

Miracle
By Jackie Aleardi

The sky was swamped with a misty, grey haze that prevented all rays of golden light from seeping through. Even so, I gazed up into the abyss of gloom through the smudged glass, searching for the slightest glimpse of sunlight to no avail. Beneath me, the railroad trembled under the roaring train as I swayed with each minute bump. I couldn't shift my focus from the bare trees stripped of leaves, limp and lifeless, as they raced by in a rhythmic blur.

It's been seventy years since Auschwitz was liberated on January 27, 1945; today I return for the first time.

It's a place drenched in the blood of my brothers and sisters, yet the compulsion to visit and find closure has never left. Often, I feel as though I've never fully escaped; a piece of me will always be a part of Auschwitz. These past weeks I've spent my nights sleepless as thoughts buzzed sporadically through my head in a storm of emotions. Now, as the train continued barreling forward, I intently concentrated on my surroundings as a means of distraction. My eyelids became anchors that I no longer had the strength to lift, and the muffled voices of passengers sank into silence. I was cocooned in the aroma of pinewood and smoke that wafted through the air, bringing me back to 1942, a time I don't dare to forget.

There was an intense banging on our door that seemed to shake the entire house as if it were an earthquake. I glanced over at Mama, who had stopped washing the dishes and stood there, a pallid statue. She only broke from her stance to look back at Papa as he silently tip-toed down the stairs, followed by my four older sisters. I was only eight, but even I could see the panic that enveloped the room.

"You are to evacuate from your household immediately. Open up, or we will commence the search by force!" a deafening voice commanded.

There was a brief pause; no one moved an inch until the Nazi soldier began to pound on the door once more.

"This is your last chance!"

"Come here," Mama whispered as she held out her hands.

I leapt from behind the table with no hesitation, making sure to grab Aderes, my old, worn stuffed rabbit from the oak chair positioned across from where I had been sitting. I collapsed into Mama's arms and quivered in fear, unable to fully comprehend what was happening. What did the Nazi soldiers want with my family? We'd done nothing wrong.

Mama questioned Papa with a quaver in her voice. "What do we do, Levi? What about the boys? They're still at Aneta's."

"Don't worry, we'll find them. Let's just focus on this for now. I'll handle it," he replied, slowly approaching the door.

Everyone watched with anguish and anticipation as he turned the doorknob. With only a crack between the door and the jamb, the soldiers abruptly shoved their way into our home. Their dominating aura radiated throughout the room, making me feel helpless. I felt violated as their arrogant gazes pierced me. They wore malevolent smirks as they basked in our fear.

It wasn't long until we were positioned in a line outside the rows of houses. There must have been hundreds of us. I scanned the ground that was littered with debris and corpses of those who were defiant. The smell of burnt pinewood and smoke drifted through the air. People were being loaded into trucks and transported to a train station.

When we arrived, I spotted my two brothers with Aneta, a family friend, and her son Gabriel. They were positioned further up in the line where people were being herded into boxcars like cattle.

"Mama, I see Elijah and Noah. Look!" I said pointing in their direction.

"Good, go to them now mein engel. Take Moyra with you and tell them we're here, but be careful."

"No! I don't want to leave you!"

"It's okay, Nasya. Everything's going to be okay. It's just a check-up."

I wanted so desperately to believe her, but she couldn't mask the look of despair on her face well enough. My sister proceeded to take my hand, and we swiftly approached them, hiding behind the others in line as to not be spotted. However, when we reached them, we were separated by the soldiers and directed towards an already crowded boxcar.

"Where are we going? What are they doing, Moyra?"

"I don't know, but stay close!" she exclaimed with concern as she squeezed my hand.

I didn't even have the chance to reply as the Nazi soldiers began to push us and a horde of other people into the overflowing boxcar. I was overwhelmed with anxiety. Why were they putting us in a boxcar? Where were we going? I didn't want to leave home. I remained paralyzed and refused to budge as the world spun around me.

"Move it now! Schnell!" a Nazi's voice boomed as he began to prod me with the butt of his gun.

"Don't touch me!" I shrieked as a tsunami flooded my eyes.

"Nasya! Listen to him!" Moyra pleaded.

"MOVE!" The soldier demanded, now prodding me more forcefully.

"NO, PLEASE NO!" I screamed and gripped Aderes tightly.

"COME ON MOVE! WAKE UP!"

I awoke in a sudden burst. A tear rolled down my cheek. The humming of the train wheels and chattering of the passengers gradually became more apparent. Instinctively, I reached for my shoulder where the nightmare soldier had been jabbing me with his gun. Nothing. My rapid heartbeat began to dwindle, and slowly my fear dissipated. I slumped in my chair, relieved it was only a dream.

