

THE CAMPS ■ RENA MAKES A PROMISE

Rena Kornreich was born in 1920 in Tylicz, Poland, and her younger sister Danka was born two years later. Rena looked after her sister throughout their childhood, never expecting that her devotion would be crucial through the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. In March 1942, when the sisters were 20 and 22, they were on the first transports of Jews to Auschwitz. Five months later they were moved to the newly created women's camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

How will we survive this place? What do we have to do in order to live? What does this life mean? What is there to know? We did not receive a ticket when we entered Auschwitz-Birkenau saying, You will leave on such and such a day; you will leave alive. There are no guarantees. Birkenau is a cruel awakening. In Auschwitz there was a lot of death, but it was not such a daily fact of life.* Now we see death every day. It is a constant, like our meals. And there are not just one or two girls dying, like before, but tens and twenties and losing count.

I know that I must be with my sister. I know that I must make sure she lives; without her I cannot survive. I do not admit that to myself, but I know she is a part of my truth, my being. We cannot be separated; there is danger in separation.

There is only one thing that exists beyond the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It lies in wait for me like a beacon of light shining through the fog. I hold it before me constantly, every second of every day. It is the only thing that keeps me going—Mama and Papa. They beckon to Danka and me from the fringes of my mind. Their hands wave against a backdrop of snow and winter sky. *We're here!* they cry. *We're waiting for you to come home.*

We're coming, Mama, I remind them. *Don't leave us here alone.* And they don't. I hear Mama's voice comforting my troubled mind, soothing the worries of our existence. The only thing she cannot help is the hunger, but even that dulls in comparison to the knowledge that Mama and Papa are waiting for Danka and me to return to Tylicz. I frame this picture in my mind and hang it on a mental wall where I can gaze at it constantly. I know they are there. I work because they need me. I live because they are alive.

Mama, I brought you the baby back, I repeat over and over in my head. It is the refrain in the song that keeps me strong and healthy and spirited. *Mama, I brought you the baby back.* My one great feat in life, my fate, is to survive this thing and return triumphant with my sister to our parents' home.



Rena (far right) with her parents, her older sister Zosia, and her younger sister Danka, mid-1920s



Sisters Rena (left), Danka, and Zosia with their mother and Zosia's children, ca. 1940

* These were the earliest months of Auschwitz before the camp fully transitioned from a labor camp to a death camp.

You have to have a brain to figure out all that is going on, the tricks to being camp smart. . . . The new arrivals barely have time to figure out how to survive before they die.

These first few weeks we are barely surviving. The food is less than it was, which means it has gone from a crust to half a crust. The soup is so thin there is no use to wait at the end of the line for a piece of turnip or meat, and the tea is practically clear. Every morning that we wake up, at

least one of the girls has died on our block. There are no exceptions. We are dropping like flies.

You have to have a brain to figure out all that is going on, the tricks to being camp smart: where it's the warmest, who's the most dangerous, who doles out a bit more soup. The new arrivals barely have time to figure out how to survive before they die.

After roll call you don't know anything else that's happening. You can't keep brooding about what is befalling you and everyone else because then you won't have the energy to go on, and you have to keep going. The work you do may kill you, but if you don't do it you will be killed. No matter what the detail, we work, we dig, we carry, we sift, we push, we die.

It is Sunday. It is fall. We get off our shelves. Get our tea. Eat our half piece of bread. There is a rumor that there is going to be a selection.

"What's a selection?" we ask among ourselves.

We groom all day, pulling lice from our armpits and clothes. There is no frightening these creatures; they are everywhere. I spit on my shoes and wet the crease on my pants. It is important to look good if there is going to be a selection—whatever that means. I want to look right. Sunday fades with the light of a pale sun.

Four A.M. *"Raus! Raus!"* [*"Out! Out!"*]

We grab our tea as we step outside. I

notice that something is different immediately. The guards do not count us at once. Instead they stand at one end of camp, ignoring our neat lines and perfect rows. We wait and wait. Well after the sun is up, we wait. The row at one end begins to move forward slowly. We strain our eyes to see what is happening but they are too far away. "They are selecting us." The whisper scurries down the rows, informing those of us who are not yet moving toward the SS.

"What's it mean?" Danka asks.

"I don't know," I lie. I have an idea, but it is not something I will share with anyone I care about. We stand in our lines, forced to contemplate what new Nazi trick this is.

