selection and saw healthy men sent off to the gas chambers. He asked another prisoner why, and was told: "They were wearing glasses."

But the great news at Auschwitz that summer was the escape of Mala Zimetbaum and Edward Galinski—the most famous of the hundreds of Auschwitz escapes, because even in failing it gave courage to the thousands of inmates who knew about it and witnessed its legendary end. Zimetbaum, who was barely 20 in 1944, was one of the most extraordinary prisoners to pass through Auschwitz. Fluent in several languages, she was put to work as a messenger and interpreter. She apparently made full use of her position to carry out assignments for the camp resistance, even managing to replace the identity cards of women selected to be gassed with those of women who had already died.

Zimetbaum fell in love with Edward Galinski, a Polish political prisoner, and they resolved to escape. They succeeded in bribing an SS man to supply them a uniform, and Zimetbaum filched a pass from the guard room. On June 24, Galinski marched out the gate of Auschwitz with a female prisoner in tow. But Auschwitz did not give up its victims so easily. They were caught two weeks later, still in southern Poland, and brought back to the camp for execution. The hangings were scheduled for Sept. 15. Galinski went first: he slipped the noose over his head, and, by one account, kicked over the stool that served as his scaffold, shouting "Long Live Poland!" Zimetbaum was stood in front of the assembled women prisoners, who were subjected to a lecture on the consequences of trying to escape. But before the guards could hang her, she pulled out a razor blade and slit her wrists, spraying her executioners with her blood.

Selection: When trainloads of Jews reached Auschwitz, most were sent directly to the gas chambers. The others were herded into work gangs.

YAD VASHEM, ISRAEL, COURTESY UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM (2)

BUT EVEN WHILE THE CAMP WAS awaiting the fate of the two lovers, something else happened to give them hope. On Aug. 20, more than 120 Flying Fortress bombers from the American air base in Foggia, Italy, flew over Auschwitz en route to bomb the factories of Upper Silesia. One of the targets was, in fact, a satellite camp of Auschwitz itself, the giant I.G. Farben plant (known as "Buna") that converted coal to synthetic fuel. "We heard the sirens in camp, but there was no cover," says Max Sands, who worked in a warehouse at Buna. "We stayed in the barracks and when I looked out, the sky was covered." At his next shift two days later, the damage made such an impression on him that he swears he saw locomotives on roofs. The downside of all this was that he and his brother lost their soft warehouse jobs and were put to work hauling bags of cement on a repair crew, but it was worth it to see the Germans bombed.

But no bombs ever fell on Auschwitz itself, nor on Birkenau. American Jewish leaders, by this time well aware of Auschwitz, pleaded with Washington to bomb the crematoriums. Hundreds of inmates might have died in such an air raid, of course, but it might have saved some of the thousands of new victims who arrived every day. For that matter, the prisoners in the camps were hoping for the same thing. "Our greatest anticipation was when the air raids were on," recalls Celia Rosenberg, 66, who was brought to Auschwitz from Hungary in May. "It would have been our pleasure to be bombed. It never occurred to us to be afraid." But the War Department—contravening even President Roosevelt's

LEFT TO RIGHT: MAIN COMMISSION FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF NAZI WAR CRIMES COURTESY USHMM, DOCUMENTATION FRANCAISE, STATE MUSEUM OF AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU COURTESY USHMM

Camp, where he conducts his "experiments" on children, dwarfs, twins. Soon, the "Angel of Death" is presiding over *Selektion*—determining who lives and dies with the point of a finger.

AUGUST 1944
Allies bombard "Buna," the I.G. Farben industrial complex, but not the death camps. Two months later a prisoner uprising destroys a crematorium. Gassings halt in November, leaving more than a million dead.

Gypsy children

JANUARY 1945
About 58,000 prisoners set off on westward death marches. Nine days later Soviets arrive to a ghost camp of some 7,000.

As the Red Army nears, prisoners are forced into death marches

RUTH ELIAS

The Mother

AT THE TIME, RUTH ELIAS thought it a miracle she survived the selection. She had arrived in Auschwitz in a transport from Theresienstadt nearly three months pregnant, in December 1943, one of 5,000 Jews marked for death after six months. But as the time approached, Germany needed laborers. The young and strong would go to a labor camp in Hamburg. "We had to go naked in front of Mengele and I was in my eighth month of pregnancy," says Elias, now 72 and living in Israel. "I saw him directing people right and left. One side for young, healthy people, the other side for the old, ill and children. I asked two young women to walk in front of me, and he pushed all three of us to the side of the young"—those destined for the labor camp. But after four days there, the barracks leader told the SS that Elias was pregnant; she was returned to Auschwitz.

