



Raport from Auschwitz

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In my 35 years of work as a midwife, I spend 2 years as a midwife-prisoner in a women's concentration camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Among many transports arriving to the camp there were lots of pregnant women. I was assigned a position of a midwife on 3 separate barracks, which were similar in a structure and the design, except for one of them, with a brick floor, the element missing in other barracks. These barracks were approximately 120 feet long; they were made of wood planks, with many holes bitten through by rats.

The camp itself was flat and the ground surrounding it was very hard, so during heavier rains there was a layer of water 6 inches deep inside the barracks, in some barracks situated in a lower part of the camp the water level was at 12 inches high.

Inside the barrack, on each side, there were three-level bunk beds. In every bed, on a dirty thin hay mattress, with dried blood and human waste, there were three or four sick women. It was very crowded. Sick women had to keep their legs outside the bed or move their legs under their chins to fit in their cramped space. It was also hard, because old hay was crushed into dust inside thin mattresses. Sick women slept on almost plain planks, which were not even smooth, since they came from parts of doors or blinds ripped from old buildings with various parts sticking painfully into bodies.

In the middle of the barrack there was a brick furnace in a shape of a canal with fire at both ends. It was the only location where women delivered children. There was nothing else, even temporarily, allocated for this function.

The fire in the furnace was burning only a few times a year. That's why, especially during winter, it was extremely cold. Every day we looked at long icicles hanging from the roof of the barrack.

Thirty beds closest to the furnace were used as a maternity ward. In the barrack there were infections, stench of sick bodies, and every kind of bugs crawling around bodies. The barrack was infested with rats, which were biting off noses, ears, fingers and feet of exhausted and very sick women, who were too sick to move.

Whenever I could I would brush off rats from sick women during the day. A woman working at night, so called nacht-shift, would do that all night. Women themselves would also divide the sleep at night to guard against rats. Rats with their diet of human flesh grew to sizes of large cats. They were not afraid of us, and when pushed aside with sticks, they would only hide their heads and lock their claws onto the bed, getting ready for a new attack. They were attracted to the stench of dying women. There was nothing to wash the women with, or change their clothes.

I was the only one who could bring water for a newborn baby and a mother. It was taking me about 20 minutes to bring one bucket of water. All kind of bugs in countless numbers took advantage of their biological superiority over dying people. Constant attacks of bugs and rats were directed not only to sick women, but to newborn babies. The bodies exhausted by hunger and cold, tortured and sick, died quickly. The number of sick in the barrack was 1,000 to 1,200 people. Everyday an average of 15 of them passed away. Their dead bodies carried outside the barrack were daily testaments of the tragedy happening inside.

The situation of pregnant women in these conditions was hopeless, and the work of a midwife very difficult. There were no antiseptics, there was nothing to dress the wounds with, and there were no drugs. The entire drug assignment for all those sick women was a few tables of aspirin a day.

In the beginning I was alone in my work. In difficult situations, when a specialist doctor was



necessary, I had to handle it myself. German camp doctors, Rhode, Koenig and Mengele could not "lower" themselves to treat non-Germans, so I had no right to ask for their assistance. Later, I was helped several times by a doctor working at another barrack and totally devoted to her patients, Janina Wegierska. Later on I was helped by a good Polish doctor Irena Konieczna.

There was a time when I got sick with typhus. Doctor Irena Bialowna took over my duties and cared for me and my patients. I am not describing the work of doctors in Aushwitz, because I am not capable to describe their humanity, their sense of duty, and their heroic work. Their humanity and risks they took is frozen in eyes of prisoners, who, tortured and starved, will never speak again. The doctors fought for lost lives and for hopeless lives they risked their own life. They had a few aspirins and a huge heart. The doctor in those conditions worked not for glory, prestige, or to satisfy their work ambitions. All of these reasons were gone. The only one left was a doctor's duty to save lives in each and every case, so exaggerated by a sorrow toward their patients.

The main sickness killing women was dysentery. Diarrhea liquids of sick women spilled often onto bunks below. Another serious illness was typhus and bladder infection. The appearance of suppurative matter on the body meant a quick death.

The typhus sick were, whenever possible, hidden from Lagerarzem (the SS-camp doctor), normally by marking a "flue" on their cards. Anyone with typhus was immediately sent to a gas chamber. Overall, no one could escape this sickness. The volume of lice was so overwhelming; the infection typhus was a fact of life for everybody. The main meal of sick women was a heated spoiled grass, containing, without exaggeration, 20% of rats' droppings.

In above described conditions I worked for two years day and night without any other staff member. My daughter Sylvia helped me sometimes, but her serious illness made her soon unable to do anything.

