

Life in Auschwitz

Al Lichtenberg

[Probably written for the U.S. Army newspaper, the *Stars and Stripes*, after the war.]

The town hall in one of the suburban districts of Paris was filled to the last row when Mlle Berthe Falk, recently returned from the Nazi extermination camp at Auschwitz, mounted the rostrum to give an account of her experiences during the 32 months she was a German slave laborer. The facts revealed in her speech and additional information given to this reporter in a subsequent interview are related in the following story.

It happened on a Sunday afternoon in February 1943. An icy north wind swept the Polish plains, froze the ground hard like a rock, and penetrated the thin garments of the woman prisoners who were lined up on a field outside camp Auschwitz. There were 3000 of them, and they had stood on the spot since four o'clock in the morning. These general roll-calls took place every other Sunday, but never before had the guards called them out so early, never had the hunger and the cold been so agonizing.

A few of the girls had fainted; many seemed near exhaustion and hardly able to stand up much longer. There was a general feeling that this was a very special occasion, some sort of supreme test. Something would have to happen soon, because it got dark early these winter evenings, and they were never kept out after dusk.

As the sun went down the gate to the camp was opened and the guards called the prisoners to attention. They would be marched back to their quarters now, so they said, but there was to be no slackening on the way in. On the contrary, they would have to go in double time past the gate. There would be trouble for those who couldn't do it.

At the gate stood a group of SS officials, men and women, who checked every prisoner for fitness. The test was simple. Those who were not too exhausted to spurt past the gate lived to see another day. The others whose strength had gone after the 13-hour roll call were picked out by the SS and hauled off to block 25.

There were many of them, and it wasn't only the strain of the past day that did it. That was only the last straw. There were the months of hard labor, malnutrition and exposure that preceded that Sunday. Human endurance went further than many prisoners—and many of their jailers—had believed it to go, but then there would be a final lapse, and that was the end.

For the Nazis, such a procedure served to eliminate those prisoners who were no longer strong enough to work efficiently. "*Arbeit macht frei*"—work makes free, so it said on large signs all over the camp, but even the dullest among the women knew that this was a lie. The signs ought to have read "Work keeps you alive"—those who became too weak to work ceased to have a claim on life.

* * *

Berthe Falk, the woman by whom this story was told, returned to her barracks that evening. Once again she had passed the test, had gotten another short lease on life. In her opinion, that was all it could possibly mean, because she never doubted that she, too, would eventually go to the gas chamber and the furnace. It was only a question of time: how long she would have the physical strength to endure this life. It mattered a lot how strong was one's will to live, she found. As soon as that will had died in a prisoner, her days were numbered. In her, it was still very much alive.

Berthe had lived in Paris when she was arrested. She had been denounced for regularly listening to BBC broadcasts, but that had only been a pretext. Actually they suspected her to be a member of the resistance movement, and they knew that she was a Jewess.

The memory of the day in summer 1942 when she arrived in Auschwitz stood clearly out in her mind. The 48-hour trip in a sealed boxcar shared by more than a hundred prisoners, with only a few loaves of bread and nothing to drink between them, had been terrible. As the doors were opened the women poured out onto the railroad sidings but soon were herded together by the SS guards.

"The camp is a long way off," one of them said. "You got your choice between an easy ride on the truck and a couple of hours walk. What would you rather have, my little ones?"

Berthe was suspicious of this sudden display of consideration and decided to take to the road. Another girl whom she had met and become friendly with on the train started to follow her, but she was stopped by the guard.

"You can't walk that far," he barked at her, after a glance at her legs, which were thick and swollen, with the veins forming a dark pattern. "Off with you on the truck." The vigorous push that followed these words landed the girl squarely on the platform where she lay motionless. That was the last Berthe saw of her.

The trucks went straight to block 25 and delivered their human cargo to the gas chamber and the furnace. The road that Berthe and a few others took led them to the living hell of a concentration camp. For the Nazis, this crude system helped to eliminate the unfit; the theory of the "survival of the fittest" had taken on a dreadful meaning.

Later on, when the shipments were stepped up until there were six to eight trainloads of prisoners per day, a special rail line was built that led to the death house itself. There was no longer a demand for slave labor, and all incoming prisoners were gassed and burned, at the daily rate of 30,000.

Murder was the main industry in the chain of prison camps of which Auschwitz was the center. Everything else, the building of roads, drainage of swamps and the plantations, were just by-products.

Fear, hunger and fatigue were the ever-present stigma of life in the camp. Never to be able to appease that empty stomach or to get enough sleep was a terrible feeling. It was still worse to be completely at the mercy of the cruel, cynical, unpredictable SS.

