

THE CAMPS ■ SUSAN AIMS FOR SURVIVAL

Susan Eckstein was born in 1922 in Vienna, Austria, and moved to Berlin, Germany, with her family in 1929. They witnessed Hitler's rise to power and so returned to Austria and then, after the Nazis occupied Austria in 1938, they fled to Prague, Czechoslovakia. Hoping to smuggle his family out of Nazi-occupied Europe, her father was able to enter Poland—on August 31, 1939, one day before the Nazis invaded Poland and World War II began. He eventually arrived in Belgium, but Susan and her mother were unable to follow him. They were arrested in 1942.

We were deported to Theresienstadt [concentration camp] from Prague. My mother, due to some personal decisions, chose to go on a further transport [train]. So mother chose at that time to be deported east from Theresienstadt, and nobody knew where to. Well, we found out later—I saw her name on the transport list when I worked in the political department in Auschwitz—that she arrived on the transport but never came into the camp. So probably, I would say, that at that age—mother was 45—she was one of the fortunate ones. Because, at her age, she would have come into the camp and she would have suffered terribly and then gone into the gas. This way, she went into the gas, not knowing what was happening, not knowing what was going on.

I came into the Auschwitz death factory from one of the many collection camps for Jews in German-occupied countries. My transport consisted of 500 men and 500 women. Sixty women between the ages of 14 and 34, myself included, were selected for labor in the women's camp; the same number of men went into the men's camp. The rest were gassed at once. Men and women, separated in camps enclosed with electrified barbed wire, were guarded day and night by soldiers with machine guns.

I was "processed" into the camp on January 28, 1943. According to Hitler's master plan I was to live for two and a half months doing hard labor before being murdered. I was shaved all over, given the summer uniform of a dead Russian prisoner, a kerchief to cover my bald head, and a tin bowl for food, drink, and other purposes. I had no spoon, coat, handkerchief or rag, nothing for care and maintenance of my appearance. This was a means to dehumanize prisoners so that guards would feel no pity when they treated us like vermin.

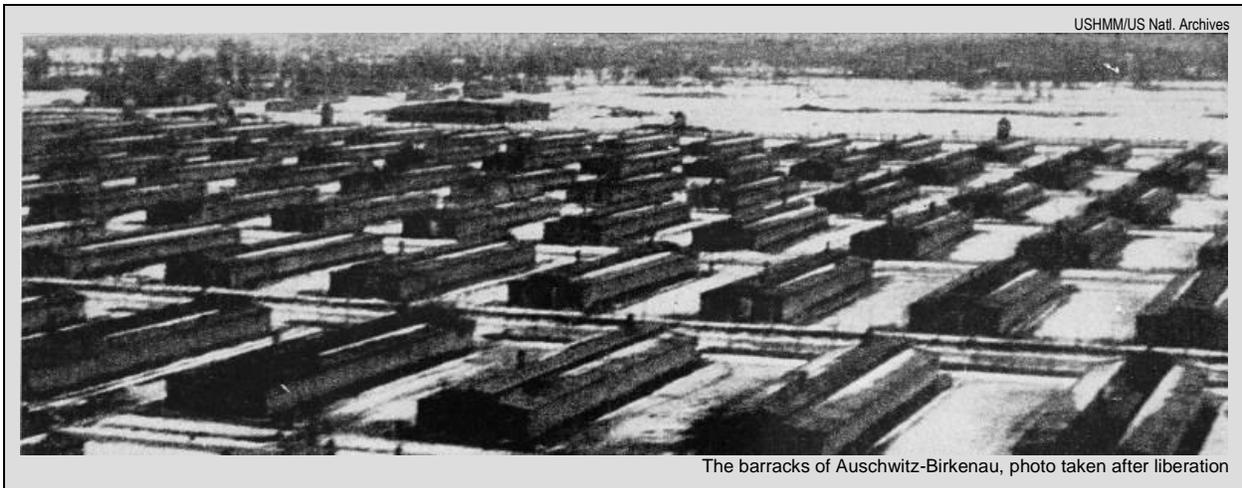
People ask how I survived such hell. I have only one explanation that makes sense to me. I learned to accept the nightmarish camp as the real world and coped from one minute to the next. Blind luck also played a part.

explanation for why some lived and others died. Survival depended on getting through selection alive or finding a kommando that worked inside the camp and was not subject to selections.