"Are you okay?" a tender voice asked.

I turned to find two inquisitive azure marbles observing me. A young girl now occupied the previously empty seat next to me. Her complexion was olive and her cheeks were still sprinkled rosy red from the frigid winter air that had nipped at her face while she was waiting for the train. Her curly, almond hair reached just below her chin and bunched up into a ball of frizz.

"Young lady, you almost gave me a heart attack!" I exclaimed breathlessly.

"I'm sorry, I was only poking your shoulder to wake you. My grandmother taught me it was impolite to point and poke, but you were mumbling, and I was worried," she said with her finger still pointed at me.

"No need to worry. It was only a dream."

"It must've been quite a dream then. Where are you going on such a dreary day?"

“I’ll be returning to Auschwitz for the first time since . . . well, for the first time in a long while.”

“Really, me too! My grandmother said it’s important to never let such places be forgotten, but what do you mean by returning? You’ve visited there before?” she questioned, her button nose crinkling as she stared at me, perplexed.

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly say I was a visitor, more a prisoner,” I replied.

“Oh,” she said, at last, looking down at her miniature backpack as a silence overcame her.

I watched as she fidgeted with the zipper and sat there in a pool of uncertainty. She, like many others, didn’t know how to react to such a statement. I usually avoided talking about my experiences as a young child; the haunting nightmares were bad enough. However, she exuded a sense of familiarity. She couldn’t have been older than I was when my hometown of Czemierniki, Poland was raided, and in her presence, I oddly felt relieved. A part of me ached to see her feel wrongfully guilty over asking a simple question. It was as if she knew the traumatic distress that was associated with recalling such events. Nonetheless, I felt the compelling urge to comfort her.

“What’s your name,” I spoke, breaking the silence.

“Bina.”

“Well, Bina, let me tell you a story,”

“What story?” she said softly, looking up at me once more.

“Mine.”

. . .

Crowded was an understatement. My legs were numb, but it was impossible to sit or kneel; there was no room. I could feel the breath escape from the person behind me, and my shoulder jammed against a young man’s leg. I clung to Aderes, burying my nose deep in her back to weaken the stench emitting from the bucket that was our equivalent to a toilet. Aderes held the fragrance of Mama’s perfume. I remembered watching her by the mirror as the morning glow outlined her elegant figure, her silky, raven hair cascading down her back as she spritzed the subtle and sweet smell of cherry blossoms onto her neck. Then she reached under her bed and pulled out a hickory box engraved with the words *Mein Engel*. She sat down on the bed, and for a moment she paused and ran her supple fingers over the words, tracing each letter.

“Come,” she finally said, patting a spot on the bed next to her.

I plopped down and glanced up at her, admiring her beauty. I watched as she observed the box one last time as if saying a final goodbye and then she placed it in my lap.

“This is for you.” She paused. “My mama gave this to me when I was younger, and now it’s yours.”

“What is it?”

“Open it,” she said tapping the top.

I unlatched the two tarnished gold clasps and eagerly lifted the lid. Inside, the box was lined with crimson red velvet and etched on the bottom of the lid was the name *Aderes*. An old stuffed rabbit lay in the box with its large, floppy ears covering its face. Its fur was light brown, and its nose was a pastel pink. Its right leg was ripped at a seam, and a navy blue patch was sewn on the left side of its stomach, but these flaws made it feel all the more personal. I lifted it out of the box and held it up as I admired each little detail.

“Aderes means protector. From now on, she will watch over you. She’s a reminder that I’ll always be with you, and no matter what, you’re strong enough to make it through anything. Always remember that, mein Engel.”

I just nodded, confused as to why she was gifting this to me now, but I didn’t linger on that thought for long.

“Hello, Aderes. My name is Nasya,” I shook its paw, “Let’s be good friends.”

The smell of vomit and excrement was too pungent. It felt like hours had passed, each second dragging on agonizingly. Passengers who had been sharply coughing without a single break for air had now stopped, and the whining of other children had ceased. The bucket in the corner had long since overflowed and spilled onto the floor. It was dehumanizing; I was an animal, caged and at the mercy of my own kind. By the third hour on the train, my mouth and throat ached for the slightest drop of water. My stomach was barren and I wished for even a bread crumb. Hour four, I got on my toes and peered through the slight crack in the boxcar. It was now early evening. In the distance, I could spot a camp. As we approached, on the ground, ditches were dug and filled with body parts and other remains.