A day in the camp started at half past three in the morning. The girls would get up from their triple-decker bunks, each of which “accommodated” about ten people, and take turns in fetching the morning tea, a brew made from grass and leaves. Then followed a roll call which lasted about two hours; the girls had learned to sleep while standing up and remained in position without moving or talking.

The women in charge of the barracks were picked invariably with such robust qualities as coarseness and impudence in view. Things got worse when the SS started a practice of introducing former inmates of women penitentiaries and put them in command of the units.

At six o'clock was work formation, and the women were marched to their respective work sites outside the camp. As they approached the gate there was a sudden burst of music, coming from the camp orchestra that played regularly during formations. The Nazis took great pride in this enterprise and rated it highly as a sporadic attempt to raise the prisoners' morale.

The camp had a barbed wire enclosure which was charged with high tension current. Berthe remembered several instances when women, half-crazed by fear and hunger and utterly weary of life, committed suicide by touching the wire. They would suddenly leave the line and make a dash for the fence from which they were separated by a shallow ditch. The guards would shoot at the runners' feet or legs and usually bring them to their knees. And then started a mad scramble on hands and legs towards the wire that would bring the coveted end.

When the column reached the gate special guards took over who marched the formations to their place of work and remained with them until they returned to the camp in the evening.

The days were endless, the work hard, the guards exacting. When it rained the marshy ground turned into yellow pulp; mud enveloped feet and legs, impeded every move and stuck like glue to the wooden shoes most of the women were wearing.

They frequently worked on the same jobs as the male prisoners, building roads, breaking rocks, draining swamps. Talking to the men was forbidden, but quick words were exchanged in defiance of the order which only served to strengthen the solidarity between the sexes. The work they were required to do was hard enough for the men; for women not accustomed to such tasks it was often unbearable.

The prisoners remained out all day, but were given a break at noontime when they were fed a cup of soup made of greens and water. Some of the SS guards who usually ate very well found satisfaction in having the half-starved prisoners watch them while they consumed quantities of meat and dairies.

At six o'clock, after a twelve-hour work day, the women were marched back to camp, again received by music, and returned to their barracks. The supper consisted of a slice of bread and a nondescript warm drink called coffee. Frequently there were special formations in the evening which had to be attended by everybody; there were always new orders, restrictions and regulations designed to upset the prisoners.

* * *

It was on one of those occasions that Berthe witnessed the most horrid scene during her confinement in the camp. For several days, SS officials had been in a state of fury over the disappearance of one of the inmates. The missing woman, whose name was Mala, was of Belgian nationality and very popular among the prisoners. Oddly enough, she had been trusted even by the Nazis and had served as an assistant to one of the SS women. In this position she had been able to make the necessary arrangements for her escape which she had plotted and carried out with another prisoner, a man she was in love with.

The guards had gone with police hounds after the fugitive couple, found them after a two-day search in the woods, and brought them back to camp. All the prisoners were called out that evening and assembled in the square.

First they saw Mala, pale but outwardly calm, flanked by two SS notables. Then the SS woman for whom Mala had worked made a speech. In her voice was the anger of a person who had been outsmarted; perhaps it was also the dull realization that, as a Nazi, one could not trust anybody.

“Those who abuse our confidence will get the brunt of our severity,” she said. “A prisoner who abides by the rules will not get into trouble, and we will be lenient with minor infractions; but a breach of good faith as this woman has committed must be dealt with accordingly. The punishment is death by hanging, to be executed today.

As these words were said a roar of horror went through the ranks of prisoners, who suddenly had become restless. But it wasn't the verdict that caused them to drop their usually apathetic attitude. While the woman had spoken Mala had reached for a razor concealed in her dress and, with a quick move, cut the artery of her right arm. Blood started to flow immediately. The bystanding SS man had not been quick enough to prevent the damage, but he stopped the girl from further mutilation and slowed up the stream of blood by giving her arm a brutal twist.

For a minute or so, the general unrest prevailed, until camp officials decided how to deal with the situation. Mala soon was ringed by the girls standing next to her who offered their help, but she said:

“Don't worry about me, I will be all right. But you others, who will go on living here, must make up your minds not to fear them. As long as you are frightened, they are your masters. But once you overcome that deep-seated fear they will lose their power over you. Promise me not to fear them....”

The SS man who still held her arm behind her back to stop the flow of blood did not understand the words spoken in French, but he realized that this was no talk for prisoners, and told Mala to shut up.

But she was quick in heeding her own advice.

“You want to tell me to shut up, now, five minutes before the end? Not on your life will you make me shut up, nobody will make me shut up...”

