

***Life and Death in Verse Case study:
The writings of Lili Kasticher, the Only Woman Who Wrote in Auschwitz***

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the unique works of a young woman named Lili Kasticher, written at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp from April to November 1944. Lili, the only woman known to have written at Birkenau (Shik, 2012), risked her life by stealing pieces of paper and pencil stubs to write poetry and encouraged her friends to do so, offering them a prize—a portion of her bread. The notes bearing her writings were concealed on her person until her liberation in spring 1945. The possession of a piece of paper or writing implement was absolutely forbidden in Birkenau. Anyone caught with such contraband was immediately sentenced to death. Consequently, inmates at Auschwitz produced no written material, with rare exceptions, such as the records kept by the *Sonderkommando* or the postcards that Germans ordered their victims to write, as discussed below (Levi, 1995).

Keywords: Sonderkommando, Auschwitz–Birkenau, death camp, writing

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Introduction

This study introduces the unique, authentic works of Lili Kasticher, written at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Lili may well be the only individual inmate who was willing to risk her life by writing. Possession of a piece of paper or pencil stub was absolutely forbidden in Birkenau. Anyone caught with such contraband was immediately sentenced to death. Consequently, inmates produced no written materials, with rare exceptions, such as the *Sonderkommando*, who documented everyday life at the camp, concealing their records in jars that they buried near the crematoria in the hope that someone would find them after the war, as indeed occurred (O. D. Kulka, 2013, 15).¹ Jewish inmates were ordered by the Germans to write postcards to their relatives, describing the “decent” living conditions in their “new place of residence” (O. D. Kulka, 2013, 10).² In *Moments of Reprieve*, Primo Levi describes a love letter that a gypsy inmate asked him to write, indicating that he endangered both their lives doing so, just to gain half a portion of bread.

Historical notes

Auschwitz, the largest and best known of Nazi concentration camps, was built in 1940 when the Nazis realized that they had more prisoners than prison space. It was liberated by the Red Army on January 27, 1945. Nine days earlier, as Soviet troops drew closer, all inmates capable of walking—48,342 men and about 16,000 women, along with 96 prisoners of war—were dispatched on foot via Austria to other locations in Nazi-occupied Europe. These evacuation campaigns would later be known as Death Marches. About 6,000 inmates remained in Auschwitz–Birkenau, including some 4,000 women. The last of the Nazis left the camp on January 24, three days before its liberation.

In the inferno that was Auschwitz–Birkenau, various regulations were imposed with the sole purpose of maintaining a repressive system that sought to break the inmates’ spirit and utterly destroy all traces of humanity among them. One such edict was an explicit ban on possession of paper and writing implements. Those who violated this prohibition were sentenced to death. We are aware, however, that the *Sonderkommando* systematically documented the destruction of their brethren—not only in writing but also photographically—realizing that they were the last and

¹ Some of the *Sonderkommando* used those same jars to conceal poetry or diaries, such as the diary of Zalman Gradowski, that was discovered among the Auschwitz crematorium ruins. These *Sonderkommando*, who faced certain death as a consequence of their documentation, were also members of the underground that planned the revolt.

² These postcards included cryptic references warning their addressees not to believe the ostensibly optimistic messages. For example, they might say: “Every day, we welcome Uncle Hlad (Czech: Starvation)’ or Uncle Mavet (Hebrew: Death).” The cards were sent by inmates of a Birkenau camp populated by families dispatched there from Theresienstadt. They were dated March 25, but the people who wrote them were annihilated on March 7, over two weeks earlier. The entire family camp was wiped out in July 1944.

perhaps the only inmates who could attest to the annihilation of European Jewry. Had they been caught in the act, they would have been executed at once. In any case, they were living on borrowed time because the Germans, at Adolf Eichmann's orders, exterminated the *Sonderkommando* every few months and replaced them with new ones, so that their secret would go with them to their deaths and not find its way outside. The only exceptions to this decree were people with special jobs, such as expert mechanics, furnace tenders, "Room Service"³ personnel, etc., as Rudolf Hess testified at his trial in a Warsaw court shortly after the war (for a more detailed explanation, see Gutman and Berenbaum, 1998).

