

Very few can understand what it was like to be a prisoner at Auschwitz–Birkenau but fewer still can understand what it was like to be forced into the role of ‘prisoner functionary’ within the concentration camp. To find yourself in a position in which, if you were brave and clever, you might be able to save a few lives . . . while being powerless to prevent the ongoing slaughter of most of those around you.

My mother, Magda Hellinger Blau, was one such prisoner, though for most of her life few, including most of her family, knew her story. As my sister and I grew up, she would tell occasional stories of the concentration camps and her unique role within them in the same matter-of-fact way that another mother might tell stories of growing up on a farm. We had no idea.

In the end, without telling any of us, she wrote her story by hand. She finally employed a young man to transcribe her words into a typed manuscript, and only then did we have the chance to read them. In 2003, at the age of eighty-seven, she took the file to a printer and had it produced as a slim book. She organised a book launch to support a charity she was involved with and sold a number of copies. And that was that.

For the final years of her life, my mother wouldn’t be drawn on her story or on the topic of the Holocaust at all. It was only after her death not long before her ninetieth birthday that I started to appreciate the complexity of my mother’s story. In the late 1980s and early 1990s she had provided audio and video testimonies to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Israel, to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, to the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne and, a few years later, to the Shoah Foundation founded by movie director Steven Spielberg. She spent hours being interviewed for these projects but barely mentioned them to us. As I watched and listened to these recordings, it became clear that in her haste to get her story printed, my mother had omitted a lot of detail. She had also left out numerous primary sources that amplified her story, including the testimonies of some of the many women whose lives had been saved by Magda’s careful manipulation of the Nazis.

Little has been written about the people like Magda, who were prisoners themselves while also holding positions of responsibility, at the behest of

the SS, over other prisoners: the so-called 'prisoner functionaries' of the concentration camps. What has been written tends to focus on the Kapos, who had particular responsibility over the Kommandos – the working groups who performed slave labour for the SS. Most of the Kapos were German prisoners, usually hardened criminals, who had a reputation for enormous cruelty. Unfortunately, this reputation meant other prisoner functionaries were tarred with the same brush.

Magda has been misrepresented and judged unfairly by some survivors simply because of the positions she was forced to hold. Most of the accusations have relied on hearsay to denounce and condemn. Many, including Magda, were accused of collaborating with the Nazis. This culture of finger pointing has caused most people who held functionary positions to maintain their silence to avoid prompting further accusations. However, to judge Magda or any of the other functionaries is to ignore the fact that they put their lives at risk every time they took some action that saved another's life.

\*

### *Magda's story*

I sat in a large, mirror-black limousine. Alongside me was SS-Hauptsturmführer Josef Kramer, commandant of the Nazis' Auschwitz II–Birkenau concentration camp, wearing the imposing grey-green uniform of the SS, including a cap with the menacing Totenkopf (skull and crossbones) symbol on the band. It was May 1944.

Kramer had only recently arrived at Birkenau, but his reputation had marched ahead of him – he was known as one of the most notorious commanders in the SS. Over the coming two months he would oversee the arrival of close to 430,000 Hungarian Jews, all transported in grossly overcrowded railway wagons. He would oversee the gassing to death, immediately after they arrived, of over three quarters of these people in the camp's killing factories. During this period the population of Auschwitz would reach its peak, as would its rate of extermination. Of the close to one million victims of the Auschwitz camps during World War II, nearly half would die in this short period, under Kramer's command.

I was a prisoner. Somehow, I had already survived over two years as an inmate of the Auschwitz–Birkenau death camps. I had endured disease and starvation, cruel punishments and abuse. I had narrowly escaped being sent to the gas chambers at least three times. On my left forearm I was branded with the tattoo '2318', and this was my name to most of the SS guards.

Kramer's car travelled a short distance to what would become known as 'C Lager' – 'Camp C', officially sector B-IIc – a newly completed prison within the Birkenau complex. The car stopped at the camp's main gate and we got out. Kramer stared down at me. 'Here you will be Lagerälteste,' he said.

Lagerälteste. Camp elder. Camp 'supervisor'. The pinnacle of the bizarre hierarchy of so-called 'prisoner functionaries'. I had been chosen, without any say in the matter, to take charge of 30,000 newly arrived fellow female prisoners. It would be my job to coordinate food distribution and hygiene across this collection of thirty barracks. Each barrack could have been used to stable around forty horses comfortably, but now a thousand women would be crammed into each one.

Any mishap, any misbehaviour, any failure of a prisoner to show for the roll call, and I would be blamed. On a whim, a disgruntled or drunk SS officer could send me to the gas chambers. Any failure of hygiene, any outbreak of disease on my watch and I, along with all 30,000 inmates of Camp C, could be sent 'up the chimney'.

I took in the scene, squinting dispassionately through the persistent haze of acrid smoke originating from tall brick chimneys barely visible in the middle distance. Dispassionately? That was the emotion I allowed myself to show Kramer. Deep inside, I held back a storm of feelings, an amplified version of the same things I had felt every day for the past two years. Fear, the same as every prisoner lived with, all day, every day. Dread, for the lives, thousands of them, that I knew would be lost no matter what I did. And determination to continue the mission I believed I had, to save as many lives as I could regardless.

\*

Initially there were around 7000 women, almost all Hungarians, in this camp but within days, as more and more transports arrived from

Hungary, Camp C quickly filled. Before long my 'city' had grown to its maximum population of over 30,000, all crowded into an area around 800 metres long and 200 metres wide. The conditions were horrific, as so many other survivors have recalled in telling their own stories. Every woman was soon reduced to little more than a skeleton. Death was always close. The life of a Jewish prisoner had no value.

How could I make this inescapable hell just a little less hellish? I was insistent that we keep the camp as clean and hygienic as we possibly could. I told my *Blockältestes* (block leaders) we would work together to prevent or contain disease outbreaks. We would try to maintain order, which would keep us from drawing the attention of the SS guards. We would ensure that food was distributed fairly and that those who needed it most got a little more if there was enough. We would hide the ill or injured to prevent them from being selected. If we could do these things, we might save a few lives, or make life a little more bearable. But we had to work together. 'The moment you fail at your duty, you will be punished by me,' I said.

Unfortunately, I did need to use discipline sometimes. Many of these girls were young, and we were asking a lot of them. I started carrying a stick, not to hit people with, but to assert some authority. 'I must do it,' I told one prisoner, 'because if I don't there will be chaos. If there is chaos, the SS will come and start shooting people. Keeping order keeps them away.' There was no time to be nice about this.

Many of the Hungarian women saw me running around the camp, carrying my stick and raising it at times, speaking harshly to some people and, occasionally, slapping someone on the face to bring them into line. These women did not understand that it was possible for things to be so much worse. They had not experienced the complete chaos of our arrival two years before or the muddy filth of the unfinished camp we found at Birkenau six months later. Many saw those of us in functionary positions and believed we were entitled, that we had more power than we actually did have, or that we were collaborating with the SS. They did not seem to understand that we lived constantly with the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads, that even granting a small kindness could be enough for us to be seen as too soft, and so banished or killed. Some of these women seemed to see our common enemy – the Nazis – as the lesser evil.

While Camp C was nearly always at its full capacity this was not a stable population. Women came and went all the time, sometimes in the hundreds. Just as selections took place after the arrival of each transport, they frequently took place inside the camps as well, led by the senior SS officers. As Lagerälteste I had to stand beside the SS officer conducting the selection and watch impassively as young women, as healthy as they could be while living in hell, were sent to one side to await their fate. The girls themselves had no idea what was happening to them. One of those who often performed selections on the ramp and inside the camps was Dr Josef Mengele, who came to be known as the 'Angel of Death'. He would select some prisoners for work, others for death and others to perform scientific experiments on.

Mengele seemed to gain particular enjoyment from performing selections, often carrying out the task in an especially callous way. He would whistle the tune 'The Blue Danube' waltz as he made his selections, swinging a stick like a baton as if conducting an orchestra. On one beat he would send a girl to the right, to continue working, and on the next he would send another to the left, to the gas chambers. He usually showed no interest in whether someone was sick or well – his selections were random. He didn't care. His principle was the 'Final Solution': no Jews.