"They're deciding who will live and who will die," the whispers confirm. Our ranks grow silent and still. How can this be true? How can they do that? We have seen how they step on us like cockroaches—why does this next thing come as such a surprise? We move forward. I take Danka's hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "I will go in front of you," I whisper.

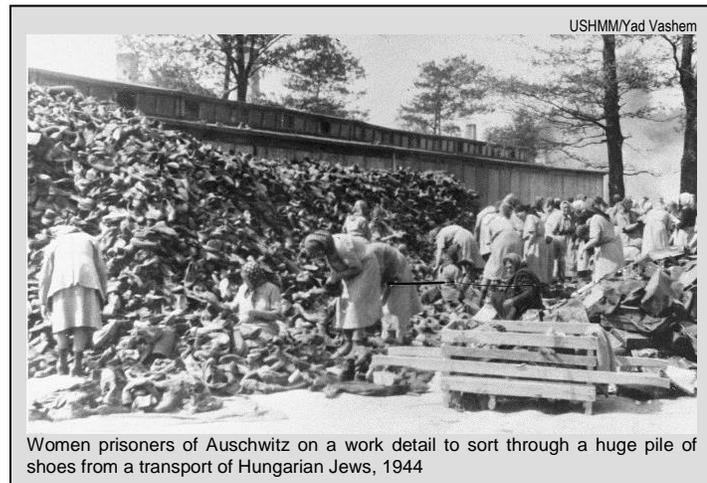


Jewish women who have been selected for forced labor at Auschwitz-Birkenau march toward their barracks after disinfection and headshaving, May 1944.

There are two sisters at the head of the line. I recognize them from the first transport. Like me, they've been here since the beginning. They step up to the table of SS officers. An SS points for one to go left and the other right. "No! Please!" the one who has been chosen for life cries, falling on her knees. "Let me go with my sister," she begs the officer, careful not to touch him. She huddles at his glossy obsidian boots, weeping for mercy. He points. She follows her sister. Hand in hand they step toward the flatbed trucks.

I squeeze Danka's hand one last time before stepping in front of those who will judge me fit or unfit. Tomorrow may have no meaning for us if we do not pass this selection—and if we do pass? Tomorrow may have no meaning for us. I hold my breath. The thumb points for me to live. Stepping forward cautiously, I wait for my sister. The thumb points for Danka to follow me. I breathe.

I am concerned about Danka's depression. She doesn't seem to care about ever getting her own bowl of soup again.* This is something beyond her fear of the kapos† serving the food. She seems so downtrodden, as if she's giving up on any hope of survival, and this depression is eating away at her soul. She is absent; her eyes are glazed over most of our waking hours. I don't think that she's too far away, but I know I must try to do something before she goes beyond my grasp. Struggling with what to do about my sister's failing faith, I finally decide that there is no other course but to confront her.



It is late. The rest of the block is sleeping fitfully. "Danka," I whisper into the dark, "are you asleep yet?"

"No."

"What's bothering you? Something's wrong, I know it. Why're you so sad?"

"I don't know."

"Please talk to me. How can I help you if I don't know what's going on in your head? I feel you shrinking away from me. You have to tell me what's wrong."

"What sense is there to this?"

"To Auschwitz?" I'm puzzled.

"To everything." She pauses. "What if there's a selection and I'm selected to die?"

"What makes you say that?"

"You look better than me. You aren't losing so much weight, and you're still strong. What if I can't make it?"

Slowly it dawns on me. "Remember those two sisters?" I take her hand. "And how the one begged to go with the other one?"

* After being hit by a guard who accused her of returning to the soup line for seconds, Danka refused to go through the soup line again.

† Kapo: a camp prisoner forced to act as a guard of prisoners in labor groups.

***I cannot lie to my sister, but
I can promise one thing.***

She nods in the shadows.

“I will do the same, if it comes to that.”

“They don’t allow it all the time, though. That was the first selection; they were soft. Now if someone begs to go with their mama or sister or daughter, they laugh and push them away.”

“I will do whatever it takes, even if I must strike the SS.”

“Then they will kill you immediately—that’s no good.”

There is something else lurking behind her eyes. It isn’t dying alone she’s afraid of, but I’m not sure which fear is possessing her.

“What is it you’re really afraid of?”

“Being thrown in the truck,” she confesses. “They treat us like rotten meat. I don’t want to be discarded like that, thrown onto the flatbeds. I’m afraid of what Erna said. Maybe there won’t be enough gas, and I’ll go into the crematorium still alive. What if they’re trying to conserve the gas?”