I had heard Mama and Papa talking about the camps a few weeks ago. They were speaking in the kitchen late into the night. All my siblings were sound asleep, and I was supposed to be, but the intense milky light pouring through the window had kept me awake. My intention was never to eavesdrop, but when I heard the murmuring, my curiosity took control. I found myself balled up on the top stair with my back against the wooden railing. I tucked my legs under my cotton nightgown and perched my head on my knees as my wild, brown hair covered each side of my face like curtains. I sat just out of view from my parents, but they were so deeply focused on their conversation that I doubt they would have noticed me if I had crept up next to them.

“A town not far from ours was raided today,” Papa said hopelessly.

“I know,” Mama responded solemnly.

They shared a long silence as they gathered their thoughts.

“I spoke with Aneta today,” Mama said quietly. “Word’s getting around about what they do to us in there. They take us into the forest and shoot us dead. Hundreds of us; dead.”

There was another long pause.

“What are we supposed to do, Levi? Our kids . . .,” she gasped through tears.

“I don’t know, Chana. I don’t know.”

That night they wept, and I listened in deafening silence.

“ARBEIT MACHT FREI.” Work makes you free. I read the sign over and over and over again, lingering on each syllable until the train screeched to a stop. I thought we had escaped the dreadful fate others had met at death camps. We would have to work like slaves performing tedious tasks, but at least I would be able to see my family. If only I’d known there was no truth to any Nazi promises. The heavy sliding door to the boxcar opened abruptly. I grabbed for my sister’s hand and clung to her like glue. As I peered through the wall of people, I managed to see the distinctive bright red of the swastika insignia wrapped around a guard’s arm. A throbbing pain pulsed throughout my head, and the ground rocked beneath me as I watched other passengers stagger from the train. I felt my hand being pulled forward and I followed the movement like a puppet on strings.

Red; all I saw was blood red. Each guard, a clone of the last. I turned back to see motionless bodies void of life being heaved off the train like rag dolls, their bodies now hollow shells. That could've been me, I thought. SS guards separated men from women and children. The cries of families in the throes of being torn apart tormented my eardrums. I covered one ear with my hand to drown out the cacophony of wails while the grasp Moyra had on my other hand tightened immensely. I struggled to hang on to Aderes as she was loosely positioned under my armpit. The consistent droning in my ears that begun on the train ride transpired into a faint ringing that seeped into the background as I frantically searched for Mama and my siblings. A plethora of people was still being unloaded from the trains and sorted into their designated lines. I spotted Mama and only two of my sisters as they piled off one of the boxcars and were engulfed by the swarm of detainees.

My third sister, Leah, never emerged from the train.

Moments later I was in an area of registration. A line approached a man dressed in a long, white coat with appraising eyes who only muttered one of two words: left or right, left or right. When my turn came, he scanned me up and down for only a second, but what felt like an eternity, and finally the word "left" escaped from his lips. Moyra shortly followed, joining me on the left. My mama and other sisters then stood before the strange man. I watched with uncertain dread as they moved to the right. The last glimpse I caught of my mother was of her sobbing; however, whether she was crying for herself or me, I was unsure. Maybe it was both.

I was a fragile porcelain doll. I was no longer human, but the property of another. Broken, shattered, and demoralized. I had no other purpose than to serve until I could serve no more; then, I was discarded and replaced. They cut the hair from my head. Every clump that dropped to the floor was another prayer unanswered. They stole my identity, my name now a sequence of numbers permanently imprinted on my left arm; and they stripped me of my dignity, my ambition, my worth.

I stared into the eyes of a guard and saw absolutely nothing. To him, I was a monotonous chore. To me, he was a stolid figure that didn't so much as blink as I stripped; removing each layer of clothing and joyous emotions until I had nothing but fear. Fear of not knowing what was to pour out of the showerheads and fear that I would die here not even knowing what for. I stared, petrified, at the wall in front of me. Inmates who had been here for longer told us of the gas emitted from the showerheads that would leave us begging for air. It was a gamble. I held my breath and closed my eyes as I waited. Then, a trickle of icy water ran over my eyelids and down across the point of my chin. I was going to live to see another day.

We were given a blue striped uniform to wear with two yellow triangles that formed the Star of David and assigned a barrack. Moyra and I were assigned to Barrack Eight. It was a narrow room with each wall covered in small bunk beds. I was still latched onto Aderes. A trusty had tried to rip her away from me as I entered the showers. I had sobbed, not because I was frightened, but because I had thought that the last piece of my mother was about to be stolen from me.