Before she could continue the man started moving, pushing her in front of him and taking the road leading to the camp hospital. Some of the girls followed them at a distance.

The SS woman dismissed the formation, after a short final statement. Mala’s suicide attempt would not save her from being executed, but there was a slight change in procedure. Instead of being hanged, she would be burned alive, in the furnace. No gas chamber for her; she would go straight to the furnace to be burned alive.

The girls returned to their barracks, but they realized that something had to be done about this, and it would have to be done quickly, in the next few hours. Those who had gone to the hospital returned with the news that Mala had received dressings on her arm, and that her condition was satisfactory.

Some had hoped that the execution would have to be suspended because Mala was too weak and ill, but this seemed improbable now. Some other way out had to be found.

One of the girls had an idea. If they could bribe the SS men in charge of the crematory, he might kill her with a bullet first, and send only the corpse to the furnace.

Any of them would have given the “coup de grace” to Mala with her own hands, but they had no arms, of course. Strangely enough, among these poorest of the poor, there were always valuables at hand. Some of the girls worked in block 25; their job was to sort the garments of the gas chamber victims. These people, taking their last trip without a warning, frequently carried their most precious possessions with them. Among their clothes were found jewels and precious stones—things that came in very handy when it was necessary to “buy” one of the SS.

The scheme worked. That very evening, Mala was taken to block 25 where she died a quick death from a bullet fired by one of the guards with his Mauser. But it was many days before the stark impression of what had happened that evening faded from the girls’ minds.

Soon after they heard that the prisoner who had attempted to escape with Mala had died by the rope.

* * *

The weeks and months went by incredibly slowly, and it seemed hard not to lose track of time. But in summer 1943, after a year of hard labor, Berthe got a new job.

The Nazis knew that Berthe had been a chemist back in Paris and decided to send her to work in the laboratory which was set up at camp Auschwitz for a special purpose. When the German army invaded Russia and conquered the Ukraine and the Caucasus they encountered vast plantations of yellow flowers which looked like dandelions. The Russians called it *kokosaghyz* and used the latex contained in the root and stem for large scale rubber production.

Eager to boost their dwindling rubber stocks, the Germans brought specimens of the plant to Auschwitz and started a plantation of their own. However, since they lacked much of the information necessary for quantity production, they started the laboratory to conduct experiments.

There were several Russian chemists, among them university professors who had been at odds with the Soviets and had volunteered to come to Germany for experimental work. One of them, Professor Lugowoy, had died not very long after his arrival in the camp, but his daughter who also was a chemist continued to work in the laboratory as an employee of the Nazis.

Besides Berthe there were about ten other girls, all of them deported French women who had been chemists or botanists before the war. They soon became great friends, sharing their meager rations, the same bunk as well as some of the fun that went with their work in the laboratory.

They were like a big family. There was Marthe whom they called mama because she always had a willing ear for everybody's troubles. Mimi was papa, a symbol of justice and reliability, and then there were Claudette, Jaqueline, Helene and the others, all sisters and brothers of Berthe.

In charge of the laboratory was a German woman whom the girls called Juliette, but this was not her real name. Juliette was in love with, and later married, Jules. And Jules was a surname given by the girls to one of the high SS officials whose real name, significantly enough, was Caesar.

Juliette had studied and knew something about chemistry, but the great number of chemical formulas, terms and figures proved sometimes too much for her to comprehend. The Nazis intended to put the plantations to industrial use as early as 1948, but the girls knew better and only laughed among themselves when they heard of it.

They were not particularly interested in the Reich's rubber production or in the latex contents of *kokosaghyz*. They made up thick monthly reports, but most of the figures, tables and equations were false.

One of the key problems—and Berthe's special assignment—was to find ways and means to keep the latex contained in the root of the plant liquid. Once it became hard it would no longer serve its purpose.

Obviously enough, if the chemist who determined the latex contents of the plant made a slip in her calculation by several percent, it would affect the accuracy of the result.

Or if the temperature at which the liquid was to be kept was off a few degrees it would lead to wrong conclusions again.

Juliette probably had a notion that the work the girls were doing wasn't any too accurate, but she wasn't a very good chemist and none too sure of her subject, and so she let it go at that.

The SS official to whom she was responsible checked the monthly reports, but he was not particularly interested in their accuracy either. As long as the reports would show progress towards the goal, they would impress his superiors in Berlin and he could be sure of his job. The war would have to be over sometime anyway.

Owing to these circumstances, Berthe and her friends were able to carry on their "work" and enjoy a great amount of freedom than at any time during their detention. Food and quarters were as bad as ever, but work was comparatively easy, and there were some interesting people around the laboratory.

