I saw and what I lived, for the sake of the future generations, and also for those who survived to know what happened to their loved ones who perished. Those positive memories should serve as a memorial to our fallen comrades and at the same time an indictment of the murderers.”

For a long time, I have been thinking and asking myself whether I should put down on paper my recollections of surviving the death camps. Many times I have decided I should record it: the survivors have a heavy burden, and none of us can ever forget it. Still, whenever I tried to write, the recollection of our misery and suffering, the death, the dirt in which we were forced to live, the hunger, the cold, the sickness, and especially my friends who lost their lives, all became too much. Only a small handful of souls managed to survive and come out of this hell of Auschwitz ... Tears welled in my eyes and my throat choked at the memories of the horrors; my whole body trembled, and oftentimes a despair overcame me as I wondered if I really even was alive, or if it was a dream or hallucination.

I remember so well all that happened, as if it were yesterday. Every detail is clear in my mind; the dates and times, names and places, the faces of the people, the buildings, and the circumstances of every incident.

I wonder how it is possible that I and a small number of others, weaker and less privileged, stayed alive, while many who were robust and strong died. I saw these strong, young men, so full of life, perish because they could not withstand the hunger, the harsh conditions, or the backbreaking labor.

Yes, we alone are living witnesses. We saw how people ran toward the electrified fence and threw their young lives away, playing into the hands of the devil, because they could not stand the inhuman conditions in which we had to exist: working for our killers and the killers of our children, parents, brothers and sisters. They wouldn't live in stalls meant for animals. These people were

martyrs, wanting to show the world their determination to either live as humans or die. Not for a moment do I think that either I or any of the others was able to survive because I was more clever or virtuous; no wisdom nor reason nor bravery could help the enslaved Jewish prisoner or save him from annihilation. We saw with our own eyes how the smartest and most intelligent perished, same as the dumb and ignorant. Life and death decisions were made at random, blindly, by men-beasts without character or feeling.

The camp SS were the chosen criminal-types who felt no responsibility towards people or history. Nothing, no human emotion, could stop these beasts from carrying out meticulously the orders that only the devil himself could have given them.

I started to write many times and stopped, thinking, for whom should I write this account? For those who, like myself, suffered the horrors: why should I open their wounds and bring up memories they would like to forget? It might be better for them not to be reminded, not to relive those times. Why remind them of the days when we had no hope, days when fear of death wasn't even as great as the horror of brutal, interminable beatings that ended in death. Better not to remember.

I thought perhaps I should write for the others, those who were not in camps, but were in the Soviet Union or other countries, or fought as partisans in the woods, or hid with false papers on the Aryan side. They did not suffer as we did, and maybe reading this account would not be as traumatic for them. But then I thought how most of their families too perished in the extermination camps and how they too suffered a great deal. Besides, how could anyone who did not see this with her or his own eyes believe that human beings can be so cruel and inhuman towards other human beings simply because those people were Jews? I cannot imagine that anyone who was not there would believe it really happened and that some people actually came out of it alive. I probably would not believe it either if I had not been there. And so I put away the pen and decided not to pick it up again.

Instead of writing, I then undertook to read the many books and articles written by other survivors that began to appear, but I did not find them satisfactory and therefore found myself prompted to activity. There were many Jews in the camps who were politically active, some who escaped and many who were martyred because of it. It is most important to me that the world should know that the Jews did not go to the gas chambers like sheep, but in most circumstances had courage and initiative, searched for and found opportunities to

actively resist. Those who gave their lives in the struggle must not be forgotten. The world should know that Jews escaped from even the most secure camps, though the Germans claimed that not even a bug could get out of them. True, many perished while trying to escape, but the facts should be known. And it should also be recorded that in the concentration and annihilation camps, where death was ever-present for the prisoners, in greatest secrecy, plans were drawn and bombs assembled to blow up the camps at an opportune time.

It was also important to me to record that there were people who sacrificed their own lives for others at a time when around us ruled beasts in human disguise. Despite having the Germans' criminal methods and conduct as an example, many of those in the camps did not lose their minds and spiritual superiority, but instead risked their own lives to help others without regard for religion or race, class or origin. Yes, even in the concentration camps one could distinguish between beasts and human beings, who, although they were physically abused and rundown, remained spiritually dignified.

And that is why I had to change my mind about writing it all down, what I saw and what I lived, for the sake of the future generations, and also for those who survived to know what happened to their loved ones who perished. Those positive memories should serve as a memorial to our fallen comrades and at the same time an indictment of the murderers.

Many of my camp comrades also prevailed upon me to write my memoirs, since I was one of the oldest Jewish prisoners and was also active in the underground movement and therefore had access to information others could not have. My long-time comrade and companion in the camp, Chaim Frosch of Bomberg, was the force behind this effort, helping with the recollection of events. I attempted to bring out events of human interest, of people who must not be forgotten, who laid down their lives for freedom.

I strained my memory in order not to forget any important event, but try as I may, I could not possibly relate all the suffering of so many.