Susan's ID photo which she carried as a refugee in Brussels, Belgium, in late 1945 after the war ended

People ask how I survived such hell. I have only one explanation that makes sense to me. I learned to accept the nightmarish camp as the real world and coped from one minute to the next. Blind luck also played a part. Twice a day the SS guards made random selections from the prisoners' ranks. Those chosen went to the gas chambers. I have no



Kommandos were work units that performed tasks inside and outside the camp. An inside unit might have five prisoners while an outside unit contained 200 to 300 laborers. Outside jobs included road building, demolishing bombed houses, digging stumps, cultivating fields, carrying ties and rails for railroad construction, all without the help of machinery. For eight months in 1943, between bouts of typhoid fever, jaundice, scabies, and other diseases, I served on an outside kommando and lived in a barracks built to house 200 people, but actually crammed with 400 to 500 women. There was one toilet and one water faucet for 25 overcrowded barracks.

On the first day of walking out with the kommando, not knowing the rules and regulations of the camp, I just acted on instinct. We were standing in line by the gate waiting to march out, and there was the work commander leader, an SS man, and I just blithely stepped up and said to him, "Reporting name so-and-so, number so-and-so, and I'm a secretary." And that man's mouth fell open because nobody had dared to do that, and somehow I suppose I must have made an impression. He wrote my number down and everybody in line said, "My God, he wrote your number down, you're going to go to the gas."

But three days later, I and some other people who had given their profession as secretary were called to work in the political department* to serve as temporaries. I guess they had a lot of investigations down there and they needed people to take transcripts of the investigations. And through that, after about two or three weeks, I got a job in the political department, which was the elite department, clean and relatively well fed. But after about a month or so, somebody in the secretarial kommando was caught smuggling information out of a file, probably out of a personal file. Like in all jobs, last hired, first fired. The example was made with me and two others who were on the bottom rung. And we were kicked out of Auschwitz and back to Birkenau to the extermination camp.



* Among other roles, the political department managed the crematoria and prisoner arrival/selection, maintained prisoner files, and conducted investigations and interrogations (which usually involved physical torture).

And then I made my way through typhoid fever, scurvy, hepatitis, and the whole bit. Well, I survived.

A lot of people, when they came into Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was a surrealistic nightmare situation, couldn't accept the fact that they were there. Why were they there? They couldn't live like that. No normal being could live like that. They totally refused to adapt or even attempt to cope within the frame of that nightmare. And I think, if I remember, from the first day on, whether it was walking around in Russian prisoners' uniforms and with a shaved head, and with one bowl for eating and elimination and everything, I accepted it. I accepted it and I manipulated to cope with anything, and I think that that was one of the most important things, that you accepted the frame of the situation and lived from one minute to the next, or from one day to the next, with no other aim but survival.

Survival was the utmost thing and survival needed to be within the frame of that given world. That was the world I lived in.

Because I have seen people who simply would lie down and die because life like that's not worth living. And, just like today where the physician will tell you your own mental condition was part of your cure, it was the same thing there. Your mental condition was part of your

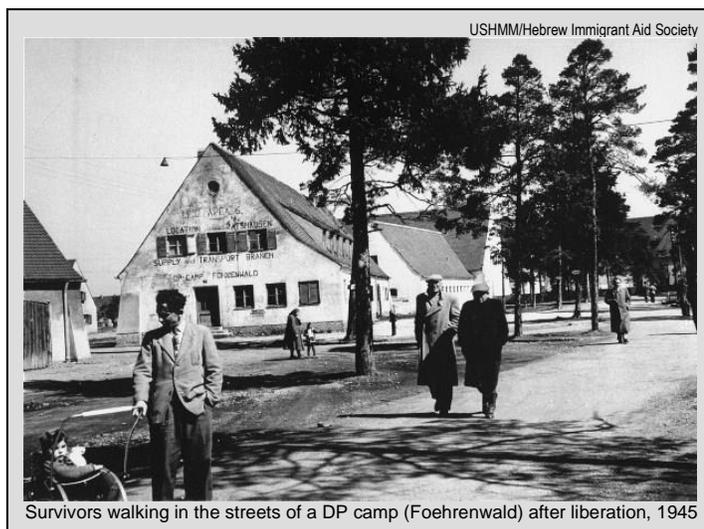
survival. Survival was the utmost thing and survival needed to be within the frame of that given world. That was the world I lived in.

