



“The Number On Grandmother’s Arm”

(Written and translated from Hebrew by Ella Dor-On)

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About the author

Ella Dor-On,



The author of five books of poetry. Her poems have appeared in many journals, textbooks and literary anthologies. Was born and brought up in Moscow, Russia, and has lived in Israel since 1957.

She holds a B.A. degree in English Literature and Eastern Studies from the Tel-Aviv University, Israel. She is also an English teacher, translator and editor.

Her book "The Number on Grandmother's Arm" has received warm reviews from teachers, principals and inspectors of the Ministry of Education in Israel. Enthusiastic responses come from students, as well.

The poems are recited on Holocaust Day at schools and during ceremonies organized by youth delegations to Poland.

The book can serve as a helping tool to cope with the difficulties in teaching literary texts about the Holocaust in Elementary, Junior-High and High Schools.

Preface

The book is based on the memoirs of my mother, Ester Shkurman-Joffe, a survivor of the Concentration Camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Esterka Margolis (her maiden name) was born in Grodno, Poland. When the Second World War broke out in 1939, she was 16 years old. After the Germans invaded Poland, Esterka and her family, together with thousands of other Jews, was transferred to Ghetto Grodno, where she was held during the years 1941-1943.

In 1943, the Ghetto was closed and the Jews, who remained alive, were transported in cattle-trains to Auschwitz. After spending two years in the inferno of Auschwitz, the Soviet Army liberated the camp, in winter 1945.

In 1957, Esterka immigrated to Israel from Russia. She got married and had two daughters and four grandsons. She died in 2010, in Israel, at the age of 87.

* * *

The urge to write the book stemmed from a conscious decision to unfold what happened to my mother and her extended family during the Holocaust – a kind of family heirloom for my children and close relatives.

The first poem I wrote on the theme was “The Number on Grandmother’s Arm”, which was first published in my children book “No one is Perfect”. One day I received a letter from a young girl, the grand-daughter of my mother’s friend. The girl wrote: “I really enjoyed reading your book but the poem I liked best was the one which you wrote about my grandmother”. I was very touched by those words. They proved that Grandma Esterka could represent the grandmothers of a whole generation of grandchildren.

My first childhood memories are associated with friendly gatherings of Holocaust survivors – my parents' friends – held at our home. I listened to stories about survival, about mutual assistance and self-sacrifice. I heard stories about my mother – how, by risking her own life, she was saving the lives of others.

I held on to the heroic part, unable to deal with the horror. For years I didn't ask my mother about her past. Nevertheless, I had a feeling of guilt and therefore, encouraged her to describe in writing all she had gone through during the war. For me, to talk to my mother about the Holocaust, was like touching a blaze and I was afraid to get hurt. It was difficult to cope with the fact that my mother, the most significant person in my life, was humiliated, helpless, despised.

As the years passed, a sense of urgency arose. The generation, which experienced the Holocaust at first hand, was gradually disappearing. Suddenly, I was troubled by the thought that if one day I did wish to ask, there would be no one to answer. It was then that I started to read my mother's diary. Through the written text I made a new acquaintance with my mother. I found in her memoirs not only factual information but also an insight into her thoughts, emotions, anxieties, fear. The memoirs were written in an outburst of emotions. The handwriting was sometimes illegible, the content confused. As a result – a dialogue followed. What I couldn't clearly understand from the text, we completed by talking. For the first time in my life I dared to ask painful questions, which she eagerly answered.

By writing a book based on my mother's diary, by telling the personal story of Esterka, a young woman who survived a death camp, I wanted to touch the hearts of the readers and thus to acquaint them with the most tragic-heroic period in the history of the Jewish people.

A poem emerges out of a rare combination between an idea and a strong inner sense. I got the ideas from my mother's life-story – all the poems are based on real events – while the emotions, which give the poems their spirit and vitality, stem from the depth of my soul, from a unique empathy with the parent, which is so typical of the next generation.

After reading my mother's memoirs, I felt I had an obligation to my large perished family – people whom I have never met. I wanted to revive them, to free them from their anonymous doom by telling the world about their tragic death. I wanted to reassure them that our family tree was not extinct – that the few roots that survived, have deepened and widened and with time grew into a large, blooming tree.

