

Transported to a Camp

As the German army suffered defeats at the hands of the Soviets in 1944, its forces fell back toward Germany. As they retreated, they also evacuated camps throughout eastern Europe, moving their captives to camps farther west. One destination was the Bergen-Belsen camp in northern Germany. Originally a camp primarily for prisoners of war, Bergen-Belsen was expanded in March 1944 to hold tens of thousands of prisoners moved from concentration camps in eastern Europe. German civilians witnessed the prisoners' arrival.

One of the prisoners who arrived in Bergen-Belsen in 1944 was Hanna Lévy-Hass, a Jewish woman from Yugoslavia. A few weeks after her arrival, she described the journey in her diary.

September 8, 1944

. . . I am incapable at this time of recalling anything from the past except what we lived through most recently: the trip they made us take to get here. What an ordeal! Two weeks in cattle cars. Holed up, forty to sixty per car, men, women, the elderly, children. Hermetically sealed, with no air, no lights, no water, no food . . . we were suffocating in a tiny space saturated with filth, fumes, sweat, stench . . . ravaged by thirst and lack of space.

Only twice during those two weeks did they give us a little bit of water and some tins of food. We were lucky when we crossed Czechoslovakia. The Czech Red Cross treated us to nice warm soup. We almost fainted with delight . . . then they gave us some water. You had to see the expressions carved on the Czechs' faces as they watched us fighting over every drop. Who knows what they read in our eyes and on our faces!

And the distressing trip continued. The Germans refused to open the train cars for even the most basic needs . . .

. . . I didn't notice one single time, not once, the slightest indication of a human reaction, the slightest hint of difficulty or discomfort in these soldiers who were under orders to behave as they did. Nothing! Their faces didn't reveal anything human . . .

At night, under a torrent of gunfire and machine-gun fire, the train crossed regions under attack by partisans or airplanes. There was one air raid siren after another. The Germans would get out of the train and take shelter wherever they could while we remained, piled up in the box cars, very visible on the tracks, panic-stricken.

Inside, in the dark, the children screamed at the top of their voices, the women wailed, the men argued over space. Exasperated, driven mad, people didn't cease quarreling and telling each other to go to hell. We had an insane desire to stretch out and we couldn't. In these deplorable conditions, there was no question of falling asleep, since even breathing was impossible . . . It was Hell.

And when we finally arrived at our destination, not having the slightest idea where we were, and when we climbed out of our holes . . . it was like wild animals emerging from the shadows of death. Then the sad procession began: faded and yellow like the ground,

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starved, exhausted, pale, fever in our eyes, we dragged ourselves like worn-out rags along an endless road that led to the Bergen-Belsen Camp, dirty and sweating under the weight of what remained of our miserable possessions.

Frightening human shadows—mute, slow—moved along an unknown road. The inhabitants of the villages—women in coquettish summer dresses, passers-by on bikes or on foot, all fresh and properly dressed and groomed, with the calm that comes from a normal life engraved on their faces—would stop for a moment and look at us with curiosity . . . and with absolute indifference! Without ever letting go of their rifles, numerous soldiers walked along the columns we formed, doling out their club blows to whoever dared turn around or fall slightly behind.