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THE UNION KOMMANDO IN AUSCHWITZ

The Auschwitz Munition Factory Through the Eyes of Its Former Slave Laborers

Compiled, Translated and Edited by
LORE SHELLEY

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Lore Shelley

Foreword by Dori Laub
Afterword by Israel Gutman

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Photo of the Holocaust M
city of Ramat Gan, Israe
who also worked for the

Part II

The Control Section

The persons who worked in this section sat at long tables and had to check the cone-shaped metal pieces termed "bodies" *(Körper)*, also called *Hülsen* (hulls or shells) to see whether they conformed to precise specifications. Defective items were discarded and those that passed the inspection were taken to a record-keeping prisoner. From here the shells went to the powder room.

The women who worked in this section were Herta Fuchs, Ada Halperin, Betty Lissing, Lotte S., Paula Stern, and Ella Shiber.

At the Hamburg trial in 1946/47, Vera was a defendant. She called me as a witness for the defense. She supposedly had been so good to the inmates, especially to me. I was subpoenaed by the court. I told my Ravensbrück friends, "Look what I received. Why should I go there? There is nothing in Vera's favor that I could produce." Some of my comrades had already been to Hamburg as witnesses for the prosecution. They advised me: "Go! Perhaps it will be possible for you to say something against her. But we have to tell you, the proceedings take place at a military court and you can answer only yes or no." So I went. The defense attorney asked me three questions. One of them was: "Wasn't Vera nice to you? Didn't she give you a pair of shoes?" Quickly, I burst out: "The shoes were from a person whom she had murdered and I asked for shoes for a woman who was alive — so that she would survive." Immediately, the defense attorney cut me off. But the prosecutor called me later as a witness. Only then could I tell everything, the way it was.[12]

After the trial, everyone crowded around me, observers and media people. Some men in military uniforms, Russians, Poles and Frenchmen came to congratulate me. Before the trial, Vera's defense attorney had paged me by loudspeaker. I hid behind a column. I did not want to talk to the defense attorney of a concentration camp murderess. Only when I returned home did I realize how smart that had been. I found a letter from the attorney which had arrived late and in which he posed some questions and also gave me instructions as to how I should answer in front of the judge. But by then, everything was passé.

During the last days before the dissolution of the camp, no more people were taken to be gassed or poisoned. Still under the supervision of the SS we returned to Ravensbrück. Red Cross transports came to take French women, Belgians and other nationalities to Sweden. I could have joined them, but I thought: "I have had enough. All I want is to go back to Vienna."

In July 1945, I finally did come back. One of my first trips was to the 9th *Bezirk* (district), to Lichtensteinstraße, to the house in which my family had lived until we were separated by the Nazis. I did not know anything about my four siblings who had escaped to different countries. I knew that my father had been taken to a concentration camp. He was murdered in Buchenwald. My mother had been sent right from the ramp in Auschwitz to the gas chamber.

I stood in front of our house and, suddenly, the mother of my best friend from school stood in front of me. "What! You are back? You are alive?" These were her surprised exclamations. "And your mother?" "She was murdered." She turned around and left without another word, either of joy or of sadness.

Paula Stern, née Schaul
Seattle, Washington, U.S.A.

At Auschwitz, Ilse and I Vowed to Name Our First Daughter "Marion" and We Actually Did — They were Born Four Days Apart in 1947.

When I was born on August 22, 1922 in Arnstadt[1]/ Thüringen, Germany, my parents Julia and Max Schaul already had two children, a boy 15 years old and a girl 12 years old. As far back as I can remember, both my sister and brother were gone and I grew up more or less as a lonely child. All the children in our small Jewish community were my brother's and sister's age, so that I had no Jewish friends. I started public school in 1929. My parents intended that I transfer after the fourth grade to a *Lyzeum* (high school). But by 1933 those doors were closed for Jews and my schooling ended with the 8th grade. Attending a business or vocational school was also not possible for me at that time.

I had always dreamed of becoming a pediatric nurse and my brother, who lived in Berlin, tried to enroll me at the Nurses' Training School in Niederschönhausen. Since they had a long waiting list, I was advised to take a household job for one year. This would entitle me to be placed on a preferential list. I did so. In the meantime, my father passed away and I remained at home with my mother. Shortly after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, I received the application forms for admission to the Nurses' Training School. I declined, since I did not want to leave my mother by herself.