Ella Dor-On

*To my mother,
with love.*



*"So the next generation would know them, even the children
yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children..."*

Psalms 78, 6

The Number on Grandmother's Arm

One day in summer, radiant and calm,
I noticed a number on grandmother's arm.
I was just a toddler – exploring the world,
asking and answering without saying a word.
I touched with my fingers the elderly arm –
scratching the figures, meaning no harm.

My grandmother hugged me, wishing me well:
“Wait till you're older. I promise to tell!”

The seasons complete their circular track.
The sweltering heat of summer is back.
“Grandma!” – I beg – “Let me, like you,
draw on my arm a number in blue!”

She lovingly kissed me, tousling my hair.
I sensed it was me she wanted to spare.

The seasons are changing – waiting in-line.
I've grown up now, I am already nine.
The number, familiar, would not fade away –
engraved with precision forever to stay!
“Why does grandmother have it while others do not?”
...Then grandmother started unveiling her lot:

She spoke of her youth, her mom and her dad,
of Jewish existence – heroic and sad,
of frost and of hunger, of danger and pain,
of how she survived again and again...

As evening descended, soothing and calm,
I tenderly kissed my grandmother's arm.

* *The number 30910 tattooed on the arm of Ester Margolis, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau (1943-1945), the mother of Ella Dor-On.*

Without a coat in winter

*To my uncle,
Aron-Leima Margolis*

In the Ghetto, in winter,
two people: mother and son.
“I’ll fetch us some wood” – offers the boy.
Out of three, there remained only one.

“Take a coat! It’s chilly outside!” –
the mother warns with a smile.
He kisses her cheek, hesitates on the porch:
“I’ll be back in a while!”

...Shooting and screaming and orphan outcry –
innocent passers-by beaten and cursed.
Streets tightly blocked, houses ransacked,
Jews being caught, deported, oppressed...

Never returned. Where could he be?
Was he sent to a camp? Will he ever get free?

Outside is a storm and a future unclear.
Indoors – the mother sheds the bitterest tear:
“Without coat... without gloves...with no scarf on your neck...
Don’t catch a cold, my precious, my dear!”

Wrapped in Tallit*

*To my grandfather,
Alter Margolis*

Every year since the War,
on the Holiest Day,**
Esterka, the daughter,
lights a candle to pray.

She lights the Yahrzeit Candle ***
and hears the ancient vow
of Jews in Ghetto Grodno,
so far from here and now.

They grieve and they hope...
Despite horror and pain,
still want to believe
in the mercy of Cain!

Every year since the War,
on the Holiest Day,
Esterka, the daughter,
lights a candle to pray.

Lights a candle and shudders
at the fate of her father,
murdered, wrapped in Tallit,
by a candle, unlit...



* *The Jewish prayer shawl.*

** *The Day of Atonement ("Yom Kippur").*

*** *a memorial candle, that burns for 24 hours, on the anniversary of a person's death (Yiddish).*

An oath of trust

Grodno, 1942

They walk in a hurry
on a cold winter day.
Looking around,
checking the way.

One is Polish, a blond,
from the village Lasky.
The other is Jewish
from the Ghetto nearby.

They've grown together –
in laughter and pain.
Their roads separated
and now crossed again.

Arrive at a neighboring
village alone –
to get some supplies
in the Aryan zone. *

They're lucky –
their baskets contain
some meat, some potatoes,
some bread and some grain.

On their way back,
too tired to walk,
they rest for a while,
absorbed in small-talk.

An old Polish woman
comes out of her home:
“Hello, pretty girls!
Where are you from?”

She gives them to eat –
as much as they please.
Then puts in their baskets
some home-made white cheese.

Brings them some apples,
she has kept in store.
To the one with the dark hair
she gives a bit more.

Marinka is jealous
and turns inhuman:
“Give her no more!” –
she says to the woman.

“She doesn’t belong here –
A Jew in disguise!
I am the Christian!
Don’t you recognize?”

Esterka turns pale
with unbearable tension.
Marinka betrayed her –
exposed with intention!

The Germans surround them –
no way to escape!
Once they know who she is,
they may kill her or rape...

“How dare you! – rebukes
the woman with passion –
You, as a Christian,
should have compassion!

