TWO O'CLOCK in the afternoon. The snow continued to fall heavily.

Now the hours were passing quickly. Dusk had fallen. Daylight disappeared into a gray mist.

Suddenly the *Blockälteste* remembered that we had forgotten to clean the block. He commanded four prisoners to mop the floor . . . One hour before leaving camp! Why? For whom?

"For the liberating army," he told us. "Let them know that here lived men and not pigs."

So we were men after all? The block was cleaned from top to bottom.

AT SIX O'CLOCK the bell rang. The death knell. The funeral. The procession was beginning its march.

"Fall in! Quickly!"

In a few moments, we stood in ranks. Block by block. Night had fallen. Everything was happening according to plan.

The searchlights came on. Hundreds of SS appeared out of the darkness, accompanied by police dogs. The snow continued to fall.

The gates of the camp opened. It seemed as though an even darker night was waiting for us on the other side.

The first blocks began to march. We waited. We had to await the exodus of the fifty-six blocks that preceded us. It was very cold. In my pocket, I had two pieces of bread. How I would have liked to eat them! But I knew I must not. Not yet.

Our turn was coming: Block 53 . . . Block 55 . . .

"Block 57, forward! March!"

It snowed on and on.

AN ICY WIND was blowing violently. But we marched without faltering.

The SS made us increase our pace. "Faster, you tramps, you flea-ridden dogs!" Why not? Moving fast made us a little warmer. The blood flowed more readily in our veins. We had the feeling of being alive . . .

"Faster, you filthy dogs!" We were no longer marching, we were running. Like automatons. The SS were running as well, weapons in hand. We looked as though we were running from them.

The night was pitch-black. From time to time, a shot exploded in the darkness. They had orders to shoot anyone who could not sustain the pace. Their fingers on the triggers, they did not deprive themselves of the pleasure. If one of us stopped for a second, a quick shot eliminated the filthy dog.

I was putting one foot in front of the other, like a machine. I was dragging this emaciated body that was still such a weight. If only I could have shed it! Though I tried to put it out of my mind, I couldn't help thinking that there were two of us: my body and I. And I hated that body. I kept repeating to myself:

"Don't think, don't stop, run!"

Near me, men were collapsing into the dirty snow. Gunshots.

A young boy from Poland was marching beside me. His name was Zalman. He had worked in the electrical material depot in Buna. People mocked him because he was forever praying or meditating on some Talmudic question. For him, it was an escape from reality, from feeling the blows . . .

All of a sudden, he had terrible stomach cramps.

"My stomach aches," he whispered to me. He couldn't go on. He had to stop a moment. I begged him: "Wait a little, Zalman. Soon, we will all come to a halt. We cannot run like this to the end of the world."

But, while running, he began to undo his buttons and yelled to me: "I can't go on. My stomach is bursting . . ."

"Make an effort, Zalman . . . Try . . ."

"I can't go on," he groaned.

He lowered his pants and fell to the ground.

That is the image I have of him.

I don't believe that he was finished off by an SS, for nobody had noticed. He must have died, trampled under the feet of the thousands of men who followed us.

I soon forgot him. I began to think of myself again. My foot was aching, I shivered with every step. Just a few more meters and it will be over. I'll fall. A small red flame . . . A shot . . . Death enveloped me, it suffocated me. It stuck to me like glue. I felt I could touch it. The idea of dying, of ceasing to be, began to fascinate me. To no longer exist. To no longer feel the excruciating pain of my foot. To no longer feel anything, neither fatigue nor cold, nothing. To break rank, to let myself slide to the side of the road . . .

My father's presence was the only thing that stopped me. He was running next to me, out of breath, out of strength, desperate.

I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his sole support.

These thoughts were going through my mind as I continued to run, not feeling my numb foot, not even realizing that I was still running, that I still owned a body that galloped down the road among thousands of others.

When I became conscious of myself again, I tried to slow my pace somewhat. But there was no way. These human waves were rolling forward and would have crushed me like an ant.

By now, I moved like a sleepwalker. I sometimes closed my eyes and it was like running while asleep. Now and then, someone kicked me violently from behind and I would wake up. The man in back of me was screaming, "Run faster. If you don't want to move, let us pass you." But all I had to do was close my eyes to see a whole world pass before me, to dream of another life.