At the end of 1938, our landlord ordered us to move out of the apartment in which my parents had lived since 1907, because the tenants did not want to share the apartment house with Jews. We had to move into a house owned by Jewish people. They were compelled to take in six families. Each family got one room and had to share the kitchen and the bathroom.

At this time, old friends of ours begged my mother to let me go to England. My brother had left for Australia and my sister was working in Würzburg.[2] It was not an easy decision for my mother, but she consented. In no time at all I received a permit to go to England and work in a household. However, by the time all the paperwork was done, World War II had broken out. Most of the Jewish families of Arnstadt had emigrated by then. Those who were still around were forced to do forestry work, including me.

When I heard about young people having a chance to go to Santo Domingo,[3] I registered with the Jewish Agency in Leipzig, but before I had all my papers together — permit, visa, passport, etc., Italy had entered the war and no ships left anymore from Genoa for Santo Domingo. In November 1940, I was offered the chance to go to *Hachsharah,* a training farm in Neuendorf near Fürstenwalde/Spree.

Neuendorf im Sande had much farmland, a large amount of livestock and about 200 young men and women who were interested in becoming farmers, gardeners or anything connected with living on a farm. I worked at different jobs, such as housework and laundry, and ended up as a permanent kitchen staff member. We grew all kinds of vegetables, but for our own use we had to go out and find dandelions and other herbs growing in the fields and meadows since most of the produce we harvested went to the Germans. In Neuendorf, I met my husband Klaus Stern. We got married in nearby Buchholz at the mayor's office on July 29, 1942. Then we had to apply for permission to go to Berlin, to be married by a rabbi. The ceremony took place on August 2, 1942.

Although we worked under German supervision, we felt pretty secure at that time. We knew about deportations of Jews from all over Germany "going East," including my mother and sister, who at that time worked in a hospital/nursing home in Würzburg. My husband's parents and younger sister were also deported in the spring of 1942.

Then it was our turn. In early April 1943, we were informed that replacements for us had been found. When the German *Wehrmacht* had marched into the Ukraine, they had rounded up all able-bodied people, mostly peasants. They shipped them to Germany to replace German farmers who were needed at the different fronts, fighting a war that was in full swing.

We started packing and repacking, trying to take along as much as possible, in conformity with the weight restrictions for the luggage we were allowed to carry. We also practiced putting on three or four garments (one on top of the other) to be prepared. In the middle of April, the Gestapo came from Berlin and made us sign papers that removed our German citizenship.[4] Fathers had to sign these slips for their children. Then we were transported to the transit camp in the *Grosse Hamburgerstraße* in Berlin. After about a week, we were loaded into cattle cars without any food or water. The cattle cars were overcrowded with men, women and children. About 48 hours later the cars were unlocked and we were in Birkenau. It was April 20, 1943,[5] Hitler's birthday and Passover.

We were surrounded by SS men — with their wild, barking German shepherd dogs — shouting orders: "Hurry up, you dirty Jews — you are not in a

resort." It did not take us long to find out that we were not on a farm or in a labor camp (the destination we had been promised previously), but in a concentration camp.

We were ordered to form lines: on one side, men; on the other, women; one side, older men; the other side, older women; and one line was women with children. In front of me was a woman with two little children, one about two to three years old and the other one a baby. I wanted to help that woman and had taken the baby into my arms when I heard my husband shouting, "Give that baby back and stay with our girls." And so I did. These were the last words I heard him say — until after the war. That poor woman with her two children, as well as all the other women with children and the older men and women, never made it into the camp.

We were ordered to put our belongings in a pile. Everything happened so fast, we had no time to think. The next command was to hand over all our rings and other valuables — and we were warned not to hide anything. Then we had to undress and our hair was shaved off. We had to take a cold shower, and we received wooden shoes — either two right ones or two left ones — and a striped men's uniform, trousers and jacket. Our left forearms were tattooed. My number was and still is 42008. Our jackets had the same number as the tattoo and a yellow and red Jewish star.