Shlomo Dragon, one of the few *Sonderkommando* survivors, attested that he and his comrades wrote out of a sense of mission. Besides keeping records, they collected the diaries they found among the items left behind when people were ordered to undress before entering the gas chambers. The *Sonderkommando* concealed these items by burying them in jars and boxes in the courtyard of Crematorium II, hoping that someone would find them at the end of the war (Greif, 2005, 54). In his testimony, Dragon, who had worked in the "Room Service" unit of the *Sonderkommando*, said he made sure that Zalman Gorodovsky, who kept a diary and documented the events of each day in meticulous detail, would be given a bunk near a window, so that he would have light by which to write. After liberation, Dragon recalled where Gorodovsky had hidden his documentation and began digging among the crematoria ruins until he found it. He also provided Gorodovsky with thermos-like jars in which to bury his works. Leib Langfuss, known as the *Magid* (preacher—for more detailed information, see Cohen, 1990, p. 312) joined Gorodovsky in his writing efforts. His comrades assigned him easy tasks, so that he would have time for the writing craft. At the end of the war, Shlomo Dragon submitted all the material to the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission that came to investigate Auschwitz. His brother, Abraham, who was also a *Sonderkommando* survivor, stated that they knew no one would remain alive and that they had to leave testimony for the world thereafter. Inmates serving as *Kanada Kommandos*⁴ risked their lives to smuggle in pieces of wax to the *Sonderkommando*, so that the writers could seal the jars and containers in which they hid their notes. *Sonderkommando* Ya'akov Gabai, of Greek origin, wrote about 500 pages of documentation about the annihilation of his brothers. Gabai was unable to carry all he wrote on the Death March to Matthausen, but submitted them as testimony from his memory after liberation (Greif, 2005, 223). Another *Sonderkommando* of Greek origin succeeded in writing a note reading: "If anyone finds this note, please give it to my wife and tell her that I'm dead." He hid it in the courtyard of Crematorium II. Fortunately, it turned out that he survived. Writing the note, a heroic act in itself, was possible only because the *Sonderkommando* had special living conditions, including quarters isolated from the rest of the camp and an exemplary organizational structure that ultimately led them to mount a rebellion in October 1944.

³ A *Sonderkommando* unit responsible for quarters, ongoing maintenance and food management.

⁴ A work detail whose job was to sort goods that the victims left behind on the ramp before their dispatch to Germany. At times, these inmates had the opportunity to smuggle in some of these goods, risking their lives by doing so, of course. Usually, they looked for food, medicines and the like.

Another well-known writing enterprise at Auschwitz–Birkenau involved the postcards distributed among inmates before they were sent to the gas chambers. They were ordered to write to their relatives in German (those who did not know German were not permitted to write), telling them that they had arrived at a labor camp where the work is reasonable and the food is satisfactory; they are well treated and in good health and hope to see their families soon. These postcards usually were dated several days after they were actually written, after their writers had already been turned to ashes for some time (Levi, 1995, 39-46).

In his story, *The Gypsy* (Levi, 1995), Primo Levi documents postcard writing and the distress felt by inmates who did not know German and did not participate in the Germans' deceptive postcard campaign. One of them, "the Gypsy," asked Levi to write something in German for him in exchange for a half portion of bread. To Levi's surprise, he pulled out a sheet of paper rather than a standard postcard, asking him to write a letter to his sweetheart. This was a strange and unique situation, not only because the Gypsy had a sheet of paper but also because he showed Levi a picture of his girlfriend that he managed to smuggle with him into the inferno (ibid.). It is clear that the punishment for possession of either or both of these two "treasures" would be a beating or death, depending on the whims of the officer in charge. Similarly, we know of Polish inmates, most of them political prisoners or people in contact with them, who kept records in Auschwitz and managed to save their work.⁵

The writings of Ruth Klüger describe experiences in Auschwitz but were recorded in Gross–Rosen, as Klüger confirmed in 1994 (Nader, 2007, 52-53). Eva Golgevit's poems were also presumed to have been composed in Auschwitz, but as she noted in her book *Ne pleurez pas, mes fils...*, published in France in 2000, all her poems and songs were transcribed from memory after the liberation and not during her internment.

From a historical perspective, Lili Kasticher's Auschwitz writings are worthy of special attention—not so much for their literary value but because of the unique and marvelous human story they tell of a young woman whose heroism challenges and bests death by means of the written word.

Lili Kasticher's works may be divided into three principal groups. The first, to be discussed below, was written in Auschwitz–Birkenau and comprises a collection of poems, some of them decorated with miniature drawings, mostly her own.