You always had to have a support group. The support group might change because any time you changed kommandos, or changed jobs, or changed blocks, you had to have a new support group. Anybody who tells you that he existed by himself, especially in the lower kommandos, is lying. You had to have a support group.

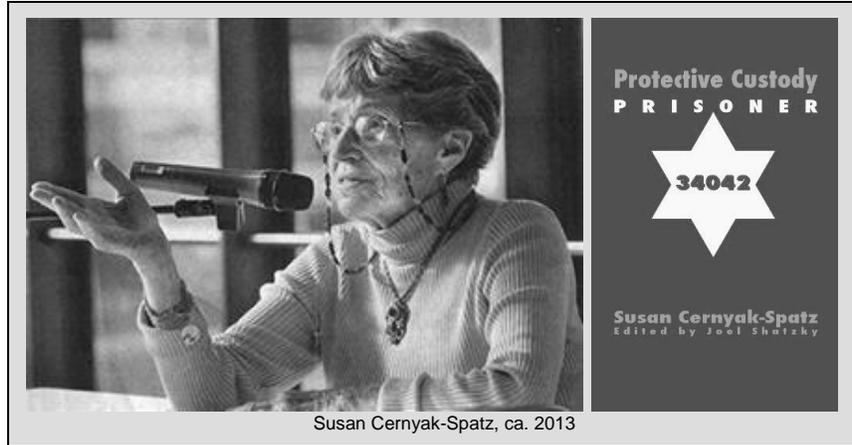
In January 1945, the Germans evacuated the camp because the Russians were too close. They did not release us. Instead we endured an infamous death march in the subfreezing Polish winter. Women who had survived for two or three years in Birkenau died on that march. Those who could not walk anymore got a bullet in the head. Survivors were stuffed into the overcrowded concentration camps in Germany proper. I spent three months after that death march in the Ravensbruck women's camp near Berlin.

When the Russians entered Berlin [late April 1945], the Germans marched us deeper into Germany. They hoped to exchange their prisoners for German prisoners held by the Allies. But when we arrived at the first American checkpoint near a small German village, German hopes were dashed. The SS guards went straight into prisoner-of-war camps. The Americans put me in a displaced persons camp.

It felt strange to walk down streets without guards or barbed wire. It took a long while to get used to freedom. I was alive but six million Jews had died as a result of governmental hatred and prejudice. These deaths, called the Holocaust, must be remembered to prevent mankind from being diminished again. The Holocaust must never be repeated.



Susan was reunited with her father in Belgium soon after the war. She married Hardy Spatz, an American GI, and they came to the U.S. on July 4, 1946. They have three children and two grandchildren. After earning a Ph.D. in Germanic Literature & Language at the University of Kansas in 1972, she moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, where she taught German and French at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for 33 years. In 2005 she published her Holocaust memoir, *Protective Custody: Prisoner 34042*. She continues to speak to students and other groups across the state.



Susan Cernyak-Spatz, ca. 2013

In 2005 she published her Holocaust memoir, *Protective Custody: Prisoner 34042*. She continues to speak to students and other groups across the state.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Susan Cernyak-Spatz, audio, 1979 (3¼ hrs., U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn47955
- Oral testimony of Susan Cernyak-Spatz, video, 1994 (6 hrs., USHMM)
collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn509009
- Susan Cernyak-Spatz, video introducing audiobook of *Protective Custody: Prisoner 34042* (2013)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLS0y2Bh68M
- “Holocaust survivor discusses experiences, lessons, for the current generation,” *The Appalachian*,
Sept. 22, 2015
theappalachianonline.com/2015/09/22/holocaust-survivor-discusses-experiences-lessons-current-generation/
- The Auschwitz Album: photographs taken by SS photographers as Hungarian Jews arrived and were selected for death or slave labor, May-June 1944 (Yad Vashem)
www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/selection.asp

Adapted from: (1) Susan Cernyak-Spatz, “Inside Auschwitz-Birkenau,” *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, 25:3 (Spring 1986), published by the North Carolina Museum of History, archive.org/details/tarheeljuniorhis2527tarh; (2) Cecile Holmes White, “Inside a Concentration Camp,” interview with Susan Cernyak-Spatz, ch. 2 of *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, published in cooperation with the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1987, archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit. Reproduced by permission of the author. Images credited USHMM reproduced by permission of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photos of Dr. Cernyak-Spatz reproduced by permission of Dr. Cernyak-Spatz and her daughter Jackie Fishman.