For hours and hours, day in and day out, we saw heavy smoke coming out of the high chimneys and there was that terrible stench in camp. Not knowing what was going on, we asked some of the veteran inmates. The only answer was, "You'll find out soon enough." Our "beds," i.e., cement platforms, held about ten women packed in like sardines. Twice a day, we had to stand for roll call, often for hours; in winter, in rain, snow and ice; and in the summer, in the heat. That body count was a kind of torture and often girls collapsed. Collapsing was the end for many of them.

After a short time of doing nothing, we were put to work carrying heavy stones from one end of the camp to the other. That job got harder and harder because we were hungry all the time. The tiny portion of bread and the little bit of watery soup did not help us. Daily, some of our girls went to the infirmary, and we never saw them again.

The "cleaning Kommando" was formed with *Kapo* Klara Ullmann. I was happy to work cleaning windows and floors in a new building, to be able to be indoors and away from the heavy stones. While working there, we were told by Resi Bergmann[6] that a new factory would be opened soon and whoever had "experience" should write her number down. Experience for what? No one knew. I wrote down my number. After a short time we received clean clothing,

this time striped dresses and jackets. Then we marched to a place called the Union. I had never seen the inside of a factory before and was quite frightened about what to answer if asked, "Where or what did you work on before?" So I asked one of the girls and was told, "Just say 'control'" That's what I did, and that was the department to which I was assigned.

Very few from our Neuendorf transport came along. I only remember Inge Franke/Bocian and Ilse Michel, whom I was happy to see. Both worked in different departments, but we could see and talk to each other. My job in the control room consisted of measuring and comparing a cone-shaped piece of metal with a sample. If it was too tight or too long, we had to discard it. My finished pieces went into the *Pulverraum* (powder room). I knew very little — or rather nothing — of what was going on or for what purpose these *Hülsen* (shells) were used. Many times I threw good pieces into the rejects pile. I cannot remember if there was a *Kapo,* but I do recall that I had to report to a civilian worker, a *Fräulein* Mimi. We also had two *Meisters;* one was called Klein and the other Jupp. The *Hülsen* came to me in big buckets and had been immersed in boiling water. They were brought in by David Rettman or Erwin Tichauer. (I saw David Rettman many years ago here in Seattle. He passed away meanwhile.)

One day we heard — it must have been in October 1944 — that one of the crematoria had been blown up and that the *Sonderkommando* had been shot. A lot of strange people suddenly appeared at the Union factory watching all of us. I did not have a working partner, nor did I have a chance to talk to any of the other prisoners during our shift. (We changed from day shift to night shift ever so often.) Since I spoke only German, there was not much opportunity for conversation with my fellow prisoners, who mostly spoke Polish or Yiddish, which I did not understand. Besides, the SS guards were always close by watching us.

Once during the night shift, an SS guard — an *Oberscharführer* — asked me from where I came, whether I had family or not, etc. By then we had found out that the men of our Neuendorf group were in Buna-Monowitz (Auschwitz III). I told him that my husband was probably in Buna. He offered to send a message to him if I wanted to write a note. I would have very much liked to do so, but I did not know whether he was sincere or whether that was a trap. So I did not respond to his offer. Anyway, I never saw him again.

Being a *Yecke,*[7] I did not organize and depended entirely on camp food until my friend Gerdie Finkelscherer got friendly with a *Kapo,* a non-Jew from Nürnberg, not connected with the Union, who sometimes gave her bread, salami and potatoes, which she shared with us.

Often we heard airplanes flying very low over the factory. We were sure they were American planes. The Germans were clever: as soon as there was any warning of a possible air attack, the whole area was "fogged in," and the planes turned back. If that happened during my night shift, there was very little lighting in my work place and it was easy for me to make "mistakes," which I did quite often.

I did not know what had happened to the *Pulverraum* group until early January 1945, when we had to witness the hanging of the four girls involved in supplying gunpowder to the underground resistance group that blew up the crematorium. Two girls were hanged during the day shift and we had to watch the hanging of the other two girls during the night shift. This was one of the lowest moments in our work at the Union. Yet we all admired the courage of those involved. (On our recent visit to Israel, we went to *Yad Vashem* to see the newly erected monument in memory of the four heroines.)