Among the notes she saved from Auschwitz were two additional interesting items:

⁵ Dr. Wojciech Polosa, Archive Director at the State Auschwitz–Birkenau Museum in Oświęcim, submitted the following items on June 22, 2016: Jerzy Pozimski's notes, in Polish, from June 24 to December 23, 1940; notes in Polish that Wincenty Gawron took with him when he escaped from Auschwitz in May 1942; *Tango Tesknoty*, a poem written by Tadeusz Borowski after his arrival in Auschwitz in autumn 1943 and saved by Polish political prisoner Mieczyslaw Szymkowiak; a handwritten Polish note of unknown date and authorship, discovered in Auschwitz in 1958; a handwritten Russian poem of unknown date and authorship.

1. A Yiddish letter of unknown authorship. According to Lili's son Alexander Hirt and daughter Daniela. Lili did not know Yiddish at all.
2. A poem dedicated to Berta, describing hunger. It bears neither name, date nor signature, but its content and the handwriting on the original copy indicate that it was most likely written by Lili. It begins with the verses: "I feel ashamed/but I am hungry / I should have been given more food" and concludes with "There are no boys here, only girls / I must not think about food."

Only two poems were written by her friends and partners in suffering whom she urged to write. Piri, Inmate No. 86855, dared to write a satiric poem about "recreation" in Auschwitz, comparing the death camp to a special resort where the inmates swim in their own filth instead of a pool. Juci Abraham submitted a poem as well, entitled *A Sweet Dream*. Both poems are dateless. In her Auschwitz diary, Lili mentions that she had to persuade her friends to write these poems in exchange for her bread portion.

The *Code of Behavior* that she would later develop at the Gross-Rosen Labor Camp in Oberhohenelbe, attempting to institute social order and mutual assistance among female inmates, was written on the reverse side of Auschwitz requisition forms. The *Code* is of immeasurable importance, as it represents an unequivocal promise that within the chaotic realities of the camp, in which every movement and every breath is dictated by the Germans, several Jewish women joined forces to draft their own rules, thereby declaring their moral superiority and freedom of opinion against an oppressor that seeks to render them subhuman.

The second category comprises a much larger set of poems and drawings from the Gross-Rosen Labor Camp in Oberhohenelbe,⁶ to which Lili was dispatched from Auschwitz in late December 1944, while the third consists of the Auschwitz diary that she reconstructed from memory after liberation.⁷

Lili Kasticher was born in 1923 in Petrovaselo, Yugoslavia and subsequently lived in Novi Sad (annexed by Hungary in 1941). She was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in April 1944 and had the K. C. number 8965 tattooed on her arm. From there, she was assigned to Gross-Rosen, where she worked at the Lorenz factory until liberation in May 1945. In December 1948, she immigrated to Israel where she remained until her death in November 1973.

It is common knowledge that female inmates at Auschwitz-Birkenau did not write because of the severe prohibition against possession of even the most rudimentary writing utensils and paper scraps (Shik, 2012). Lili insisted on writing nonetheless and even encouraged her fellow inmates to do so as a means of maintaining a last shred of human dignity. These "written signs" from the inferno also engendered an intuitive therapeutic empowerment, now referred to as *bibliotherapy*, that helped them face

⁶ These writings will be addressed separately. Lili Kasticher's manuscripts were submitted to the Yad Vashem Archives in 1973, including memoirs written in Israel in 1951 (File No. 4-14/0.48 (4064459)).

⁷ This diary exemplifies Naama Shik's (2012) theory concerning autobiographical writings by Auschwitz survivors immediately after liberation.

their horrible fate and gave them the aim and purpose that are so critical in the human struggle for life and survival (Frankl, 1970).

In an interview published in the Hungarian-language Israeli newspaper *Uj Kelet* (New East) on February 23, 1951, Lili explained how she stayed alive, revealing the ways she obtained pencils and crayons in Birkenau. She had once read a book on handwriting analysis and palmistry and would read palms for the inmates, always promising them an encouraging future. One day, she was approached by the Kapo, who asked to have her palm read. Excited by Lili's reading, the Kapo asked her to analyze letters from her boyfriend at the front, wanting to know if he really missed her. Lili's interpretations always confirmed what the Kapo wanted to hear. Subsequently, the Kapo asked Lili to write and illustrate her letters to her boyfriend. That's how Lili obtained writing implements. She picked up paper from the office floor, hid them in her pocket and took her booty back to her blockmates. This story was repeated in a letter she wrote to a Mr. Halmi on December 15, 1963.