All people are equal
in the eyes of the Savior.
By treating her well
you are winning His favor!

Set out on your way –
be faithful and mild.
Don't break your oath
to the poor Jewish child!”

* *Jewish children used to sneak out of the Ghetto, risking their lives, in order to bring food for their hungry families.*

Mother's Love

A loaded gun... A child in fear...
The mother's heart forebodes:
You are in danger, dear!

Behind, a shot is heard...
Her arms embrace him
like the wings of mother-bird.

Obeying the Law of Creation –
with her body alone,
she protects the next generation.



You shall live!

In a field owned by a Pole,
five Jewish people hide in a hole.
Waiting for food he has promised to bring...
Saving a Jew was a dangerous thing!

Three days have passed and he still hasn't come.
They have already eaten the very last crumb.
If he doesn't show up, if they wait any longer –
all are destined to die of thirst and of hunger!

Praying in silence, as the hours run,
the mother is hugging her only son –
a cute, little boy, almost four.
He asks for a drink...but there is no more...

Waiting in vain – exhausted, afraid.
Between hope and despair a decision is made:
All around is a field of ripe wheat...
In the distance some windows are lit...

Like the Biblical mother*, facing danger,
she would rather he lived with a stranger!
She sends him alone to the vast open land,
where someone might stretch out a merciful hand.

Go, my first born, without any clue –
lest anyone knows, you are a Jew!
All I have is a blessing to give:
You shall not die! You shall live!

* *Jochebed – the mother of Moses in Judaeo-Christian tradition.
To save her son's life she put him in a wooden chest in the Nile.
The Pharaoh's daughter found him and adopted him.*

A Jewish child in Ghetto

A Jewish child in Ghetto,
surrounded by a wall.
Alone, without his mother,
with hands raised up, so small!

He marches hurt and grievous
on freezing roads, in cold.
Light coat... Bare knees in winter...
So helpless to behold!

With yellow Star of David –
a symbol of disgrace.
He's on the verge of crying.
What fate is he to face?

So vulnerable, fragile,
in front of loaded guns,
like blameless sheep to slaughter
is led to die at once.

His eyes reflect an endless sorrow,
an endless fear of brutal deeds,
because through them at me are looking
more than a million murdered kids.

A Jewish child in Ghetto,
cries out in silent plea...
His monumental picture
implores: "Remember me!"



Gold for Water

*On the way from Ghetto
Grodno to Auschwitz (1943)*

The train suddenly stops.
No one gets on or gets off.

Jews on the train, nerves frayed from the rattle.
They are locked in the wagons, like cattle.
Mothers are hugging their kids in despair...
Indifferent Poles on the platform don't care!

“Have mercy, Pan!* Bring some water to drink!
What will happen to us? Dreadful to think...
Look at the children! Their fate you can change!
Water to drink... Take the gold in exchange...”

Takes the gold. Disappears out of sight.
Will he ever return? Will they see any light?
They've run out of time, their hope almost gone.
The train any minute will start to move on.

A miracle happened! Just as they go,
here comes the man with a bowl of white snow!
Like for Manna from Heaven – son, mother, daughter –
dozens of hands reach out for the water...



* *Sir – in Polish*

Precious moments

*To my grandmother,
Shifra Margolis*

A.

Mother and daughter embrace.
What agony are they enduring?
The train's moving fast...
Mother's warmth feels
familiar and reassuring.

“You will live, have children,
overcome all the pain on the way!
– the mother foretells –
With your sister in Palestine *
you will be re-united one day!”

Mother and daughter embrace
while the train speeds
to its destination,
they do not know where...
Their grief-stricken hearts
beat with the sole expectation
to get off the train ...anywhere!

Mother and daughter embrace
in the harsh winter weather.
Thus, without knowing,
they share their last,
precious moments together...

B.

Last station – Auschwitz.
Here the Devil reigns with might:
Who is to live? Who is to die?
One – to the left... One – to the right...**

C.

Next day.

Smoke rises from the chimney high,
spread all around by furnace heat,
and smell is carried by the wind –
the smell of Death, of scorched meat...

“Where is my mother?
– asks the girl bewildered –
Spare me the lies!”
“They’re burning the transport
from Grodno...” – an echo replies.