The road was endless. To allow oneself to be carried by the mob, to be swept away by blind fate. When the SS were tired, they were replaced. But no one replaced us. Chilled to the bone, our throats parched, famished, out of breath, we pressed on.

We were the masters of nature, the masters of the world. We had transcended everything—death, fatigue, our natural needs. We were stronger than cold and hunger, stronger than the guns and the desire to die, doomed and rootless, nothing but numbers, we were the only men on earth.

At last, the morning star appeared in the gray sky. A hesitant light began to hover on the horizon. We were exhausted, we had lost all strength, all illusion.

The Kommandant announced that we had already covered twenty kilometers since we left. Long since, we had exceeded the limits of fatigue. Our legs moved mechanically, in spite of us, without us.

We came to an abandoned village. Not a living soul. Not

a single bark. Houses with gaping windows. A few people slipped out of the ranks, hoping to hide in some abandoned building.

One more hour of marching and, at last, the order to halt.

As one man, we let ourselves sink into the snow.

My father shook me. "Not here . . . Get up . . . A little farther down. There is a shed over there . . . Come . . ."

I had neither the desire nor the resolve to get up. Yet I obeyed. It was not really a shed, but a brick factory whose roof had fallen in. Its windowpanes were shattered, its walls covered in soot. It was not easy to get inside. Hundreds of prisoners jostled one another at the door.

We finally succeeded in entering. Inside, too, the snow was thick. I let myself slide to the ground. Only now did I feel the full extent of my weakness. The snow seemed to me like a very soft, very warm carpet. I fell asleep. I don't know how long I slept. A few minutes or one hour. When I woke up, a frigid hand was tapping my cheeks. I tried to open my eyes: it was my father.

How he had aged since last night! His body was completely twisted, shriveled up into himself. His eyes were glazed over, his lips parched, decayed. Everything about him expressed total exhaustion. His voice was damp from tears and snow.

"Don't let yourself be overcome by sleep, Eliezer. It's dangerous to fall asleep in snow. One falls asleep forever. Come, my son, come . . . Get up."

Get up? How could I? How was I to leave this warm blanket? I was hearing my father's words, but their meaning escaped me, as if he had asked me to carry the entire shed on my arms . . .

"Come, my son, come . . ."

I got up, with clenched teeth. Holding on to me with one arm, he led me outside. It was not easy. It was as difficult to go out as

to come in. Beneath our feet there lay men, crushed, trampled underfoot, dying. Nobody paid attention to them.

We were outside. The icy wind whipped my face. I was constantly biting my lips so that they wouldn't freeze. All around me, what appeared to be a dance of death. My head was reeling. I was walking through a cemetery. Among the stiffened corpses, there were logs of wood. Not a sound of distress, not a plaintive cry, nothing but mass agony and silence. Nobody asked anyone for help. One died because one had to. No point in making trouble.

I saw myself in every stiffened corpse. Soon I wouldn't even be seeing them anymore; I would be one of them. A matter of hours.

"Come, Father, let's go back to the shed . . ."

He didn't answer. He was not even looking at the dead.

"Come, Father. It's better there. You'll be able to lie down. We'll take turns. I'll watch over you and you'll watch over me. We won't let each other fall asleep. We'll look after each other."

He accepted. After trampling over many bodies and corpses, we succeeded in getting inside. We let ourselves fall to the ground.

"Don't worry, son. Go to sleep. I'll watch over you."

"You first, Father. Sleep."

He refused. I stretched out and tried to sleep, to doze a little, but in vain. God knows what I would have given to be able to sleep a few moments. But deep inside, I knew that to sleep meant to die. And something in me rebelled against that death. Death, which was settling in all around me, silently, gently. It would seize upon a sleeping person, steal into him and devour him bit by bit. Next to me, someone was trying to awaken his neighbor, his brother, perhaps, or his comrade. In vain. Defeated,

he lay down too, next to the corpse, and also fell asleep. Who would wake him up? Reaching out with my arm, I touched him:

"Wake up. One mustn't fall asleep here . . ."

He half opened his eyes.

"No advice," he said, his voice a whisper. "I'm exhausted. Mind your business, leave me alone."