I cannot answer that question. How can I assure her that there will be enough gas to kill us when we arrive at the ultimate destination of all prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau? I cannot lie to my sister, but I can promise one thing.

“Sit up, Danka. Come on, sit up.” I hold out my hand. “You see my hand here.” I put her hand on mine and look into her eyes. “Our parents are standing here in front of us and my hand is our Talmud, and on this holy book and before our parents I make the oath to you—that from this day on, if you are selected I will join you no matter what. I swear that you will not go onto the trucks alone.”

It is pitch-black in the blocks, but I can almost see the light flicker back on in my sister’s eyes as I make this promise. Exhausted, I release her hand, and we fall back against the cold wood, pulling our blankets close around our bodies. Sleep comes swiftly, carrying us to a land where there are no shadows.

At lunch the next day, Danka stands in line and receives her first full helping of soup in months.



The SS walk up and down our rows counting the evening crew, making note of those who collapsed and died during the day. A hush descends through the columns of women. Dr. Mengele has come into camp. We know who he is; there are rumors about him. He stands before us, the glorious angel of doom.*

An SS motions for a portion of our ranks to move away from the main group. Danka and I are in the group separated from the rest of roll call. Dr. Mengele walks slowly among us looking for the healthiest, most able-bodied specimens. It is a moment I have been hoping for; sometimes he chooses prisoners for inside work details. This may be our lucky day, the day we find a way to leave Birkenau. He walks by us like a butcher inspecting his meat.

He points at me but passes over Danka. I step out, walking to the front of the line, moving away from my sister. Danka is discarded with the rest of the unfit specimens. Roll call is dismissed. Thousands of women hurry to their respective blocks to grab their bread and a place on the shelves to sleep.

We march away from the regular blocks toward the quarantine block. Turning my head, I catch a glimpse of my sister as the pit in my stomach grows wider and wider. The anxiety of not having her next to me is unbearable. I do not know if this detail is for life or if it is for death. I do know that

* Dr. Josef Mengele is the most infamous of the Nazi physicians who conducted brutal medical experiments on prisoners in the concentration camps.

the only way I can keep my promise to my sister, though, is to keep her with me at all times—too much can happen in a moment. There is no debate in my mind about my duty to my sister; the oath is the driving force behind all of my actions.

There is no debate in my mind about my duty to my sister; the oath is the driving force behind all of my actions.

That night, Rena offers her bread portion to a kapo guard to let her leave the quarantine block and get Danka. Reunited, the sisters wait several days in quarantine with the other selected women, wondering what work they will be doing.

Danka drifts off into a world of her own. I watch her become oblivious to her surroundings, knowing that this is how she survives. Meanwhile, I listen to every bit of information I can gather; this is how I survive—always being aware.

“Raus!” “Line up!” It’s the fourth morning. An attendant from the hospital enters the block. “March out!” We follow her lead, stepping out of quarantine, marching across the length of camp toward another building. The sign over the door reads SAUNA. Inside, the kapo informs us, “Leave your old clothes in a pile here. You no longer need them. There are new uniforms on that table. “Schnell!” [“Quick!”]

Stepping naked over to the table, we snatch up the new one-size-fits-all uniforms, pulling them over our bodies. They’re exactly like our other blue-and-gray striped dresses, rough as unworn sandpaper.

“Put these aprons on!” We tie clean, white, pressed aprons around our waists as we line up again, filing out of the building in twos. We march back across the length of the compound in front of the rest of the women in camp already lined up for morning roll call. The next building we enter is in the middle of the camp; it’s a small, one-room building across from our blocks. It’s Mengele’s office. Inside, the nurse orders us to hold out our arms so that the secretary can write down each of our numbers on a list. Outside, we line up facing the camp roll call, in neat rows of five, ten to each line, forming our new exclusive work detail.

Out of the corner of my eye I see a woman with a list in her hand and make a note that her presence is odd. She comes from behind the building, nervously looking this way and that as if she’s afraid. She stands for a moment, scratching something out on the list, then cautiously she takes one of the girls by the hand and leads her out the back of the line and behind Mengele’s office. They disappear.

My heart races as the realization sinks in. “Danka, this is not a good detail to be in.”



It takes less than a second for me to decide the course of action we must try to take if we are to survive. "Come with me."