Sick women, as I mentioned, delivered babies on the stove. The number of deliveries which I assisted with was over 3 thousand. In the middle of incredible filth, bugs of all sort, rats and infectious diseases, lack of water and other terrible things which I do not know how to describe, there was something unusual happening there.

One time Lagerarzt asked me to prepare a statistic about infections during deliveries and a death rate for infants and mothers. I answered to him that I had never had a single case of death either for newborn or for mothers. Lagerarzt looked at me in disbelief. Even the most sophisticated German clinics at universities, he said, could not claim such a success rate. In his eyes I saw hate and jealousy. It is quite possible that such exhausted organisms were too sterile for bacteria to feed on.

A woman in the last stages of pregnancy was forced to save her portions of bread for which she could "buy" a bed cover. She would tear it into strips, getting pampers and clothes for the infant ready, since there was nothing available for the infant. There was no water in the barrack, so washing pampers was very difficult. There was a strict order against leaving the barrack. Moving around the barrack was also forbidden. Women dried washed pampers on their backs or legs. Putting them to dry in the open was not allowed and could be prosecuted by death. For normal newborns there was no food allowed, not even a drop of milk.

Women's breasts, dried by starvation, annoyed newborns' lips, creating a hopeless sucking motion which only deepened their starvation.

Until May 1943 all newborn born in Aushwitz concentration camp were murdered in the most brutal way: they were drowned in a barrel. It was done by Schwester Klara and Schwester Pfani. The first one was a midwife herself and came to the camp because she murdered a child. When I took over the duties of a midwife, she was forbidden to continue her work, because, as a Berufs-



vbrecherin, she lost the right of performing her job. She was moved to things she was much better at. She became a "kapo," in charge of the barrack. There was a girl helping her, a redhead prostitute, Schwester Pfani. After each delivery there was a long sound of splashing water coming from their room. Soon after that a new mother could see her baby being thrown in front of a barrack and ripped by rats.

In May 1943 the situation of some children has changed. Children with blue eyes and blond hair were taken from their mothers and sent to Germany to be Germanized. Overwhelming screams of mothers accompanied the departing of each transport of newborns. As long as a newborn was together with the mother, motherhood itself created a ray of hope. Separation with the newborn was overwhelming.

Thinking about a possibility of reuniting these children in the future with their mothers I started tattooing newborns under their armpits, in a way so SS would not discover it. The thought of a possibility of future reunion with their children helped many women go through this ordeal.

Jewish children were still drowned in the most brutal fashion. There was no way to hide a Jewish child or put him or her among other children. Schwester Klara and Schwester Pfani observed Jewish mothers very closely during the delivery. The newborn was tattooed with the number of the mother; afterwards Klara and Pfani drowned the child in the barrel and threw the body outside.

The life of other children was the worst; they died from a slow starvation. Their skins became thin and transparent, with muscles, blood vessels and bones seen through the skin. Newborn Russians survived the longest. 50% of all women were from Russia.

The most vivid tragedy in my mind was a history of a woman from Vilnius, sent to Auschwitz for taking part in underground movement. Immediately after the delivery her number was called, since the prisoners were called by their number. I went to excuse her, but it did not help, it only increased the anger of the officer. I realized she was called to a gas chamber. She covered the newborn in a dirty paper and hugged the baby to her chest. Her lips started to move as if she wanted to sing a song, as many mothers did, trying to make up for cold and hunger, for the conditions of their life. She could not do that, she did not make any sound...only huge tears were flowing from her eyes, through her white face, and falling on a head of a small prisoner on his way to a death sentence. What was more tragic, the simultaneous death of two closest beings, or witnessing a death of her own newborn by the mother, or realization of leaving another child without any protection in this world; it is difficult to know.

Among those horrible memories there is one main thought coming back to me all the time. All children were born alive. Their goal was to stay alive! Only thirty of them survived the camp. Several hundred children were sent to Germany to grow up as Germans, more than 1,500 were drowned by Schwester Klara and Pfani, more than 1,000 children died because of cold and starvation (the numbers do not include the period to April 1943).

I had never had an opportunity to present this report of a midwife to the Department of Health. I am doing it now in memory of these who had never had a chance to talk about the injustice. I am doing this in memory of mothers and their children.

If in my country, contrary to our war experiences, there would be forces directed against the life of a child, I do trust that there will be the voice of all midwives, the voice of all honest mothers and fathers, and the voice of all honest citizens, the voice supporting the life of children. In the concentration camp all children, against all odds, were born alive, beautiful and chubby. The Nature, against all hate, was fighting for its rights with unknown force of life. The Nature is a teacher of a midwife. Together they fight for life and together they cherish the most beautiful thing in this world, the smile of a child.