After finishing his selection, Mengele would leave Camp C while a single guard led two columns of girls to the front of the camp: one group to be transported by truck to wherever they were needed as slave labour; the other to be taken to the gas chambers. The girls in this group did not know their fate, so there was no reason for them to resist, therefore the SS saw no need to use many guards.

One day I seized a moment. I knew the numbers in each line had not yet been counted, so I stepped into the line selected for gassing and detached a group, saying, 'March with me. Don't ask any questions,' and steered the group of perhaps fifty girls silently back into the camp. I removed as many from the line as I thought I could get away with without anyone noticing. The action was so brazen and unexpected that nobody realised what was happening.

From then on I repeated this trick whenever I saw the chance. I observed the positions of the SS and camp leaders, and when I thought

nobody was paying any attention, I stepped in and led some away. Sometimes it was only twenty, sometimes many more. The SS were often coldly efficient, but there were flaws in their systems. One of the most glaring weaknesses was their arrogance: they could never imagine that a lowly, starving prisoner, even a Lagerälteste, would dare to be as brazen as I was.

Years later, in Israel, I would meet a lady named Chava, a survivor of Camp C, who told me of a time when many members of her extended family had been selected by Mengele. 'We all cried as they marched away,' she told me. She said her younger cousin carefully followed the line towards the front. A few minutes later, she came running back, calling out, 'Don't cry! Magda is bringing them all back.' Somehow, I had saved this lady's relatives. They were all so thankful. I, on the other hand, was thankful that it was only this young girl, and not an SS guard, who had seen me performing this dangerous trick.

\*

As I started to meet more of the women in our camp, I was able to work out whose skills could be put to good use. One morning, a woman approached me and introduced herself as Dr Gisella Perl. She told me she needed a pair of shoes, so I invited her into my room and gave her shoes and a towel. Gisella told me she was a gynaecologist who had worked in a Romanian sanatorium, so I told her I would put her in the Revier.

This soon proved to be a good decision. An order circulated that all pregnant women were to report for registration before being sent to a sanatorium – which almost certainly meant death. Thankfully there were only a few pregnant women, so I called each of them to see me with Gisella. We explained that being sent to the sanatorium really meant being sent to the gas chambers, but that having an abortion would save their life. Of course the women were hesitant. We were forcing them into a dreadful predicament. But we were able to convince most of them. I made them swear that they wouldn't mention this to anybody. If what we were planning was discovered, many more would be sent up the chimney.

We went to the Revier and Dr Perl performed the abortions as best she could on the dirt floor, with neither equipment nor hygiene. Later we

discovered a woman who had managed to hide her pregnancy. When she was close to giving birth, Gisella helped her through labour and delivered the child. The mother had a day's rest in the Revier then returned to her barrack. The infant, who the SS would never allow to stay alive in this place, was quietly allowed to pass away before any more cruelty could be imposed on its short life.

Over the coming months Dr Perl would deliver dozens of babies and perform countless abortions on the floor of the Revier. She saved the lives of many women in this way, though sadly at the expense of many innocent unborn or newborn children. Such were the unimaginable dilemmas faced by those of us who found opportunities to save one life even as thousands of others were lost.

\*

Auschwitz survivor Dr Gisella Perl wrote this open letter published under the headline 'Magda, the Lagerälteste of C Lager' in the Új Kelet Hungarian-language newspaper in Tel Aviv on 28 July 1953. In part, it read

*...I knew it then and I know it now: it was a bitter fate to be Lagerälteste, to hold together 30,000 to 40,000 human beings degraded to the level of animals, to keep them in order while at the same time carrying out the fiendish commands of the SS supervisors . . . . . Our Lagerälteste, our Magda, was a righteous person. She fought like a righteous person. I thank providence that our Magda was like that, someone who believed and had faith that some day we will become human again. Someone who, everywhere and at all times helped us with kindness, defended us and saved us – sometimes with harshness and sometimes smiling or frowning. I feel that with this testimony I am repaying a debt of gratitude in the name of very many prisoners – and not least in my own name – to whom Magda, the Lagerälteste at Auschwitz– Birkenau had shown so much kindness.*

**Edited extract from *The Nazis Knew My Name* by Magda Hellinger & Maya Lee, with David Brewster (Simon & Schuster, \$32.99), out September 1.**