"Give it to me," a trusty demanded, attempting to pry it from my arms.

I gripped onto Aderes, refusing to budge. They weren't going to rid me of this too.

"What's going on over there," a guard questioned sternly, walking towards us.

"Sir! She won't give up her rabbit," the trusty stammered.

He looked me up and down, and scoffed.

"That wretched thing! She can keep it," the guard laughed, waltzing off.

We were awoken at 4:00 AM each morning and given half an hour to use the toilet, get dressed, make our beds, and have breakfast. Washing facilities were shared among two thousand prisoners and usually contained little to no toilet paper and dirty water. The guards then held roll call. Each day the numbers dwindled as many fell ill and died during the night. We would be counted twice, and any inconsistencies meant we would be counted again. Those who had then gone missing or collapsed were beaten, tortured, or executed. I watched as two thousand turned to one thousand.

Inmates that roamed the grounds were nothing but skin wrapped around bone. Everyone worked endlessly from morning to night producing synthetic rubber for a plant owned by IG Farben, and food intake was rationed, so all we got were scraps. I went to bed each night not knowing if I'd wake up, which I soon came to accept. Moyra was all I had left. I hadn't seen a trace of my papa or my brothers. I wouldn't be surprised if they were lying perished in a mountain of bodies ready to be disintegrated at the crematorium. Passing by it each day, the suffocating smell of burnt flesh stung my nose. I was desensitized to such horrors. After all, staring death in the face was a daily occurrence. One wrong step and he would suck you in.

One night Moyra curled up behind me in my tiny, creaky bunk bed. In the distance, the heaving of detainees echoed through eerily still darkness. The moonlight couldn't reach us here. She tenderly played with my hair, pulling it away from my face as she sweetly sang a lullaby. Her warmth engulfing me as I held Aderes against my chest.

“Numi, numi yaldati,
Numi, numi, nim.
Numi, numi k'tanati,*
Numi, numi, nim.

Mommy's gone to work -
She went, Mommy went.
She'll return when the moon comes out -
She'll bring you a present!

Numi, numi...
Sleep, sleep...” She quietly sang as her voice grew silent.

I awakened to the sound of sirens resonating throughout the camp. A multitude of guards stormed into the barrack, grabbing inmates from their beds. I sat up and pressed myself against the wall, feeling the cold seeping through the wood on my back. Moyra was no longer in my bed. My mind raced as the guards continued to rip weak bodies from their beds. The screams were almost as loud as the blaring sirens. Then just as soon as they came, they left. I shot out from my bed and looked in the direction of Moyra's bunk, only to find her lying there sound asleep, so fatigued.

“I can't lose you, too,” I whispered to myself.

Two years later. January 27th, 1945; 15:00.

The Germans ordered that Auschwitz be abandoned. Why; I don't know. All around me buildings were being blown up, torn down, and set ablaze. Records were being shredded and Nazi guards were gathering inmates. Amongst the chaos, Moyra told me to run. However, I didn't want to obey her. I couldn't abandon her.

“Nasya, go! You have to go. I’ll make sure they won’t get you,” she urged me.

“No, I can’t... I can’t. I won’t,” I stammered.

She grabbed onto my shoulders and squeezed. It was with the intent to comfort me, but I found it terrifying. It felt too much like a goodbye. She locked eyes with mine, and her usually bright, azure eyes were now dull and rimmed with tears. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Finally, she said, “I love you.”

I didn’t say anything. I knew if I did, it would make it all real, so I just stared at her through the oceans blurring my vision. At last, she turned to leave.

“Wait! Take this,” I yelled, holding out Aderes.

“I can’t! No way!”

“Yes. She’ll protect you as she did with me. You’ll take it and you’ll return it to me when we see each other again,” I said, shoving Aderes into her arms.

And with that, she was gone, and I ran until my lungs were fire and my legs were rubber.

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“What happened next,” Bina enthusiastically questioned.

“I was saved,” I replied. “After that, I was lost. Auschwitz had been all I had known for three years; it was home, and now I was free with nowhere to go. I expected I would die, but I had unexpectedly lived. I was dispersed in a sea of refugees trying to find any of my relatives, but I was the last survivor. From my village, only ten lived.”

She stayed quiet, absorbing every word.

“Well,” she said, “Did you ever get your bunny back?”

“No, I’m afraid not.” I sighed, tears threatening to fall.

“If it makes you feel better, you could have mine.”

She unzipped her maroon backpack and pulled out a ragged, old bunny rabbit with a navy blue patch on its left side and a ripped seam on its right leg.

“This is Aderes,” she chimed.