-
- * *In 1943 the State of Israel didn't exist.
It was under the British Mandate as Palestine.*
 - ** *Right meant – life, left meant – death.*



A Nightmare

*Esterka's dream – 42 years after the end of the War.**

Tonight I dreamt about my mother.

...In my dream I see her talking to a young woman. The face of the woman seems familiar. My mother is standing near a bench. I can feel the beating of my heart. I am moving towards her. She is standing in front of me – slim and beautiful.

I want to take her home...

My mind is tormented by the thought:

Is it possible that she is standing here, in front of me?

I know she was burnt in Auschwitz and her ashes were scattered somewhere over the Polish land...

She holds my hand calmly. We get on a bus together.

She pays for the tickets and meanwhile my mind wonders again:

How is it possible? She isn't supposed to have any money...

I want to tell her that I will pay for the tickets. She looks at me with a lovely smile and says:

– Do you know the woman I have been talking to just now?

I asked her to introduce me to someone because it is hard to be left alone in the world...

– Mother! – I am calling her, but she doesn't hear me –

You can stay with me!...

At that very moment a huge fire blazes up and my beloved mother is caught in the flames...

I wake up in horror and tears.

*Esterka Margolis,
June 10th, 1985*

* At the time, my mother told me about her dream and I asked her to write it down. Years later, I translated it from Russian (E.D.)

With perfect precision

Everything done with precision,
filed and reported on time.

Schnell! Schnell! *

– the orders are echoed –

We mustn't waste any time!

Everything carefully thought of,
arousing their hope and their trust.

Hastening, yet, reassuring:

Schnell! Schnell!

Labor will free you at last!

Everything counted and sorted.

Clothes, glasses and shoes –

loaded on trains for removal.

Schnell! Schnell!

Into the Gas Chambers, Jews!

Everything done with precision,
in cold-blood, according to plan.

Obeying commands from superiors:

Schnell! Schnell!

And the earth fills with ashes of men...

* *Quickly!* - in German.

Herr Doctor *

The selection has started. The doctor is here.
A routine observation from a different sphere:

Passing slowly from one to another –
a professional glance, at ease, without stress.
His finger alone, with indifferent gesture,
proclaims: right is Life – left is Death.

The round has finally ended...
The silence is pierced by a shout!
The doctor has given an order –
the patients are forced to get out!

A terrified girl refuses to leave –
she clings to her bed, she cries and she pleads.
A blow of a rifle on shoulder and head
stops the nuisance. She fatally bleeds.

The quiet returns. With ominous patience
the hospital's waiting for a new round of patients...

The handsome physician in neat uniform
delights in the role of inspector.
He's anxious to know if all's going well.
–“We are doing our best, Herr Doctor !”

* *Doctor Mengele - head physician of Auschwitz, known for his sadism and cruelty as well as for his good looks and polite manners.*

A casual meeting

A casual meeting in a labor camp.
She recognizes a familiar face –
The guy who used to pull her braid...
A recollection from a different time and place!

A cotton headscarf hides a shaven head.
She looks so utterly forlorn!
Like all the women in the camp
her dress is shabby and outworn.

The wind has blown off her scarf.
She blushes, shamefaced to admit it –
Her body's slim, exhausted and in pain.
Her soul, as yet, is not defeated...



The right pair of shoes

The only possessions of thousands of Jews –
a striped uniform and a pair of work shoes.
These are supplied, on purpose, at random –
the right pair of shoes is yours, only seldom.

Those who receive a size not their own
and do not exchange it – their fate is well known...

You must wear a shoe that is narrow and tight,
without any socks, from dawn until night.
And even at night – despite terrible pain –
you mustn't remove it and wear it again –
for the foot is so swollen and blistered and blue,
it wouldn't fit back into the shoe.

Those who are slow, who groan, who look ill,
become easy prey for the hunters to kill...

A shoe that's too loose or too wide –
sinks in the mud, hinders the stride.
You're bound to lose it for all that you try –
the barefooted are doomed prematurely to die.

Oh, how we wished - in dread beyond measure -
for the right pair of shoes, as if for a treasure!

A Gift of Life

Spring. Labor camp.
In a hospital bed
Esterka's been lying,
for days, almost dead.