There was the Russian named Vassili, a scientist by profession and a prisoner of war of the Germans who had volunteered to work on the plantation. Vassili was in love with Olga, a Russian prisoner who worked in the fields. When it became known that Olga was having dates with him, she was punished. Then Vassili tried to get permission to marry her, but his request was refused by the SS.

Months later, after Olga had given birth to a baby girl, things were getting worse for the three of them. There were petty annoyances for him, privations and maltreatment for her. One day the little family disappeared, and was never heard of again. Everybody hoped that they had safely reached the Russian lines.

Then there was Miss Lugowoy, the professor's daughter, who was paid by the Nazis, but got along pretty well with the prisoners. One of the things she had, and the girls wanted, was the daily copy of the "*Völkischer Beobachter*." For them it was the only means of information within their reach.

Miss Lugowoy did not let them have it outright, but there was a silent agreement according to which she would leave the paper in her drawer every day, and the girls could read it during their lunch hour, on the toilet.

* * *

By this and other means, Berthe and her friends managed to get some information about the progress of the war in Russia and Italy. Reading between the lines they formed their own ideas about the long expected second front.

On the afternoon of June 6, 1944, they knew that the invasion had become reality. One of the prisoners who worked in the office had overheard a report on the radio. The news went around the camp like wildfire.

Berthe and her friends were filled with joy. At last, the long-nourished hope for a second front had come true; the noose around Hitler's *Festung Europa* was tightening. From that day on, the prisoners dared to carry their heads a little higher, and the arrogance of their jailers took on a hollow ring.

On crude maps they followed the Allied advance in the West, and they never lost sight of the Russian front because it was from the East that they expected liberation.

Again and again they spoke about Paris. The memory of the town had always been strong in their minds, but now it became more vivid than ever and they looked forward to the day when Paris would be free. It was this preoccupation that brought great peril upon Berthe which she almost paid with her life.

Perhaps it was not very wise of Berthe to write down some daydream she had about Paris, and pass the notes on to one of her friends, but that's exactly what she did. The way she envisioned the liberation of the capital and the plight of the German army was not well suited for Nazi ears.

Her imagination had it that Paris would fall to the Allies on Bastille Day, the 14th of July, that anniversary of the French revolution on which the people used to sing and dance in the streets. The French had prevented the German retreat by hiding all their vehicles, then had brought out secret arms and killed them all. The Nazi leaders were publicly hanged on the Place de l'Opera. "*A bas les Boches*" was the battle cry of Paris, and great was the rage of the French people.

These notes were found by a SS man who carried the title of *Sonderführer*, or special leader. His job was that of a prison spy, and he was to ensure the political "reliability" of all the inmates. When the search for the author began, Berthe immediately confessed having written them. Then followed an examination which she will long remember.

The *Sonderführer* was a devoted party member, the "good" Nazi who would condemn people for dogmatic reasons rather than out of sheer cruelty. But it was this very mentality, rather than the sadism of some SS men, which was responsible for the mass murder in the extermination camps.

Berthe realized how much depended on the examination and tried her best to put up a good argument.

"It was just a dream I had before waking up one morning, and I thought my girlfriends would like to know about it, so I wrote it down. Yes, it was only a dream, but a dream shared by many good Frenchmen today."

"There *are* Frenchmen who worked with the Germans," the *Sonderführer* replied quickly, "and did their utmost to bring the two peoples closer together, which was the wish of our leaders."

"Ja, ja," said Berthe, while remembering some German classic she had read at the lyceum, "*die Treue is doch kein leere Wahn*. Devotion is no mere illusion, but *my* loyalty belongs

to a free France. When I came to Auschwitz I realized that for me there could be only one of two solutions: the furnace or an Allied victory. It still remains to be seen which way I will go.”

The Nazi was taken aback by such bluntness and retorted in an angry voice:

“You are a bad element within your group, and you exert an evil influence on your fellow prisoners. With ideas like these you try to poison the minds of the other French girls. What you have done is a political crime, and you will have to suffer the consequences.”

This boded no good to Berthe, and she decided to change the pace.

“If you treat me as a prisoner,” she said, “the verdict can only be one way: you will have to kill me. But if you treat me as a woman your better sense must tell you to forgive me.”

“I have never wanted the job of *Sonderführer* in a woman camp because of the conflicts that constantly arise, but this is where I was ordered by my superiors. In your case I have no alternative but to hand you over to the Gestapo.”

When the examination was over Berthe had the distinct feeling that she had lost out. In any case, she told herself, she had tried to make the best of a pretty bad situation. And she couldn't even be sorry for having written the letter.