My father too was gently dozing. I couldn't see his eyes. His cap was covering his face.

"Wake up," I whispered in his ear.

He awoke with a start. He sat up, bewildered, stunned, like an orphan. He looked all around him, taking it all in as if he had suddenly decided to make an inventory of his universe, to determine where he was and how and why he was there. Then he smiled.

I shall always remember that smile. What world did it come from?

Heavy snow continued to fall over the corpses.

The door of the shed opened. An old man appeared. His mustache was covered with ice, his lips were blue. It was Rabbi Eliahu, who had headed a small congregation in Poland. A very kind man, beloved by everyone in the camp, even by the Kapos and the *Blockälteste*. Despite the ordeals and deprivations, his face continued to radiate his innocence. He was the only rabbi whom nobody ever failed to address as "Rabbi" in Buna. He looked like one of those prophets of old, always in the midst of his people when they needed to be consoled. And, strangely, his words never provoked anyone. They did bring peace.

As he entered the shed, his eyes, brighter than ever, seemed to be searching for someone.

"Perhaps someone here has seen my son?"

He had lost his son in the commotion. He had searched for him among the dying, to no avail. Then he had dug through the snow to find his body. In vain.

For three years, they had stayed close to one another. Side by side, they had endured the suffering, the blows; they had waited for their ration of bread and they had prayed. Three years, from camp to camp, from selection to selection. And now—when the end seemed near—fate had separated them.

When he came near me, Rabbi Eliahu whispered, "It happened on the road. We lost sight of one another during the journey. I fell behind a little, at the rear of the column. I didn't have the strength to run anymore. And my son didn't notice. That's all I know. Where has he disappeared? Where can I find him? Perhaps you've seen him somewhere?"

"No, Rabbi Eliahu, I haven't seen him."

And so he left, as he had come: a shadow swept away by the wind.

He had already gone through the door when I remembered that I had noticed his son running beside me. I had forgotten and so had not mentioned it to Rabbi Eliahu!

But then I remembered something else: his son *had* seen him losing ground, sliding back to the rear of the column. He had seen him. And he had continued to run in front, letting the distance between them become greater.

A terrible thought crossed my mind: What if he had wanted to be rid of his father? He had felt his father growing weaker and, believing that the end was near, had thought by this separation to free himself of a burden that could diminish his own chance for survival.

It was good that I *had* forgotten all that. And I was glad that Rabbi Eliahu continued to search for his beloved son.

And in spite of myself, a prayer formed inside me, a prayer to this God in whom I no longer believed.

"Oh God, Master of the Universe, give me the strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahu's son has done."

There was shouting outside, in the courtyard. Night had fallen and the SS were ordering us to form ranks.

We started to march once more. The dead remained in the yard, under the snow without even a marker, like fallen guards. No one recited Kaddish over them. Sons abandoned the remains of their fathers without a tear.

On the road, it snowed and snowed, it snowed endlessly. We were marching more slowly. Even the guards seemed tired. My wounded foot no longer hurt, probably frozen. I felt I had lost that foot. It had become detached from me like a wheel fallen off a car. Never mind. I had to accept the fact: I would have to live with only one leg. The important thing was not to dwell on it. Especially now. Leave those thoughts for later.

Our column had lost all appearance of discipline. Everyone walked as he wished, as he could. No more gunshots. Our guards surely *were* tired.

But death hardly needed their help. The cold was conscientiously doing its work. At every step, somebody fell down and ceased to suffer.

From time to time, SS officers on motorcycles drove the length of the column to shake off the growing apathy:

"Hold on! We're almost there!"

"Courage! Just a few more hours!"

"We're arriving in Gleiwitz!"

These words of encouragement, even coming as they did from the mouths of our assassins, were of great help. Nobody wanted to give up now, just before the end, so close to our destination. Our eyes searched the horizon for the barbed wire of Gleiwitz. Our only wish was to arrive there quickly.

By now it was night. It had stopped snowing. We marched a few more hours before we arrived. We saw the camp only when we stood right in front of its gate.

The Kapos quickly settled us into the barrack. There was shoving and jostling as if this were the ultimate haven, the gateway to life. People trod over numbed bodies, trampled wounded faces. There were no cries, only a few moans. My father and I were thrown to the ground by this rolling tide. From beneath me came a desperate cry:

"You're crushing me . . . have mercy!"