Lili wrote mostly at Birkenau, while her friends did so primarily at Gross-Rosen, where the living conditions were slightly more bearable, Lili organized writing contests, for which the prizes consisted mostly of food that she had set aside from her own minimal portions.

Lili's Writings in Auschwitz

In Auschwitz, Lili wrote five poems with date-bearing headings and two—*The Song of The Camp* and *Where Is Our Homeland*—whose headings mentioned only the location: Auschwitz. *The Song of the Camp* describes the women's yearning for the landscape of the Danube and their "homeland": Green, flower-laden fields, small cottages and the sweet sound of bells ringing in the valley. *Where Is Our Homeland* opens with the eponymous question and concludes with a prayer for success in finding that homeland, where they will be free and where "mother is waiting to be hugged and kissed." The two poems appear to have been written about the same time, as their themes are similar and no mention is made of the camp and its hardships.

As its title suggests, *One Night in Birkenau* was written in Auschwitz-Birkenau on May 31, 1944, not long after Lili's arrival, on a piece of paper filched from the office with German writing on the other side. It opens with the verses:

Thousands of nighttime fears are chased by the wind, in the night... (Kasticher, 1951)⁸

The poem's content expresses the tortures of life in the *Lager* (camp), with all its terror, loneliness and hopelessness. The inmates lived with their nightmares, in which they see their children asking for a cup of chocolate milk. Then, the alarm signaling the start of the work day cut the dream short:

⁸ The poems were translated into English by Suli Bruck in July 1973, with subsequent minor emendations by Zvi Ofer.

Rise, the sound of the alarm,
The camp bell high in the sky.

They are returned to the real world, in which they had been separated from their children, who were slaughtered in the gas chambers. To the left of the poem is a miniature illustration of the muddy camp and its wooden barracks.

To the Doctor at Auschwitz was written at Birkenau on June 15, 1944 in the same manner—in pencil on a piece of used paper, with a miniature sketch in the upper left-hand corner depicting tiny women raising their hands towards heaven. In a diary she wrote in Israel, Lili recounts that the poem was dedicated to a Jewish woman doctor who risked her life by tearing a piece of cloth from her smock to bandage a wounded inmate. The poem describes the inmates' physical and mental torture and their yearning for words of encouragement:

Stand strong! We shall overcome...
Cursed hands will not drain our blood!

The Jewish physician indeed offered inspiration and substantive assistance through her kindness and soft words.⁹

The Germans routinely ordered inmates, men and women alike, to sing on the way to and from work. Lili's poem *The Parade is on the Way* (July 30, 1944) was thus included in the women's marching repertoire, sung to the tune of a well-known march, *Mariska* and describing the inmates' lives with much humor and irony:

The parade is on its way, out of the gate
Whoever stays in place gets a kiss on "the place"...
Oh, how wonderful is our fortune of plenty

This poem includes a miniature illustration of marching women at its upper left corner.

The Women of the Camp (November 11, 1944) deals with the joy that another week has passed and all are still alive. It describes the terrible starvation that the inmates suffer, yearning for bread as they listen to the sounds coming from their empty stomachs.

Spring 1940 (December 3, 1944) was probably Lili's last poem written at Auschwitz. Unlike all the others, it describes the horrible historical events of Spring 1940 that she had witnessed, in which people killed one another as the Danube flowed peacefully through the beautiful green forests of European spring. Lili's postwar notes call the poem *Dreaming of Novi Sad 1940*. Its most remarkable feature is the absence of any reference to the misery of Auschwitz, instead focusing on Lili's account of the Third

⁹ Concerning the altruism of Jewish physicians and nurses, Wilner (1998, pp. 28-30) reports that they carried dysentery and typhus victims, at risk to their own lives, so that the Germans would not notice them and send them to the gas chambers.

Hungarian Army's butchering of Serbs and Jews as it passed through the region. This event preceded the mass shootings of Serbs and Jews along the Danube in winter 1942, known in Serbian history as "the Cold Days."

Most of the writing at Auschwitz–Birkenau was accomplished by Lili herself, who tried to minimize the risk when encouraging her friends to do the same. At the Gross–Rosen Labor Camp in Oberhohenebelbe, Lili organized literary competitions, but hardly wrote herself. At both camps, the prizes were always taken from her bread portion, reflecting her heroic, altruistic personality and leadership.