Later she heard that the *Sonderführer* had made a recommendation to deport her to a Gestapo camp. This would have meant the certain end. But Caesar, the camp leader whom the girls called Jules, had converted the sentence, and she was sent to a *Strafblock*, or disciplinary unit with the camp. Caesar, as usual, was afraid for his job, and wanted to avoid anything that could reflect on the political reputation of his camp.

The three months which Berthe spent in the *Strafblock* belonged to the hardest during her confinement. The inmates were made up of the lowest of the low, with prostitutes and outright criminals in the majority. Many of these women were regular guests in the *Strafblock*; soon after they were released they would commit another offense and be back in a short time.

This part of the camp was a strange and contradictory sight. There were women in rags, their tottering frames and emaciated features a disgrace to human dignity; and there were others, well-dressed and apparently in want of nothing, more often than not because they were on good terms with the local SS guard.

The duties were extremely heavy. A fifteen-hour workday with hard labor, the usual formations and roll calls left only about four or five hours of actual rest. The famine was worse than ever. Besides, there were floggings for the slightest of reasons. For Berthe who deeply resented physical force this was the greatest of evils.

And it was sad news for her when she heard that her friends, her beloved family, had been sent to Ravensbrück, a camp located in north Germany. Due to the advance of the

Red Army, Auschwitz could no longer be considered as safe, and therefore many prisoners were evacuated to the rear. She gave up the hope ever to see them again.

For once, a pleasant surprise was in store for her. In October 1944 she was released from the *Strafblock* and was told that she was to join her unit in Ravensbrück. The reunion with the family was a source of great joy for all of them. And the war was going well for the Allies, bad for Hitler. The end of the Nazis could not be far off now.

The SS were getting nervous, restless. In March 1945, after Berthe had worked for several months at the hospital lab in Ravensbrück, they were moved again, this time to Mauthausen in Czechoslovakia, which seemed comparatively safe from the Russians.

Here started the final phase of her imprisonment. The day of liberation was not far off for Berthe and the others, yet they could not foresee that fatal incident which brought danger to all and cost many lives.

At this stage of the war, German communications were one of the favorite targets of Allied air attacks, and prisoners were often used for clearing work. In the new camp, men and women alike were ordered to undertake repairs on a damaged rail line, which was a 25-mile distance from camp.

They rode to the worksite on open freight cars before dawn, and started on the job upon arrival at about six in the morning. But already on the second day their work was disrupted by another air raid.

When the alert was sounded the SS guards herded together the prisoners strung out along the railroad, led them to an adjoining woods and told them to disperse under the trees. It was the first air raid Berthe witnessed. She was hugging the forest ground, two of her girlfriends close by, and awaited what was to come.

The day was beautiful, and the planes, English bombers, glistened in the sun, flying very high. They looked graceful and harmless. Then the first bombs started to fall. Miraculously enough, they dropped right on the target, churning up the embankment. More bombs fell. Then everything went black before Berthe's eyes.

When she woke up she was at the camp hospital, seriously wounded and very weak. A small bomb had landed in the woods a few feet from where Berthe had been lying; shrapnel tore up her leg, wounded another girl, killed a third. Charlot, her friend, was found dead on a tree, blown up there by the concussion. In all, the air raid took fifty lives. The wounded were brought back on the freight cars; fellows prisoners carried them in their arms for the three-mile stretch from the station to the camp.

* * *

Weeks went by, and Berthe slowly recuperated. The leg wound healed nicely, the shock abated. It was good to be alive, after all.

And then, one night in April, they were awakened by the guards. All French, Belgian and Dutch women were to get up, dress and get ready to move out immediately, so the SS ordered. The girls were apprehensive.

Would they be moved to another camp again? Were the Russians approaching? Or was the executioner finally catching up with them?

A stranger entered the barracks, addressed the girls in French and introduced himself as a Swiss doctor, representing the Geneva Red Cross. He told them that they were going to leave immediately, to be evacuated to Switzerland.

They wouldn't believe it at first. But then when they stepped outdoors they saw the convoy of white trucks, with large red crosses painted on, that were to take them away. The girls were overjoyed. They embraced each other, the Swiss drivers, the doctors. They laughed and cried.

The SS men shifted about with glum expressions on their faces. To them this was like a bad omen.

“*Nicht, nicht fortgehen*—no, don't go away,” cried one of them when the girls were getting ready to leave. But the evacuation was all agreed upon by his superiors, and his power had vanished.

Berthe and her friends quickly climbed into the truck, lest the Nazis might change their minds, and soon they were on their way to freedom.