

HILDE SHERMAN'S TESTIMONY



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.



PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

...According to the Gestapo's orders, we could take up to 50 Kg. of luggage and a bedroll 70 cm. long and 30 cm. wide with blankets etc. Of course, everyone tried to squeeze his best belongings into the suitcase, as no one knew how long they would have to last during this so-called 'resettlement'....And so we boarded the train on the 10th [of December 1941]. I said goodbye to my parents....

My husband's name was Kurt Winter. I was deported with his family. We arrived at Dusseldorf at dawn. We had to disembark and walk to the slaughterhouse yard, where we were gathered together. I remember that even at that point the older people were unable to carry their baggage and simply threw it on the street. I saw how the people [of the town] were watching. They did not go out on the street, they were watching from behind the windows. I saw how the curtains were moving. No one can claim that they did not see. Of course they saw us. We were over one thousand people.

We then arrived at the slaughterhouse yard [the assembly point] and stood there the entire night. Everything was deep in water. It was a terrible night. That was the beginning. It was the first time I was beaten. It was a high-ranking SS officer who stood at the entrance. There were steep stairs leading down into the yard and the people were not moving fast enough. So he pushed me and screamed: What are you waiting for, the streetcar? There will never again be a streetcar for youShortly afterwards, we had to undress completely and our things were taken away....



BOARDING THE TRAIN

The next morning at dawn we were forced to the ramp. The train had not arrived. It was bitterly cold. We stood there and stood there from 4 a.m. until 9 a.m. We were then called and the trip began on 11 December 1941.... Everything had been taken from us. One of the people asked one of the guards, an SS man, when the train was coming. They took out a club and beat him for so long that he remained there on the ground. He didn't get on the transport. That was our first dead. That was the beginning...



THE TRAIN MOVES

We were in a passenger car. This was before they started using cattle cars. We were so crowded that it was unbearably hot. In addition there was heating, which was unnecessary. In the other car, where the children were, there was no heating at all. They almost froze....



THE JOURNEY

I remember we were suffering from terrible thirst. We had taken bread with us, but the thirst was terrible. Everyone in the car was running a fever because of the terrible heat. We arrived at Instertburg, right at the border, in what had been Poland. There the train stopped. The doors were opened and we were allowed to get off and gather the snow for drinking. We could drink it when it melted....

I had not taken off my boots because I knew that I would not be able to get them back on my swollen feet. I was the only one who was not running a fever and could get off the train. So I put as much snow as possible into dishes and even handed it through the windows to the adjacent cars. At the end of the ramp I saw a mailbox. I prepared a postcard for my parents and wrote that once their time comes, they should take only warm clothes. An acquaintance later told me that the postcard actually reached them. We traveled through Lithuania for three days and four nights. I was deeply impressed by the peasants' houses with their straw roofs. It was something we had not seen in Germany. They used wells. In Germany we had running water. The people were at the wells with felt boots and sheepskins. They looked so miserable. I thought: my God, these Lithuanians are all good Catholics, if this is what their life is like under German occupation, what will our fate as Jews, as deportees be...

5 JOURNEY'S END

At night, the train suddenly stopped. We had no idea where we were. At dawn we could see a sign saying Shirotawa. Where is Shirotawa? What is Shirotawa? It was terribly cold. Around 10 a.m. we heard dogs barking. SS troops arrived and circled the train. The doors were opened and the screaming began: Out, out, fast, fast. We had to get out, and the last people had to clean the cars with their hands. There were no tools. We had to stand in line on the ramp. A car arrived with two high-ranking SS officers. They got out of the car, and I remember that one of them started screaming: Line up in fives and off with you to the ghetto. A man called Meyer, from Gort, a small village near Dusseldorf, had two children on his arm, two small boys, and asked: Sir, is it very far to the ghetto? Instead of an answer, the officer took out a stick... and hit him in the face. He released a German shepherd, who attacked the man. The man fell to the ground and the two children too. When he got up, his mouth was all bloody and his teeth broken. This was our first impression of Latvia, of Riga, of Shirotawa.... There was ice everywhere.... The ghetto was about 20–25 km. from Shirotawa. People threw away their bags. The Latvians were not only watching, they were looting. As soon as the train left, they stole everything that was on the ground. Then we went through a suburb and up a little hill. Then there was an iron gate. It opened and we were in the ghetto.

THE FATE OF THE JEWS IN RIGA

On November 30, 1941 the first transport of Jews from Germany arrived in Riga. In the coming months another 24 transports with a total of over 25,000 Jews arrived. One of these was the transport guarded by Salitter and carrying Hilde Sherman. Thousands of these Jews were murdered upon arrival. The rest were put in concentration camps in the area. The Germans conducted periodic mass executions of Jews by shootings in the nearby Rumbuli Forest. Among the Jews who perished in Riga were Hilde Sherman's husband and many other members of her family. She registered 26 family members at the Yad Vashem Hall of Names.



ABOUT THE PHOTOS

Left: Hilde Sherman as a young woman after the Holocaust. She was born as Hilde Zander in Germany, 1923. She was the only survivor of her family after the deportation in the ghetto of Riga. Yad Vashem

Right: Jewish ghetto in Riga, Latvia. Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-N1212-326 / Otto Donath / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Reprinted with permission from Yad Vashem Archive O.3/7337.