Lili's Auschwitz–Birkenau writings, all in Hungarian, included *Rules of Behavior*,¹⁰ a guidebook influenced by her socialist views. She declared that the only way to survive the hell of Birkenau is to act as a mutually supportive group that adheres to the moral values on which its members were raised: "Here, there is no longer 'I,' there is only 'we.' And as 'we,' we will be saved if we behave sincerely, sacrificing ourselves for others, displaying good will, never bearing grudges or reporting others. Only thus can we maintain human dignity," concludes Lili (Kasticher, 1951). This manifesto illuminates Lili's personality as a socialist leader and reveals that the real purpose of her writing initiative was to preserve a modicum of humanity for herself and her friends.

Lili's diary, written in 1951, describes the birth of a baby in Birkenau. The women realized that it would mean disaster for the mother and everyone else. After considerable hesitation, they decided to give him up. They wrapped him in a blanket and placed him at the entrance to the block, without revealing who the mother is. Lili describes this warm and sweetly breathing creature, painfully addressing the difficult moral dilemma and subsequent decision to give him up, thus saving the life of his mother and those of the others in her block (see discussion of *One Night in Birkenau*, above).

Lili's Auschwitz works reflect starvation, humiliation, beatings, hard labor, poor hygiene, crowding, fear of death and uncertainty, all of which rendered life unbearable, but also expressed hope for a much better life in Israel, after liberation, as exemplified by the final lines of *Homeland*:

Those who suffered
Will rejoice again one day.

Within this inferno, one may discern signs of moral behavior, at great sacrifice, in which people risk their own lives for the sake of others, such as the Jewish doctor who saves a wounded inmate, or Lili herself, who steals pencils and paper and gives away what little bread she has despite her own overpowering hunger. As she wrote in her diary: "Soft words are life itself." As long as we write, sing and create, we will remain human (Kasticher, 1951, pp. 12, 15).

¹⁰ A handwritten manuscript found in Lili's diary. Lili's granddaughter recalled her mother's informing her that *Rules of Behavior* was written in Birkenau (Sela Ben-Ami, 2007).

Conclusions

Lili's writings in Auschwitz–Birkenau raise several interesting points concerning her struggle to defeat death both physically and morally. Had she been caught, her punishment would have been death. Yet her writing was her struggle to defeat death, so the price was taken into account.¹¹ Second, the moral dilemmas she described in her poems and to a certain extent in her diary (Kasticher, 1951), especially the one concerning the woman doctor, always had altruistic solutions that accord top priority to others and their needs. Such behavior is also described as overtly feminine in educational contexts (Noddings, 1994).

Her own works and her attempts to encourage her friends to write¹² are heroic and unique measures of resistance, expressing her fight against the Nazis as well as her struggle to remain human and help her friends do so. She realized that as long as the breath of life was within them and their spirit continued to resist the Nazi oppressor, they still had some chance of survival. She derived great mental and spiritual satisfaction from her ability to create, proving her humanity even in the hell of the labor camp. Above all, she exacted her triumph over the Nazi oppressor who wanted to turn her into an *Untermensch*.

The therapeutic empowerment of Lili's creativity saved her and many of her friends by raising their self-esteem and pride in the horribly sadistic and humiliating atmosphere created by the Nazis. These women and their works may well be remembered long after the Nazi era fades into oblivion.

In a recent newspaper article, Prof. Dov Kulka (2013) inquired: "What was the essence of Nazi Antisemitism?... The Jews, by race, were the biological source of the Jewish spirit... [that] was the enemy because of its ideas about the unity of the world and equality of humanity... The opposite idea was a conception of inequality among races... and a constant war for survival. They wanted to return the world to its 'natural order,' that is contrary to the humanistic ideas originating in Judaism." This study uniquely identifies the transformation of accepting one's fate into a source of creativity that accords dignity and strength to life in a world of brutality and violence, as exemplified by Lili Kasticher, whose creative verses of life and death turned the chaotic world of Auschwitz into an island of possible survival.

¹¹ It is important to note that unlike the *Sonderkommando*, she had no organization to support her writing but rather relied on her own initiative and efforts.

¹² Female inmates' participation in the prize competitions that Lili organized intensified in the Oberhohenelbe Labor Camp, where physical conditions were slightly improved, with a positive effect on the overall atmosphere as well. The inmates were working for the Lorenz plant, that manufactured radio receivers and other electronic devices. They slept on mattresses and two-person platforms in an attic and above all, once every two weeks, on Sundays, when the factory was closed, they had time for personal hygiene. Lili used her free time for social activity because she knew that a reinforced spirit would rescue her comrades from death.

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