Danka's eyes bulge with fright. "Why do you say that?"

"One of the elite just took a friend or relative out of the lineup."

"Who?"

"I don't know who she is, but she's important enough to walk around while the rest of us are standing roll call. She would know if this was a bad kommando [work detail]. We're not going to work under any roof. This is for death."

"You can't be sure."

"Yes, I can." I look around. My mind runs through every scenario possible. It takes less than a second for me to decide the course of action we must try to take if we are to survive. "Come with me."

Her eyes pop out of her head. "Where?"

"Back to the sauna." I look at the dreaded dresses we're wearing. How could I have missed the signs? No numbers on the breast, new dresses, clean white aprons exactly like the experiment victims were wearing.* "Our only chance is to get our old uniforms back before they remove them and we're lost for good."

"We can't do that!"

"We have to." I am fierce.

"How?"

My mind has catapulted beyond the situation we are in, to the particulars that could save our lives. "We're going to pretend that we're just as important as any block elder or kapo. I'm going to take your hand and we're going to march across the compound and I'm not letting go until we're in the sauna."

"In front of everybody?"

"It's a gamble."

"We can't. They'll shoot us for sure."

"Danka? This is something for experiments. Remember the women with the faces?"

"Gathering herbs?"

"You want to be a zombie?" I glare into her face.

"No."

We fall silent as an officer passes.

"You're going to be if you don't come with me now. We have one chance to live and once chance to die. If we cross the compound we might live or die. If we stay here we're dead for sure."

She wants to follow me, I can tell, but fear has her feet rooted into the ground. "I can't," she whispers.

I lean very close to her ear. "I'm going to break my oath to you. I swore I'd die with you, but that was only if you were selected, not if you chose to die. I don't owe that to you anymore!" Our

* One day the sisters witnessed the march of skeletal women with "bottomless eyes" to the gas chamber. Another inmate tells them the women are experiment victims: "They torture them until they are dead or vegetables. After they are done experimenting with them, they go to the gas."

voices are sparse and speculative. The SS are busy counting the prisoners on the other side of the Lagerstrasse [camp main street].

“If you don’t want to listen to what I’m saying, then you’re deciding to give up your life—but I’m not. I’m going back to the sauna whether you come with me or not.” I pray I’ve scared her enough to come with me.

“What do I do?” Her voice wavers.

“Just walk with me. That’s all you have to do. Keep your chin high and believe you’re important.” Her eyes glaze over. She will do as she’s told. “Now give me your hand.” Like a cold clammy fist, her fingers wind around mine.

Passing Stiewitz and Taube [SS officers], we walk with the air that we are doing exactly what we’ve been told to do. My fingernails dig into her flesh. I’m not letting go of my sister’s hand. We walk, convinced that no one will stop us. We are important. We have been ordered to return to the sauna. I repeat this to myself over and over. Chins up, eyes forward, never look back.

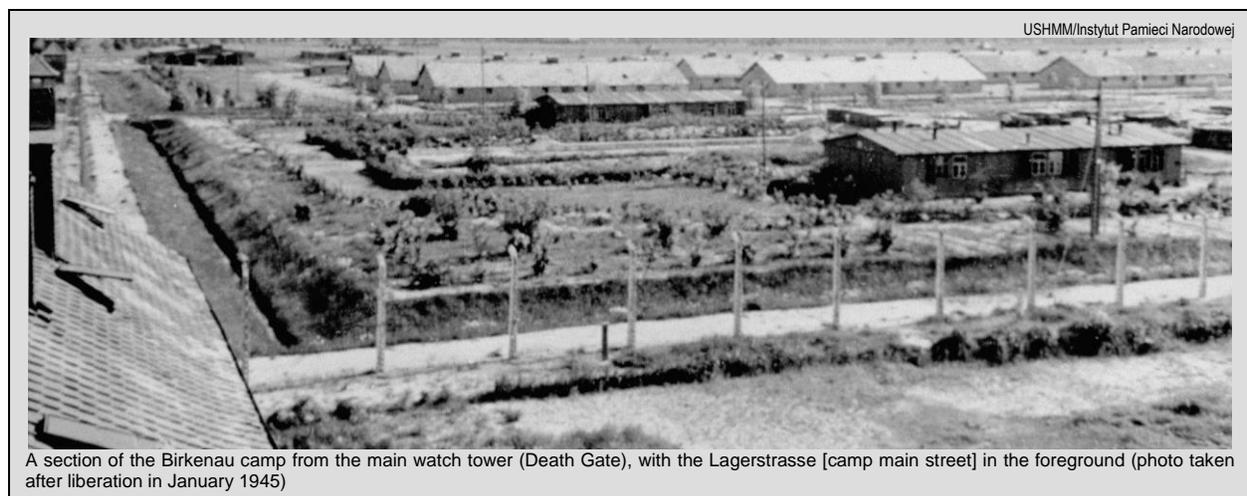
The distance seems to remain the same. The sauna gets closer. The lines and rows of prisoners seem to continue on forever. Through the desert of Birkenau we walk invisible. Seconds slow to hours as our feet trudge through the mud. Our heads held high, our gaze never veers from our path. Danka’s hand turns blue from the tightness of my squeeze. Chins up, eyes forward, never look back.

