

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