Suffers from typhus –
awaiting the worst...
Tormented, exhausted
from hunger and thirst.

Awakens from sleep.
In the vagueness of gloom
beholds a young woman
in the half-darkened room.

She looks unfamiliar –
head shaven but fair.
Her eyes are imbued
with softness and care.

She offers potatoes
in the palm of her hand –
dry, covered with soot,
yet, hard to withstand.

Eats in silence,
slowly, with thrift...
Today she's received
the most precious gift:

A gift of Rebirth,
of Life, despite danger,
which held in her hand
the merciful stranger!

Escape

*Dedicated to Rudolf Vrba
and Alfred Vetzler*

Two prisoners escaped
– an unbelievable event –
from the most closely guarded
concentration camp.*

The camp alarm is roaring.
Get out! Get out!
Form lines of five!
Run! Quick!
Don't tease your fate!
The dogs are trained
to tear to pieces
whoever steps aside,
whoever's late...

All prisoners are counted.
Then – left to freeze –
are brutally forced
to stand on their knees.

The Appell** drags on endlessly –
minutes, seem like an hour...
There's no limit to terror
and the misuse of power!

Two prisoners, two heroes, escaped
in order to inform the world
of sins beyond perception,
of crimes beyond the spoken word.

* *Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Vetzler brought the Allies authentic documents about the extermination of Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau (1944).*

**"roll call" (German) - Inmates were forced to stand at attention for hours while they were counted. This was always carried out no matter what the weather.



A meeting with Alfred Vetzler*

In 1972, I was summoned to Vienna, Austria, in order to testify against two Nazi war criminals. In the courtroom I met some old acquaintances, former prisoners in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. From them I heard that Alfred Vetzler lived in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia.

Alfred Vetzler and Rudolf Vrba, both of Czech origin, managed to escape from Auschwitz in 1944, without being caught. They fled to Hungary and delivered testimony to the Allies regarding the massive extermination of Jews in the Camp.

I decided to go to Czechoslovakia and meet Fredo, as we used to call him in those days. I showed up at his apartment, without calling. Even after so many years he recognized me at once and we wept on each other's shoulder like children, after not having seen each other for 28 years.

Fredo remained the same humble and kind person as I remembered him in Auschwitz. Unfortunately, he was in a poor financial state and feeling very depressed. He was persecuted by the Czech authorities for supporting the liberal president Dubcek.

I spent two wonderful days with Fredo. We enjoyed each other's company, remembering the past and discussing the present situation. I promised that as soon as I returned home I would send him a visa application to Israel. However, as I found out later, this was not possible. At that time the Czech authorities wouldn't allow their Jewish citizens to leave the country.

The day of departure! Fredo accompanies me to the railway station. We both share the sadness of the moment. We are thankful that fate has brought us together again, but deep in our hearts we sense that this is our last meeting.

Suddenly Fredo disappears. I stand worried on the platform, wondering where he might be. After a while he appears and hands me a small package. "It's for you – he says and a childish smile lightens his face – a sandwich!"

I hold the package tightly.

...Bread... Railway station...

Gloomy memories from the past come back to my mind. My eyes fill with tears.

Two years later, I was informed that Fredo had died.

*A fragment from Esterka's personal diary (1975)

Good luck!

Grodno, 1945

The war has ended. Free at last!
Loneliness and longing drive
her home, to Grodno.
Did anyone of family survive?

The houses are ruined.
The neighbors estranged.
Nobody knows...
So much has been changed.

She keeps on searching.
Never gives up on a try.
Then someone remembers: Rachel?
A nurse... in the village nearby!

Even the winter cold won't freeze
the overwhelming tears of bliss.
Despite the storm – on foot, as is –
she rushes hopeful to her sis.

Walks alone on a slippery road.
A coachman slows down his horse:
– Get on the cart, Panienska,*
the weather is getting still worse!

Climbs onto the cart.
Suddenly feels she isn't alone –
a woman wrapped in a shawl
slumbers while the horse's pushing on.

Ride in silence.

Then the coachman starts a small-talk:

– Where are you going? It's too cold for a walk!

– To find a lost sister. My faith never broke!

– I wish you Good Luck! –

says the man in a voice loud and deep.