I open the sauna door without looking behind me. There are no voices behind us ordering us to halt, no gunshots firing at our backs. There’s only roll call, the lifeline that we must grab as quickly as we can change our clothes. We step inside, shutting the door behind us.

“Quick, Danka. We have to hurry!” I whisper urgently. “Undress and give me your clothes. I will do the rest.” Tearing the uniform of an experiment victim off my body, I search the pile of discarded uniforms in my underwear. Danka cannot move. She stares at me like a small animal frozen by fear, incapable of helping me as I fumble through the clothes looking for her number, repeating “2779, 2779” over and over, out loud. My hands tremble uncontrollably as my nerves unravel.

There is no time. Our lives depend on getting back to roll call. We must be counted. We must disappear before anyone notices we’re missing from the special detail. Finally, her uniform is on the floor in front of me. I toss it to Danka.

Rena finds her uniform in the pile and, when they both have changed, she opens the sauna door and views her goal—the lines of women standing for roll call.



“Ready?” I don’t wait for an answer, pushing Danka out ahead of me and into the neat ranks of five. “Please move up,” I whisper to the girl-women around us. “Please move over. Make some room, please.” No one pushes back, no one argues. The rows of fated women we depend on move as silently as water, swallowing us into their bosom until we are one with the ranks.

The SS move up our row. We hold our breath. They pass us. We have been counted. Roll call ends.

We are outside digging, building, rather than in Mengele’s and Clauberg’s hands. It feels good to work. It feels good to be alive.

*As the Soviet army approached Auschwitz in early 1945, most prisoners were forced on a death march to the Ravensbruck camp in Germany. There Rena and Danka were liberated on May 2, 1945. Rena believes her parents perished in Auschwitz. The fate of their sister Zosia is unknown. (Their older sister Gertrude had immigrated to the U.S. in 1921.) After the war, Rena and Danka worked for the Red Cross in Holland. Rena married one of the Red Cross commanders, John Gelissen, and in 1954 they emigrated to the United States (two years after Danka had arrived with her husband). In 1988 Rena and John retired to Hendersonville in the North Carolina mountains. The couple have four children and three grandchildren. In 1995 Rena published her Holocaust memoir, *Rena’s Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*.*



ONLINE RESOURCES

- *Rena’s Promise*, website accompanying the 2015 edition of Rena’s memoir; follow the Education tab for teacher and student resources and the Promise Project www.renaspromise.com/
- Video: Shoah Foundation oral testimony of Rena Gelissen, 1996 [Access via sfi.usc.edu/vha](http://www.sfi.usc.edu/vha).
- Video: Presentation by Rena Gelissen on her Holocaust experience, Salem College, Winston-Salem, NC, 1994 (YouTube) www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGx3i_GiT6w (first of several parts on YouTube)
- Jeremy Berlin, “How two sisters’ love helped them survive Auschwitz,” interview with author Heather Dune Macadam, *National Geographic*, April 15, 2015 news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/150415-ngbooktalk-nazis-auschwitz-holocaust-survivors/

Excerpted from Ch. 5 (“Birkenau”) of *Rena’s Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, by Rena Kornreich Gelissen with Heather Dune Macadam, 1995; expanded ed., 2015. Copyright © 1995 by Rena Kornreich Gelissen and Heather Dune Macadam. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts. Sections with brief omitted portions presented without ellipses for ease of reading. Images credited USHMM reproduced by permission of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Family photographs reproduced by permission of Sylvia Gelissen Lanier, daughter of Rena Gelissen.