The voice was familiar.

"You're crushing me . . . mercy, have mercy!"

The same faint voice, the same cry I had heard somewhere before. This voice had spoken to me one day. When? Years ago? No, it must have been in the camp.

"Mercy!"

Knowing that I was crushing him, preventing him from breathing, I wanted to get up and disengage myself to allow him to breathe. But I myself was crushed under the weight of other bodies. I had difficulty breathing. I dug my nails into unknown faces. I was biting my way through, searching for air. No one cried out.

Suddenly I remembered. Juliek! The boy from Warsaw who played the violin in the Buna orchestra . . .

"Juliek, is that you?"

"Eliezer . . . The twenty-five whiplashes . . . Yes . . . I remember."

He fell silent. A long moment went by.

"Juliek! Can you hear me, Juliek?"

"Yes . . ." he said feebly. "What do you want?"

He was not dead.

"Are you all right, Juliek?" I asked, less to know his answer than to hear him speak, to know he was alive.

"All right, Eliezer . . . All right . . . Not too much air . . . Tired. My feet are swollen. It's good to rest, but my violin . . ."

I thought he'd lost his mind. His violin? Here?

"What about your violin?"

He was gasping:

"I . . . I'm afraid . . . They'll break . . . my violin . . . I . . . I brought it with me."

I could not answer him. Someone had lain down on top of me, smothering me. I couldn't breathe through my mouth or my nose. Sweat was running down my forehead and my back. This was it; the end of the road. A silent death, suffocation. No way to scream, to call for help.

I tried to rid myself of my invisible assassin. My whole desire to live became concentrated in my nails. I scratched, I fought for a breath of air. I tore at decaying flesh that did not respond. I could not free myself of that mass weighing down my chest. Who knows? Was I struggling with a dead man?

I shall never know. All I can say is that I prevailed. I succeeded in digging a hole in that wall of dead and dying people, a small hole through which I could drink a little air.

"FATHER, ARE YOU THERE?" I asked as soon as I was able to utter a word.

I knew that he could not be far from me.

"Yes!" a voice replied from far away, as if from another world. "I am trying to sleep."

He was trying to sleep. Could one fall asleep here? Wasn't it dangerous to lower one's guard, even for a moment, when death could strike at any time?

Those were my thoughts when I heard the sound of a violin. A violin in a dark barrack where the dead were piled on top of the living? Who was this madman who played the violin

here, at the edge of his own grave? Or was it a hallucination?

It had to be Juliek.

He was playing a fragment of a Beethoven concerto. Never before had I heard such a beautiful sound. In such silence.

How had he succeeded in disengaging himself? To slip out from under my body without my feeling it?

The darkness enveloped us. All I could hear was the violin, and it was as if Juliek's soul had become his bow. He was playing his life. His whole being was gliding over the strings. His unfulfilled hopes. His charred past, his extinguished future. He played that which he would never play again.

I shall never forget Juliek. How could I forget this concert given before an audience of the dead and dying? Even today, when I hear that particular piece by Beethoven, my eyes close and out of the darkness emerges the pale and melancholy face of my Polish comrade bidding farewell to an audience of dying men.

I don't know how long he played. I was overcome by sleep. When I awoke at daybreak, I saw Juliek facing me, hunched over, dead. Next to him lay his violin, trampled, an eerily poignant little corpse.

WE STAYED IN GLEIWITZ for three days. Days without food or water. We were forbidden to leave the barrack. The door was guarded by the SS.

I was hungry and thirsty. I must have been very dirty and disheveled, to judge by what the others looked like. The bread we had brought from Buna had been devoured long since. And who knew when we would be given another ration?

The Front followed us. We could again hear the cannons very close by. But we no longer had the strength or the courage to

think that the Germans would run out of time, that the Russians would reach us before we could be evacuated.

We learned that we would be moved to the center of Germany.

On the third day, at dawn, we were driven out of the barrack. We threw blankets over our shoulders, like prayer shawls. We were directed to a gate that divided the camp in two. A group of SS officers stood waiting. A word flew through our ranks: selection!

The SS officers were doing the selection: the weak, to the left; those who walked well, to the right.

My father was sent to the left. I ran after him. An SS officer shouted at my back:

"Come back!"

I inched my way through the crowd. Several SS men rushed to find me, creating such confusion that a number of people were able to switch over to the right—among them my father and I. Still, there were gunshots and some dead.

We were led out of the camp. After a half-hour march, we arrived in the very middle of a field crossed by railroad tracks. This was where we were to wait for the train's arrival.

Snow was falling heavily. We were forbidden to sit down or to move.

A thick layer of snow was accumulating on our blankets. We were given bread, the usual ration. We threw ourselves on it. Someone had the idea of quenching his thirst by eating snow. Soon, we were all imitating him. As we were not permitted to bend down, we took out our spoons and ate the snow off our neighbors' backs. A mouthful of bread and a spoonful of snow. The SS men who were watching were greatly amused by the spectacle.

The hours went by. Our eyes were tired from staring at the horizon, waiting for the liberating train to appear. It arrived only very late that evening. An infinitely long train, composed of roofless cattle cars. The SS shoved us inside, a hundred per car: we were so skinny! When everybody was on board, the convoy left.

PRESSED TIGHTLY AGAINST one another, in an effort to resist the cold, our heads empty and heavy, our brains a whirlwind of decaying memories. Our minds numb with indifference. Here or elsewhere, what did it matter? Die today or tomorrow, or later? The night was growing longer, never-ending.

When at last a grayish light appeared on the horizon, it revealed a tangle of human shapes, heads sunk deeply between the shoulders, crouching, piled one on top of the other, like a cemetery covered with snow. In the early dawn light, I tried to distinguish between the living and those who were no more. But there was barely a difference. My gaze remained fixed on someone who, eyes wide open, stared into space. His colorless face was covered with a layer of frost and snow.

My father had huddled near me, draped in his blanket, shoulders laden with snow. And what if he were dead, as well? I called out to him. No response. I would have screamed if I could have. He was not moving.

Suddenly, the evidence overwhelmed me: there was no longer any reason to live, any reason to fight.

The train stopped in an empty field. The abrupt halt had wakened a few sleepers. They stood, looking around, startled.

Outside, the SS walked by, shouting:

"Throw out all the dead! Outside, all the corpses!"

The living were glad. They would have more room. Volunteers began the task. They touched those who had remained on the ground.

"Here's one! Take him!"

The volunteers undressed him and eagerly shared his garments. Then, two "gravediggers" grabbed him by the head and feet and threw him from the wagon, like a sack of flour.

There was shouting all around:

"Come on! Here's another! My neighbor. He's not moving . . ."

I woke from my apathy only when two men approached my father. I threw myself on his body. He was cold. I slapped him. I rubbed his hands, crying:

"Father! Father! Wake up. They're going to throw you outside . . ."

His body remained inert.

The two "gravediggers" had grabbed me by the neck:

"Leave him alone. Can't you see that he's dead?"

"No!" I yelled. "He's not dead! Not yet!"

And I started to hit him harder and harder. At last, my father half opened his eyes. They were glassy. He was breathing faintly.

"You see," I cried.

The two men went away.

Twenty corpses were thrown from our wagon. Then the train resumed its journey, leaving in its wake, in a snowy field in Poland, hundreds of naked orphans without a tomb.

WE RECEIVED no food. We lived on snow; it took the place of bread. The days resembled the nights, and the nights left in our souls the dregs of their darkness. The train rolled slowly, often halted for a few hours, and continued. It never stopped snowing. We remained lying on the floor for days and nights, one on top of the other, never uttering a word. We were nothing but frozen bodies. Our eyes closed, we merely waited for the next stop, to unload our dead.

THERE FOLLOWED days and nights of traveling. Occasionally, we would pass through German towns. Usually, very early in the morning. German laborers were going to work. They would stop and look at us without surprise.

One day when we had come to a stop, a worker took a piece of bread out of his bag and threw it into a wagon. There was a stampede. Dozens of starving men fought desperately over a few crumbs. The worker watched the spectacle with great interest.

YEARS LATER, I witnessed a similar spectacle in Aden. Our ship's passengers amused themselves by throwing coins to the "natives," who dove to retrieve them. An elegant Parisian lady took great pleasure in this game. When I noticed two children desperately fighting in the water, one trying to strangle the other, I implored the lady:

"Please, don't throw any more coins!"