– Good Luck! – echoes the stranger
from the back, half-asleep.

Arrive at a crossroad. Esterka gets off.

The woman jumps down, too.

The horse and the cart disappear in the dark,
leaving behind them the two.

Stand alone –

two shivering shadows,
between blackness of sky
and whiteness of meadows.

– Excuse me, could you tell me
the way to the village?

– To the village... Esterka?!

– Rachel?!

– My sister!

– Five years...

They embrace each other in tears...

* *a young woman – in Polish.*

Grandma Esterka lights a torch

May, 1987

Grandma Esterka lights a torch
in Jerusalem, near Yad Va-Shem,*
in the name of the survivors of Auschwitz,
the most dreadful concentration camp.

Grandma Esterka lights a torch –
grey-haired, not young any more,
stands upright in dignified silence –
forty years since the end of the war.

And the prayer of the cantor and the singing of the choir,
remind her of voices from far-away lands,
some screaming, some silent –
the voices of parents and brothers and friends...

And the sounds of the orchestra,
telling what words can't express,
take her back to the sounds of marching –
the marching to death...**

And the merciful frost of the capital city
and the wind, blowing the flags of the State,
remind her of the two-thousand-year longing
of Jews, surrounded by cold and by hate...

Grandma Esterka lights a torch,
in the name of rebirth and survival,
and in front of her eyes burns a flame –
the flame of Gas Chambers and the flame of Revival!

Grandma Esterka lights a torch,
overcome with triumphant sensation.
From a distance, I watch her with pride,
and with me watches the whole Jewish Nation!

* *The museum in memory of the Holocaust survivors.*

** *The Germans used to send the Jews to their death
accompanying the marching by orchestra music.*

Family Album

One day I asked my grandmother,
out of curiosity that suddenly arose:
– Why do you take so many pictures,
of yourself and of relatives, distant and close?

– In the Second World War,
after heavy bombardment from air,
we were forced to abandon our home,
to seek shelter elsewhere in despair.

We lost all our belongings –
money, land, cozy rooms.
All that we loved, that we cherished –
letters, albums, family heirlooms.

Of the whole family that perished –
parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts,
remained just one faded picture –
my niece at the age of six months.

The photos revive times long forgotten,
they are a reminder of joy and of strife.
I want you to have what I was deprived of.
I want, through the photos, to immortalize Life...

On Holocaust Day

On Holocaust Day

Mom lit a candle.

"Children – she said –
this candle I light
in the memory of my
grandmother, grandfather,
cousins, uncles and aunts,
relatives distant and close,
who were murdered by the Nazis,
simply because they were Jews..."

I felt sad –
shed even a tear.
I was afraid that a German
might suddenly come
and kill all my family dear.

Mother consoled me:
"Now we have our State,
we have our Army.
Now we control our fate!"

Today Mom lit a candle.
"It's a day of sorrow – she said –
but also a day of great joy,
of hopes rising high.
For all our sufferings –
*Am Israel Hai! **"

And I thought
how lucky I am
to have a grandmother,
a grandfather,
cousins, uncles and aunts
and other relatives distant and close.
And went to play in the yard...

* *The People of Israel are alive! (Hebrew)*

You...

You walk among us
the last of survivors ...
Your hair grey, your faces wrinkled,
carrying a burden of memories
of your tormenting past.
Carrying it with dignity,
with courage,
with aspiration,
that it become
a sign and symbol
for the next generation.

You walk among us
the last of survivors ...
Your body is frail
and your soul is in pain.
Yet, your spirit is strong
and your hearts filled with pride
(inexplicable to the free generation) *
that you are alive and are the citizens
of your own Nation.

You walk among us
the last of survivors...
Your hearts overflowing
with love and with longing
for your children and grandchildren.
Love, so abundant, with self-abnegation,
(incomprehensible to the Sabra generation)**
as if your whole being depends on this word.
Thus can love only those
who feel lone in this world...

You walk among us
the last of survivors...
Tied by bonds of mutual fate
and wondrous kinship,
which you have passed on,
as your last obligation,
to your children –
the next generation.

* *People living in Israel after the establishment of a free independent Jewish State in 1948.*

** *A Jew born in Israel is called "Sabra".*