On Aug. 4 she gave birth. "Mengele, he gave the order to bandage my breasts . . . He wanted to make an experiment to see how long an infant can live without food . . . In the beginning, the baby was crying all the time. Then only whimpering. The belly was swollen . . . Every day Mengele came and wrote his notes. [After seven days] Mengele said, 'Tomorrow I'll come and fetch you . . .' A Jewish doctor asked me why I was crying . . . I told her, 'Tomorrow Mengele is coming to fetch me.' She arrived back with a syringe and she told me, 'Give this to your child.' I asked what it was. 'Morphine. It will kill your child . . .' I killed my own child. It didn't take long before the child stopped breathing. In the night, they collected corpses. They collected also this little corpse. I didn't want to live anymore."

wishes—seems to have stuck to a policy of not mixing military and humanitarian objectives. "The best way to help those people," Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy insisted, "was to win the war as quickly as possible."

Even so, the bombing raids and the news filtering back to the prisoners in the fall of 1944 made it clear that the war had turned decisively against the Germans. For the sonderkommando, who never expected to survive the war, this was a call to action. They enlisted the help of prisoners who worked in a munitions plant—most of them women—to smuggle out gunpowder, a few grams at a time. A plan took shape to blow up the gas chambers, attack the guards and break through the electrified fence that surrounded Auschwitz and Birkenau. But before they could act, on Oct. 7, the SS demanded 300 sonderkommando for "transfer"—barely a euphemism—and the victims decided to die fighting.

Unplanned, unorganized and vastly outnumbered, the rebellion had no chance. The sonderkommando fought the well-armed SS troops with knives, chains, stones and perhaps homemade grenades. One part of it worked: bales of human hair, destined for German carpet factories, had been stashed in the attic of Crematorium 4; the sonderkommando sprinkled them with gasoline and ignited them, setting ablaze the roof of the whole vast structure. Three SS men were killed. But no one escaped, and of the 663 members of what became known as the Last Sonderkommando, 451 were shot by the SS and tossed in the ovens by the end of the day.

And of the women who helped them, four—Roza Robota, Ester Wajcblum, Ala Gertner and Regina Safirsztain—were arrested and taken to the infamous prison Block 11, where they were tortured for weeks, although without revealing the names of any other conspirators. In a letter smuggled out to her sister Anna, Ester wrote about how "the familiar sounds of the camp—the screams of the kapos, the screams for tea, soup, bread, all those hated sounds now seem so precious to me and so soon to be lost . . . Not for me the glad tidings of forthcoming salvation; everything is lost and I so want to live." Ester was 20. On Jan. 6, 1945—less than two weeks before the Germans abandoned Auschwitz altogether—the four women were taken to the gallows. Their fellow prisoners had been assembled for the spectacle. Two women grabbed Anna and pushed her into a barracks to keep her from watching, but she heard the groans. It was the last public execution at Auschwitz.

As fall turned to winter, and the Red Army drew closer, new orders arrived from Berlin. The transports stopped coming, the crematoriums went cold—in fact, the whole vast operation went furiously into reverse, as the Germans began dismantling the evidence of what was to have been the crowning achievement of the Third Reich. Crews sent to clean out the chimneys had to scrape out deposits of human fat 18 inches thick. The prisoners greeted these developments with mixed emotions: happy to see the Nazis losing, but troubled by the general assumption that the Germans would slaughter them all first.

The Soviet offensive on Upper Silesia began on Jan. 12, and the Germans quickly fell back. Red Army guns boomed over the roll call on the evening of Jan. 17. The next day, long columns of prisoners began marching out of the camp, thousands at a time—past the famous sign with its mendacious promise ARBEIT MACHT FREI (WORK MAKES ONE FREE), leaving behind the remains of the chimneys that were supposed to be their only exits. Most were in various stages of starvation; many had only wooden shoes or rags to cover their feet as they tramped over the freezing mud.