"Why not?" said she. "I like to give charity . . ."

IN THE WAGON where the bread had landed, a battle had ensued. Men were hurling themselves against each other, trampling, tearing at and mauling each other. Beasts of prey unleashed, animal hate in their eyes. An extraordinary vitality possessed them, sharpening their teeth and nails.

A crowd of workmen and curious passersby had formed all along the train. They had undoubtedly never seen a train with this kind of cargo. Soon, pieces of bread were falling into the wagons from all sides. And the spectators observed these emaciated creatures ready to kill for a crust of bread.

A piece fell into our wagon. I decided not to move. Anyway, I knew that I would not be strong enough to fight off dozens of violent men! I saw, not far from me, an old man dragging himself on all fours. He had just detached himself from the struggling mob. He was holding one hand to his heart. At first I thought he had received a blow to his chest. Then I understood: he was hiding a piece of bread under his shirt. With lightning speed he pulled it out and put it to his mouth. His eyes lit up, a smile, like a grimace, illuminated his ashen face. And was immediately extinguished. A shadow had lain down beside him. And this shadow threw itself over him. Stunned by the blows, the old man was crying:

"Meir, my little Meir! Don't you recognize me . . . You're killing your father . . . I have bread . . . for you too . . . for you too . . ."

He collapsed. But his fist was still clutching a small crust. He wanted to raise it to his mouth. But the other threw himself on him. The old man mumbled something, groaned, and died. Nobody cared. His son searched him, took the crust of bread, and began to devour it. He didn't get far. Two men had been watching

him. They jumped him. Others joined in. When they withdrew, there were two dead bodies next to me, the father and the son.

I was sixteen.

IN OUR WAGON, there was a friend of my father's, Meir Katz. He had worked as a gardener in Buna and from time to time had brought us some green vegetables. Less undernourished than the rest of us, detention had been easier on him. Because he was stronger than most of us, he had been put in charge of our wagon.

On the third night of our journey, I woke up with a start when I felt two hands on my throat, trying to strangle me. I barely had time to call out:

"Father!"

Just that one word. I was suffocating. But my father had awakened and grabbed my aggressor. Too weak to overwhelm him, he thought of calling Meir Katz:

"Come, come quickly! Someone is strangling my son!"

In a few moments, I was freed. I never did find out why this stranger had wanted to strangle me.

But days later, Meir Katz told my father:

"Shlomo, I am getting weak. My strength is gone. I won't make it . . ."

"Don't give in!" my father tried to encourage him. "You must resist! Don't lose faith in yourself!"

But Meir Katz only groaned in response:

"I can't go on, Shlomo! . . . I can't help it . . . I can't go on . . ."

My father took his arm. And Meir Katz, the strong one, the sturdiest of us all, began to cry. His son had been taken from him during the first selection but only now was he crying for him. Only now did he fall apart. He could not go on. He had reached the end.

On the last day of our journey, a terrible wind began to blow. And the snow kept falling. We sensed that the end was near; the real end. We could not hold out long in this glacial wind, this storm.

Somebody got up and yelled:

"We must not remain sitting. We shall freeze to death! Let's get up and move . . ."

We all got up. We all pulled our soaked blankets tighter around our shoulders. And we tried to take a few steps, to shuffle back and forth, in place.

Suddenly, a cry rose in the wagon, the cry of a wounded animal. Someone had just died.

Others, close to death, imitated his cry. And their cries seemed to come from beyond the grave. Soon everybody was crying. Groaning. Moaning. Cries of distress hurled into the wind and the snow.

The lament spread from wagon to wagon. It was contagious. And now hundreds of cries rose at once. The death rattle of an entire convoy with the end approaching. All boundaries had been crossed. Nobody had any strength left. And the night seemed endless.

Meir Katz was moaning:

"Why don't they just shoot us now?"

That same night, we reached our destination.

It was late. The guards came to unload us. The dead were left in the wagons. Only those who could stand could leave.

Meir Katz remained on the train. The last day had been the most lethal. We had been a hundred or so in this wagon. Twelve of us left it. Among them, my father and myself.

We had arrived in Buchenwald.