The next few weeks were very tense. We knew something was going to happen — but what? On January 18, 1945, we were called out for roll call and were told, "Everyone is marching out." It was then that I lost track of Ilse Michel. We had become close friends and had done a lot of "recipe exchanging," i.e., discussing what we would cook first after liberation.[8] We also promised each other we would stay in touch, and I had given her my brother's address in Australia. Another vow we had made was to name our first child Marion — in case she should be a girl.

That march — referred to as the death march later on — lasted for days. It was bitter cold and we had no food. We ate only the snow that fell day and night. Many of my fellow inmates just gave up, collapsed, and were shot by the SS guards. When we finally arrived in Ravensbrück, we were told that there was no room for us. We stayed a short while and then were transported to the satellite camp of Malchow. There was also an ammunition factory at Malchow, that was entirely underground, covered by a green lawn. Besides Gerdie Finkelscherer, née Adler, with whom I stayed in touch until her death in 1982 or 1983, I do not remember any other names of inmates I worked with.

Again there were air raids. We were now between the Russian and American fronts, and wondering how much longer it would go on and how it would all end for us. Would we be free soon or would the SS kill all of us beforehand? During the last part of April 1945, smaller groups of inmates were sent from Malchow to different camps in Germany. I left with the last group. We began marching in the afternoon and continued all night. By mid-morning we were ordered to rest in a field at the outskirts of a small forest. Little by little, the SS disappeared, and we also dropped out of sight in small groups. When we

reached a village, I hid along with four other prisoners in the empty chicken coops in the back of an abandoned farm house.

By the following morning, the American Army had reached that village, which was called Brook and was located in the province of Mecklenburg. By noon of the same day, the Americans left and the Russian Army occupied the area. The four of us made our way to the city of Magdeburg, where we had to wait for weeks until transportation to other parts of Germany was available. One girl in our group left us to find a quick way to Vienna. I wanted to go as soon as possible to my hometown Arnstadt in Thüringen, which was under Russian occupation.

Before we were separated, my husband and I had agreed we would meet in my hometown after the war. It took me until the middle of June to get there. Shortly after my arrival, I was supplied with food rations and an identification card. Then I went to the family whom we had designated as our contact. Here I received a letter with the most exciting news — it was from my husband, who was well and staying in Bavaria. He advised me to wait until he could come to Arnstadt. There was no mail service yet, and that letter had gone from hand-to-hand via home-coming soldiers, from Munich to Arnstadt. It took my husband till late August to reach me. He had been liberated by the American Army at the concentration camp of Mühldorf. Since Bavaria was occupied by the Americans, he had to cross the border illegally to reach the Russian zone.

Knowing we did not want to stay in Germany and that there was no chance of emigrating from this area, we left Arnstadt in October 1945 and again crossed the border illegally. We settled temporarily in the town of Fürth in Bavaria.

We accepted the first opportunity to leave Germany and arrived in New York on October 20, 1946. On November 17, 1946, we went to Seattle where my husband had an uncle. Our daughter Marion was born on January 29, 1947, four days before Ilse Michel had her daughter Marion.

Quickly we adjusted to the new life in the new country, but could not understand why no one was interested in hearing our story of what we had gone through. We were ready to tell the world what happened in the death camps while everything was still fresh in our minds, but no one wanted to listen. That really did hurt and still bothers me now.

In February 1952, our son was born. Both our children grew up with the truth; that is, we told them why they had no grandparents or any other relatives. They both knew all about our background. Our son did Holocaust research for years under Professor Yehuda Bauer at Hebrew University in Israel. Because of his studies he is now very much involved in his job as regional director of the

Anti-defamation League of B'nai B'rith here in Seattle. Our daughter and her family are well-informed too. My husband has been giving talks to high school and university students for years, and we are in close contact with our old Neuendorf group and other survivors here and in Israel.

Ella Shiber, née Liebermann
Haifa (Israel)

"Dog, Tell the Jew ..."

I was born in 1927 in Berlin, a daughter of Joshua and Rosa Liebermann. My sister Berta, my two brothers Alex and Leo and I attended school in Berlin. On April 1, 1933, when I was six years old, S.A. men picked up my father solely because he was a Jew. Two days later he was released in a deplorable state. My father had fought in WWI from 1914-1918 and loved his German homeland. He did not want to believe what his eyes saw and his ears heard. The situation deteriorated day by day. We heard about Dachau. Many of our circle of friends disappeared in Dachau; instead of letters little boxes with ashes were returned to the families in many cases. Our neighbor, the owner of an electronics store in the Gartenstraße, was a respected party member, his children belonged to the Hitler Youth. One day we heard that our neighbor had committed suicide. They had found out that his grandfather had been a baptized Jew. The children had no inkling of this. They were thrown out of the Hitler Youth. Neither the Christians nor the Jews permitted the body to be buried in their cemeteries. For a few days, the corpse was kept at home until it was finally cremated.

In 1938 we were expelled from Germany to Poland and settled in Bedzin, my mother's native town. When the Germans occupied Poland we were sent to the ghetto of Bedzin. In the summer of 1943 when the deportation started, my family tried to hide.

On the night of July 31, 1943, we awoke to the sounds of shooting, crying and shouting: "Jews out!" We ran across the yard to our hiding place. It was like a tomb under a garbage bin. My mother, my father, my little brother and I, and my old aunt. We sat pressed together, knees bend so there would be room for all

years at this office, I retired. Today I have a comfortable life. I am affiliated with a reform temple and I am active in Women's American ORT.

I am very close to my friend Gretel Tichauer and I am in steady contact with my friends Rose Meth and Paula Stern, who also worked at the Union. Gertie Adler, another friend from the Union, passed away a few years ago. I am also in touch with friends from Gut Winkel and Gut Skaby who survived the camp.

I have regained an inner peace. Now I am able to talk freely to a policeman, the noise of a plane does not upset me anymore, and passing a smokestack gives me a feeling of sadness and sorrow. But I still dream of selections and the fear is forever.

I am privileged to have a family, although a small one — a good husband, a cherished daughter and a handsome grandson.

I have no gentile friends, just acquaintances. I do not trust anyone because I can not forget, and I will never forgive.

Mala Weinstein
(Israel)

I Recruited Regina Safirsztajn and Estusia Wacjblum for the Gun Powder Smuggling.

During this period I was working on a night shift at the *Pulverraum* (gunpowder room) at the Union munitions factory. It was a period of most stringent selections. At that time my three sisters Eva, Rocha and Rachela were taken by the selection.

It is very difficult to forget all this, but now I realize that it is doubly difficult to put all this on paper.

One evening in the month of February 1944, when our group went out on its regular work shift, we saw trucks loaded with people passing by and heading for the crematoria. The naked bodies loaded on the trucks glistened in the lamplight. We could hear the heartrending weeping of the passengers. I knew that my sisters were on one of these trucks. The last truck was loaded with men. They were singing the *"Hatikvah."* The tune left an indelible impression upon

Fräulein S. then went on to tell the court that Vera Salvequart had told her that she administered the white powder because the prisoners refused to accept it from the SS because they did not trust them, but that as she was herself a prisoner with a kind voice and apparently friendly to them, they took the powder thinking they were taking medicine (Lord Russell, 1957, pp. 201-202).

Chapter 12: Paula Stern

1 Arnstadt is located a few miles south of the provincial capital of Erfurt.

2 Würzburg, a German city situated on the Main river, is the capital of Unterfranken.

3 At the Evian Conference on the problem of Jewish refugees held in July 1938, when most of the nations refused to accept any Jewish immigrants fleeing for their lives, the tiny Dominican Republic alone offered encouragement — by volunteering to contribute large but unspecified areas for agricultural colonization (Wyman, 1990, p. 455).

4 Under the Eleventh Supplementary Decree of the Reich Citizenship Law, enacted on November 25, 1941, a German Jew whose regular place of residence was or came to be abroad was deprived of his citizenship, and this in turn led to the confiscation of his property by the Reich. This meant, among other things, that the Jews who were deported to Auschwitz or Majdanek were *eo ipso* stripped of their property: a joint act of robbery and murder, ordered and executed by the state (Grabitz, 1990, pp. 854-855).

5 On April 20, 1943, an RSHA transport arrived in Auschwitz with approximately 1,000 Jewish men, women and children. After selection, 299 men, receiving the numbers 116754 to 117002, and 158 women, receiving the numbers 41870 to 42027, were admitted into the camp. The remaining approximately 543 deportees were killed in the gas chambers (Czech, 1989, p. 472).

6 Resi Bergmann, originally from Danzig, had been in the camp of Kersdorf, not far from Neuendorf, and had had factory experience at the *Zeiler Werke* in Briesen/Mark, which manufactured batteries. She had been deported to Auschwitz with the same transport as Paula Stern, but did not survive the camp.

7 Yiddish slang for German Jews, frequently used in a pejorative sense.

8 Opinions were divided in regard to discussions of food. Chylinska recalled that "fictitious cooking" was a favorite pastime in the kitchen block in Birkenau. The hunger for unattainable dishes was allayed by stories about how these would be prepared, how they tasted, etc. Frequently this took place on Sundays. As soon as the evening roll call was over, the prisoners sat down on the lower bunks and started their gastronomical concoctions. Noisy disagreements even occurred. One day, L. from Zakopane stubbornly insisted that veal marinated in sour cream was far superior than veal treated with lemon juice. Her counterpart got so upset that she declared she would never invite L. to dinner because she could not stand any

idiosyncrasies at her table. For a few days, the two did not speak to each other (Ryn and Klodzinski, 1987, II, p. 119).

Bejlin stated that there were two subjects that prisoners considered to be taboo: the crematoria and food. Talking about food increases the production of stomach acid via conditioned reflexes and results in hunger. That is why one should not discuss food. If some one lost control, and over and over started to speak about meals eaten at home, this was the first sign that she or he was on the way to becoming a *Muselmann* (Langbein, 1972, p. 116).

Chapter 13: Ella Shiber

1 Avi Hurwitz, the editor of *On the Edge of the Abyss,* states: "Ella Liebermann-Shiber is aware of the fact that once an event or experience is committed to graphic form it takes on a universal dimension. The image is released from the trammels of time. The sketches incorporate event, time and memory, thus creating historical awareness; they will serve as a testimony for future generations and as a deterrent to those who attempt to deny the reality of the Holocaust.

Ella Liebermann-Shiber chooses a direct, unadorned and exact form of representation but which conveys 'whole hearted hate.' Her sketches give expression to the helplessness and terror of those subjected to the horrors. It is a voice that warns against the evil and the bestiality in man, against the hardheartedness and the cruelty which become uppermost in a society that has lost touch with its humanity, for 'the imagination of the murderer far exceeds that of the victim.' (Leah Goldberg)

"This uninterrupted flow of drawings created by Ella Lieberman-Shiber during the years immediately following her release from the Germans was the beginning of a process of rehabilitation, a process of return to life.

"Ella Liebermann-Shiber has also perpetuated the final moments of those of our people that are, in the words of Alterman, 'imprinted in every fibre of our being' — a mute scream for life on the edge of the abyss" (Hurwitz, 1994, p. 7).

2 SS-woman Lisl Hasse was born on September 27, 1925 in Goerlitz. She was *Aufseherin* in the *Arbeitseinsatz* in the women's camp in Birkenau. At the end of 1944 she became pregnant through a liaison with SS-man Schippel. Supposedly she was in custody of the British (Shelley, 1992, p. 262).

3 SS-woman Margot Drechsler was born on May 7, 1908 in Neugersdorf, Saxony. She was *Oberaufseherin* in the women's camp of Birkenau. After the war she was sentenced to death in the Cracow trial and executed in Poland (Shelley, 1992, p. 260).

4 *SS-Oberscharführer* Wilhelm Boger was born on December 19, 1906 in Stuttgart. In 1922 he was already a member of the Nazi youth movement. *"Ich war ein alter Hase in der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung."* After business training, a few apprenticeships, unemployment, service as an auxiliary policeman and attendance at the police academy, he worked for the criminal police and later for the Gestapo.

In Auschwitz he was in charge of the escape detail at the Political Section and excelled in barbarism and sadism beyond anyone's imagination. The prisoners were terrified of him. It was Boger who introduced the torture instrument called

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