SOURCE: "THE NUMBER OF VICTIMS" BY FRANCISZEK PIPER IN "ANATOMY OF THE AUSCHWITZ DEATH CAMP," EDITED BY YISRAEL GUTMAN AND MICHAEL BERENBAUM

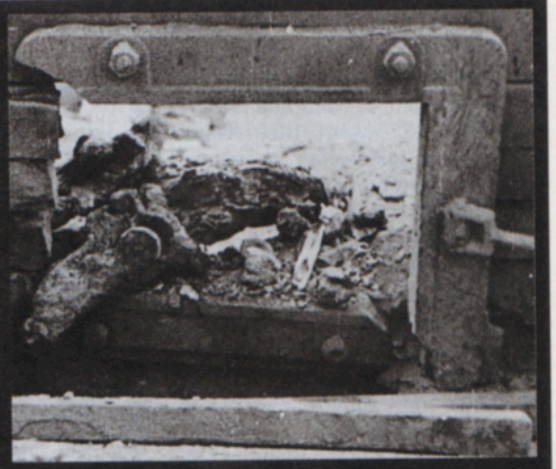
RICKI ROSEN—SABA

The German officers enforced one simple rule: anyone who fell behind, for any reason, was shot dead on the spot. "You were outside, without fences, but you were not free," said Siggi Wilzig. "If you thought the camp was bad, just wait until the death march." Wilzig had usable shoes, but several days into the march a shoelace broke, which could have cost him his life. Just then he spied a sapling poking out of the snow; he worked it free and lashed his shoe together in time to rejoin his march. "An act of God!" he exults.

In the confusion of these days quite a few prisoners managed to escape. Louis Zaks, who had been in concentration camps since 1941, was working in the coal mines of the Jaworzno subcamp when the Soviets approached; he declared his own emancipation a day early by refusing to go to work, which in normal times would have meant a bullet in the head. He was marched to another subcamp, Blechhammer, where he ran off and hid in a coal pile. After several hours, he felt safe enough to stretch, and the coal began to move, and 20 people stood up from nearby piles. But freedom had its perils also. Walking on the highway north toward Lodz, he and his fellow escapees encountered a group of Soviet soldiers. "They asked for our watches. We told them, 'We have no watches, we are from a concentration camp.' 'Oh,' they said, 'you are Jews. Nobody likes Jews. Germans don't like Jews, Poles don't like Jews, we don't like Jews.' They chased us into the forest and lifted their rifles." Zaks was saved by the timely arrival of some Russian officers, including one who was Jewish.

Those who didn't escape or die on the death marches were eventually loaded onto open railcars for the trip to camps in Germany; having come in sealed boxcars in the summer, they now traveled in the open in the winter. They were so emaciated and pitiable that civilians sometimes threw them bread and even clothing as they passed. The SS guards discouraged the practice by shooting at the civilians. The last few weeks and months, as the Reich collapsed around them, were some of the hardest the prisoners had to endure. Linda Breder, interned near Ravensbrück, in Germany, gives a calm account of her 33 months at Auschwitz and the death march along a road "paved with corpses in the snow." But she breaks down in tears at the memory of a kettle full of soup that overturned as it was being served, leaving the starving women to lick the food from the snow. Freed eventually by the Russians, she set off with some friends to walk back to Slovakia, living off the land. They went into a German woman's house; the table was set with dishes and napkins, there was a tureen of hot soup. The women had seen nothing like it for three years. Anger and hunger waged war within them, until one grabbed the tablecloth and sent everything crashing to the floor. They searched the house and found the woman, hiding, and two SS uniforms in a closet. They roughed her up and moved on.

Meanwhile the Russians, having done their part for history, had moved on themselves. The survivors stood and walked out as free men and women, and miraculously got on with their lives. They went back to being tailors, or jewelers, doctors and writers; some went to Palestine and fought another war. You couldn't pick them out of a crowd, now, in Jerusalem, Toronto or Los Angeles, unless you happened to spot the numbers graven on their forearms. They (and the others who passed through Auschwitz) left behind, according to a subsequent Soviet accounting, more than a million suits, coats and dresses, seven tons of human hair and comparable heaps of shoes, eyeglasses, cooking utensils and other goods, counting only what was found in only six of the 35 storerooms of Canada, the Germans having burned the rest. They took with them the indelible memory of the moment when a tall man in shiny boots condemned them to life, the moment in which Rita Yamberger sees a young boy pulled roughly from her grip and shoved to the left. "From afar, I saw the little boy. He was lost in the crowd, shouting for his mother. He was lost. I hope he found his mother and they died together." ■



The Sonderkommando: The Nazis forced Jewish prisoners to work in the crematoriums. When the ovens were full, bodies were burned in the open. The SS killed most of the brigade, lest they testify.

Clandestine photo shows workers burning the dead

STATE MUSEUM OF AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU COURTESY UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM (LEFT).
STATE MUSEUM OF AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU