

*I Chose Life:
My Last Public Testimony of the Shoah*

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Translator's Note

In 2018, Segre was named Senator for Life by the president of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella. The basis for the appointment was her thirty years of public testimony, after forty-five years of silence, about her experience as a deportee (at age thirteen) and prisoner slave at Auschwitz. This is her last public testimony, the transcript of a talk that she gave to a group of young people at Le Rondine Associazione (The Swallows) near Arezzo on 9 October 2020. Founded in 1997, Rondine is an association committed to the reduction of armed conflicts and the promotion of a methodology for the creative transformation of conflicts in all contexts.

THERE COMES A TIME when a person who is ninety years old, as I am now, says: “Enough, I need to rest. I don’t want to remember anymore. I don’t want to suffer anymore. . . . I don’t want to anymore.” Where to speak, then, for the last time in public? I recalled how I had been affected twenty years ago by the Rondine association, where young people from countries in conflict live together in a small village near Arezzo. It seemed like a utopia, a dream of a few people of good will, but it immediately turned into an enchantment. It was what I would have liked to accomplish in life, what I saw as something impossible and that Rondine, in the small and modest facility that it was then, was trying to do. It was a beginning, an extraordinary beginning.

Usually, on these occasions, one begins with the thank-yous, and I am always very informal. I know very well that I should first thank

the authorities who, with all the work they have to do, every day, without peace, without respite, even more so with the pandemic, as we see on television and in the newspapers, have nonetheless found the time and the desire to come. Therefore, I thank them all, because I understand that in each of them there is a strong wish to be here today. But as a grandmother, as I fortunately and proudly am, I thank the young people, the ones who are present and those who I know are following me in streaming. They are all my ideal grandchildren. Much the more so because, I never tire of saying it, my story has the pain, the love, the compassion, the heartrending memory of the girl I was and whose grandmother I have now become. An incredulous grandmother, at times incapable of being profoundly close, for so many years now without tears, to that young girl.

I know that it is difficult, on seeing a woman of ninety, to imagine her young. I know because everyone has felt that. When our grandmothers showed us their old photographs, we sat and listened, but it wasn't easy to think that that young lass, that bride, had later become how my grandmother was. I wanted to believe it because I loved her a lot, I didn't want to be rude; but I understand that the young people who see me today ask themselves: "You mean this one here was a young girl?" Yes, I was a young girl, too. I was also a child, middle-aged, and then old. I have had my life, my little life.

And it was my little life, interrupted one day in September, 1938, that made me become "the other"; and when one becomes "the other," then the world around you thinks you are different. And this thing did not end there. It was not only during a single period that I was considered "the other." It has been that way ever since. Still today, though with no ill will, sometimes they call me "my Jewish friend."

I was at table with my papa and my grandparents when they said to me: "You can't go to school anymore." I was in the third grade. I was an average student, a decent student, but I really liked school because I was an only child, without a mother. I didn't have siblings or cousins to play with, so I was happy to go to school. "Why not?" I asked. "You've been expelled," they responded. All boys and girls in all schools know what it means to be expelled, and I asked again.

“Why, why, why?” But they couldn’t tell me that I had behaved badly or that I had done something seriously wrong. I remember their faces, like a flashback to those minutes, the faces of those who loved me and who had to explain to me: “We are Jews, there are new laws. . . .”

If you want to know what, deep down, the fascist racial laws were, one of their cruelest aspects was that they made children feel invisible. I was obliged to give up my desk, my classmates. And there were hardly any, only three, who remembered me for the rest of their lives. But the class was not made up of only three. The others didn’t notice that my desk was empty, and many years later, after the war, on seeing them again as young women as I too had become, they asked me: “But you, Segre, where did you go off to that we never saw you again?” I should have responded: “to Auschwitz.” But I didn’t. At the time, it was too hard for me. I wouldn’t find the words for forty-five years; wouldn’t try to explain why I had become invisible.

From there, from that expulsion, began the long, sad story of a minority of Jewish Italian citizens. Many among them were patriots. Many were fascists, because they were part of the Jewish middle class. It was the beginning of hard years, of separation, of the telephone that never rang, with nobody who invited me to their parties. And there was the infiltration of that air of fear that, when it enters into a family, makes the gazes of people who love each other freeze up. Because they would like to do something for the others, and most of the time, they can’t.

So, there was this escalation of fear, of policemen coming into our house to treat us like enemies of the nation, of people fleeing, of friends and relatives bidding you farewell and, intelligently, though not without suffering, leaving Italy to go abroad.

They saved themselves. Unlike those simpler folk who didn’t know languages and had less knowledge of the world, as we were in my family, and who decided to stay and to believe that after all nothing bad would happen in Italy.

They were years that were bound up with the start of the war, having to leave our home in Milan, being evacuees, because when the bombs start falling, you flee. But this was a destiny common to all

Italians, worried about the bombing, about rationing, about relatives and friends who were going off to war. We were a minuscule and modest nucleus of refugees in Inverigo, a town in the Brianza area of Lombardy. I was always listening to our neighbors' radio because we, being Jews, were not allowed to have one. So I became a specialist in reporting the news to our house. I reported about the awesome power of the Nazi army that was mowing down the other countries like bowling pins, and gradually almost all of Europe. Until that powerful army, after Italy signed the Armistice on 8 September 1943, also occupied Italy, whose ally it had been until the day before.

What happened then? The fascist racial laws had been severe and humiliating, but there had never been talk of deportation. Instead, on 8 September 1943, the Nazis occupied the north and center of Italy and the roundups began. And the attempts to escape.

But who escapes? The ones who are prepared, who have their tents and sleeping bags ready, who have someplace to go. But when a family is lower middle class, with grandparents and ailing relatives to care for, and you've never been abroad, do you escape? No, you stay. You say to each other, "We are Italians, they won't do us any harm."

Then a Friend came to us, one of those with the capital *F*, the unforgettable ones that are the true discoveries in life. He appears outside your door and says, "The little girl"—that would be me—"is coming with me." People risked their lives if they hid a Jew, even a newborn baby, believed to be a dangerous enemy of the German Third Reich. Yet there were those who hid me for months. They were two families, even if I didn't understand at the time how important that friendship was. After all, the Italian word for friendship, *amicizia*, shares its etymology with the word *amore*. I wasn't even all that nice to them, not so grateful—sentiments I would express afterward, too late—because I was homesick.

When my father, with a lot of struggle and risk, came to visit me, I begged him, I said, "Let's go away, let's go to Switzerland, let's escape, I don't want to be separated from you." And he, conflicted, desperate, good son, good father, didn't know how he could leave his

parents. Finally, he got a declaration from the police in Como, which came at a high price, that said my grandparents could stay. Given their age and their health conditions, they were not dangerous for the Reich [*trans. note: In reality, a few months later, Segre's paternal grandparents were also deported to Auschwitz, where they arrived on 30 June 1944 and were immediately sent to the gas chamber*].

My father decided that he and I would leave. When I entered the Senate on my first day—because life is so crazy that it also happened to me to enter the Senate with all of my baggage of history—I said, “I have been a clandestine emigrant in the mountains, I have been an asylum seeker because on this side of the border people were dying. I know what it means to be sent back.” You can be sent back in many ways. In our case, we were sent back because we ran into a man who obeyed orders. It was a terrible moment. For us, so lower middle class and so unfit for the mountains in winter, to have succeeded in entering Switzerland —“How wonderful, we are in the land of liberty, nobody will hurt us anymore!”—and then, instead, to meet an officer who looked at us with contempt, who made us feel all of our lowliness as persecuted outcasts whom he did not believe.

He sent us back, toward that fence that separates States and that we had struggled so hard to get through. We were taken back under a rifle and bayonet, ridiculed. And there, near the fence, trying to get back into Italy, we were arrested by two officers of the tax police in black shirts, who were desperate that they had to do it but had no choice, because the German barracks was right nearby. I remember how we walked as prisoners on that mountain. My father was a passionate stamp collector. He spent his evenings studying his beloved postage stamps, and he had brought some of the most important ones to maintain us in Switzerland. He had surely made sacrifices to buy them, but in that moment he threw them down in the mud, because he realized that there was no hope.

I entered alone, at age thirteen, the female section of the jail in Varese; fingerprints, the mug shot, like a common criminal. “Why?” It was that “why” from when they had expelled me from school, that

“why” to which nobody had an answer. Then I was a prisoner in the jail in Como and then in the big San Vittore jail in Milan, where I was again with my father in our last little home: cell 202 of the V wing that we shared for forty days.

Those were important days in my life, in which I consoled my father. I want to say to you young people: don't think that your parents are always strong, don't think that anything can be asked of them. At times, you are stronger than your parents; don't be stingy with an extra hug, or in saying, “I am here, is there something I can do for you?” I felt it, I felt for all my childhood and adolescence the desire to protect my father, a widower at age thirty-one with a baby girl, because I knew he was fragile and that I was so important to him.

What were those forty days then, in the San Vittore jail, when the news was already going around that we were going to be deported? How must my father have felt? He was forty-four years old. And I was getting old, very old. When he came back from the courtroom interrogations, he was no longer my father, he was my son, and I his mother. I tried to embrace him, to tell him that whatever might happen I was happy because we were together.

Then one day a German came in, read a list of more than six hundred names. We had to get ready to leave the next day for “an unknown destination.” But who leaves for an unknown destination? Sure, maybe some people want to go and see the world and so one morning they decide to leave and where they go, they go, but normally, each of us, when we leave, knows where we're going.

We set off. A line of six hundred people: men, women, children, old people. A slow, silent procession, mute. Of those six hundred and five, twenty-two of us returned. In that moment, the common detainees in San Vittore, looking down on us from the walkways because it was their exercise hour, were unforgettable, extraordinary. They tossed us apples, oranges, scarves. “You haven't done anything wrong,” they said to us. “God bless you, may God protect you.” It was manna, manna from heaven. Whatever their sentences may have been, they were human. Then it took another two years to meet other humans; there were only monsters.

With kicks and punches, we were loaded on the trucks. We drove across Milan: deserted, indifferent, with its windows closed. They were streets I knew; I saw my house in the distance. At the Central Station, on so-called platform 21, we were packed with extreme violence into cattle cars. The Nazis weren't alone. Helping them were also zealous fascists, our neighbors, people who had no pity.

We were shut inside the cars and boarded up. There was some straw on the floor and a bucket, which remains impressed on my memory. When forty, fifty people shut inside a car don't know where they're going, and they are terrorized, afraid, that bucket fills up, overflows. There was no light, no water. There was only closeness to those you loved.

The journey toward the void lasted about a week. From those small cattle-car windows we first saw Italy go by, then the border, we arrived in Austria. . . . We cried, we despaired, it was incredible, continuous laments of people sobbing, one louder than the other, without end. When the crying stopped, it gave way to the psalms of the lucky ones who managed to pray and praise God even in a situation like that. Then came silence, the silence of the last things, an imposing silence, because words are useless when death is near. When you are about to die there is no noise, the noise that is so numbing in the life of today, where no one can stay more than a minute without turning on the radio, the television, not to mention the telephone. Silence, a solemn silence, unforgettable, that was worth more than a thousand words, in which there was only your own inner self before that which we sensed was about to happen.

In fact, after seeing a variety of landscapes, we arrived in an artificial station that had been prepared beforehand for ours and all the other trains that came from Nazi-occupied Europe. There was a snow-covered clearing; it was winter, the 6th of February 1944. We were clubbed down to the ground off that terrible convoy, bewildered, unable to understand the various languages all mixed together. When, on 29 January 2020, President David Sassoli welcomed me affectionately to the European Parliament, he asked me, "How does it make you feel?" "It makes me feel great," I answered, "this waving

and mixing of flags of all colors, of countries who are trying to live together in agreement.” It was different when we got off that train and all those languages were crisscrossing, those of the slaves and the masters.

I didn’t understand anything. I was behind as a young girl. I was stunned, terrorized. I clung to my father without understanding what was happening, while there were all these people just arrived and others dressed in stripes, their heads shaved, charged with separating families.

They separated the men from the women. I tried making little smiles at my father. It was such a strange moment; no one could believe that it would turn out to be *that* moment, nobody wanted to believe it, but it was *that* moment.

Why is it that no European railway company asked why those trains left full and returned empty? The answer is: indifference. No one cared.

And so I—who knows why—because there is fate and not because I had some special talent, if not that at thirteen I was a big girl and people thought I was fifteen or sixteen—was chosen with another thirty Italian Jewish girls from that shipment. All the others, old, young, little girls, went to the gas chamber. And the same was true for the men. I saw my father in the distance, tried to wave to him, then I didn’t see him anymore. I would never see him again, but back then I didn’t know that.

They made us start moving, us thirty women, on foot, without realizing where we were. I had no idea, I just walked behind the others, of whom I was the youngest, but they had no idea either. We walked ahead until we got to the gate, the entrance gate to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

“Where are we? What is this place?” The long stretch of barracks, snow on the ground, dozens of head-shaved women, skeletal, dressed in stripes, digging holes, carrying rocks. I hadn’t yet studied Dante. When I read him years later, I understood that we were the damned. We were serving punishment, but there was no counterpoise.

On entering there, I thought I had gone mad, that something had removed me from my being, from my being that had embraced

my father just a half hour before, and that was now in that place dreamt up around a conference table, planned. No, that place was not born of circumstance, it was not the effect of a moment of anger by which you do something that you later regret. No, at the conference in Wannsee, much earlier, people respected in their world, military men, politicians, had organized this reality for “the other.” It worked perfectly, just perfectly, there was no error.

We went into the first barracks, with our clothes, as we were when we came off the train, and there we began to understand that we had to forget our names. For all of us, our name is something important. And there instead, “Forget your name, it is of no interest to anyone. From now on you will be a number.” A number tattooed on an arm, so well done that after so many years, mine is still perfectly legible: 75190. It had to be learned immediately, in German, because answering immediately on command was a question of life or death. There actually were those who died in the first few days because they were deaf and dumb to the German language, and they didn’t know how to obey when their number was called.

Then we were stripped, shaved, and left naked while soldiers walked by sniggering, and looked us up and down with contempt: “Here are some more of these women. . .”

They took everything. Didn’t leave us a handkerchief, a book, a postcard, a picture. . . Nothing from our previous life. Dressed in striped uniforms, maybe some of you have seen them in movies, that were not our size, clogs on our feet, and a hanky on our heads.

We looked at each other, we looked at each other. . . I didn’t know any of the other thirty, but we had to get to know each other immediately. We asked one another: “Where are you from?” “From Genoa, from Turin. . .” They were Italians. They were Italian girls. “But why is this happening to us? Where are we?” No one, not even those who were twenty-five, thirty at most, had understood.

No, I didn’t understand what that place was that you could see at the end of the main street of the enormous Birkenau camp. A building with a chimney, with smoke and fire.

“What is this place? What is it?” The first prisoners we met, a group of French women who had been there for a week or two, told

us: “You see that fire? The ones you left at the station have already passed through the chimney.” “What do you mean?” we asked, still warm from that embrace. “Here, those who don’t work go to the gas chamber and then they’re burned in the ovens.” We looked at these French girls, they were nice, they didn’t seem like they were crazy, but we said to ourselves, we new arrivals: “Maybe they’ve put us in a madhouse.” Because it wasn’t credible. For a normal mind, aside from my being more naïve than the others, it wasn’t possible to believe we had arrived in a place like that. For what? Why?

The life of the prisoner slave began. I never recount all the details. Those who have wanted to be informed have read, studied. There have been courses on antisemitism, racism in general, and it is possible to read all the details about what went on in the death camps. But there are a few passages that struck me deeply even then.

Over the course of my years of testimony, many young people have imagined, “There must have been such solidarity among you, such friendship.” Unfortunately, I have had to disappoint them, because when you have nothing, all you have is your own body getting skinnier by the minute, that becomes so horrendous you don’t even recognize yourself anymore. It is very difficult—except in novels or in some rare cases—for friendships to form. Each one’s fear of dying for a yes or a no, for a glance, for an order misunderstood, for one false step, slowly leads you to be transformed into what the oppressors want: that you are no longer a person, that you become inhuman, egotistical, that you do what it takes so that the one blanket for five or six prisoners somehow gets to you, too. You can’t be so generous as to say, “We are all cold. Maybe you feel the cold more than me, I’ll give you my piece.” I didn’t do that, no one did it for me.

What’s more, each of us was in terror of losing our friend. After letting go of my father’s hand, I didn’t look for friendships. The fear of becoming a friend to someone and then losing them led me to choose solitude, even though that was not part of my character, of my being. I was afraid. I was afraid of everything. I was afraid of losing still more, after I had already lost everything. But despite that, the routine, the being together, the sleeping together, the growing emaciated together,

the being afraid together, made it so that, even though there were no generous friendships, there was still a closeness, a closeness between people who spoke Italian in a babel of languages that gradually we all tried to learn.

I had a big stroke of luck, though it was certainly not for my capabilities. I became a worker slave in the Union munitions factory. It was an important chance, in fact, to get out of the camp every morning. We were 750 women of all nationalities who went there on foot, obliged to sing German songs, but this meant leaving behind the flame, our companions in punishment, that atmosphere of terror and horror that was the concentration camp. It meant walking on a road and hearing the sounds of the countryside, the voices of people talking in their homes, even though no one ever looked out to say “poor things.” It meant slave work, which, however, gave us at least a reason to get through the day.

There were male prisoners there, too. The first day, I saw among them, those who were doing jobs even more tiring than ours, a young man from Florence who was part of my shipment. Aldo Sorani, one of the few who made it and came back. Right away, I asked him, “Where is my father?” And I started asking him all the time, “Where is my father? Where is my father?” Then I didn’t ask anymore. I understood his sensibility so well that after a while I realized I would never see my father again. But in those days, I asked, and asked. . . .

We worked all day without knowing the time because none of us had a watch, none of us could ask the time, none of us could ask anything. Then we went back, in the evening: the flame or the smoke, and we understood, by now we knew, if they had already done their work or if instead they were still in action.

What about the night? How is the night in the camps? “You didn’t sleep. . .” my young listeners have hypothesized in these years of my testimony. No, we slept, and how. For the weariness from our day as slave workers. And also because we wanted to sleep. We would put our fingers in our ears to keep out the sounds of the night, the whistles, the howls, the crying of those being taken to the gas. At a certain point, whole families arrived from Hungary, who didn’t even

pass through the station where we had been selected. The children got lost, their mothers searched for them. Right up to the end, these people didn't know they were going directly to die.

We didn't want to hear, we didn't want to know. Day by day, we were becoming more egotistical. I didn't turn my head to look at the piles of bodies outside the crematorium, ready to be burned. I didn't stop to look at my companions in punishment, I didn't want to see. I had found something inside of me that estranged me. I didn't want to be there. If you wanted to survive, you had to abstract yourself, remove yourself with your thoughts. This is central—I've said it every time to my young listeners and again today I tell you—always choose life.

I chose life, even though I survived by chance. There were very few who committed suicide, as easy as it was to do: all you had to do was grab onto the electrified barbed wire that we passed by every day. Everyone chose life, life, life! To dream of being out of there, the sound of a playing child, a cat, a green meadow, a cloud, any beautiful thing. But in this estrangement from the place of death, the effort to take one step after another, not to look around, we ended up being egotists, wandering monads in that terrible place that was built for us.

In the year I spent there, I passed the selection process three times. What was the selection process? The kapos, who were ferocious, shut us inside the barracks and had us go outside in groups of fifty or sixty. We went to the shower room, the real one. And there, naked, not because we wanted to display our beauty but because we were forced to, we walked down the corridor, each of us with our now horrible bodies, with boils, scabs, because life in the camp was no vacation. At the end, there was a small tribunal, three men, two army officers and that doctor, Josef Mengele, who later on was so talked about. Then, however, I didn't know their names, nor was I interested in knowing them. In front of them, each woman, alone, was looked up and down, in front, behind, inside her mouth, to see if she was still able to work. And then there was that gesture [*trans. note: a nod of the head*], that gesture that Mengele, that infernal judge, made

without a word to indicate that we could go, we could still work. Ah, what a stupendous moment, marvelous, it was like a birthday, a birth, a gift. . . . What kindness to have let me go on living! It was there, however, precisely in one of those moments, that I was horrible. I have not forgotten it.

At Union, my job was transporting pieces of iron that the workers used to make cartridges for machine guns. I was an assistant and for a certain period my contact, let's call her that, the worker I went back and forth to, was a French girl named Janine, maybe ten years older than me. She was blond, blue eyes, a sweet voice, a very lovely woman. One day, the machine that cut the iron cut off the tips of two of her fingers. And when we were called to the selection, she, terrorized, grabbed a rag to cover her fingers, but if you're naked the rag stands out. I heard them stop her, the clerk taking note of the number on her arm: there was no use for it anymore, she was going to the gas. And I, I who had passed the selection just before her and who worked with her every day, did not turn around. I did not turn to say to her, "Janine, I love you. Janine, be brave, . . . Janine." Even just her name would have been enough. I did not turn around. I couldn't accept any more separations. That's what I had become.

But there has never been a time that I have not remembered Janine. It was so important, this memory of my horrible self and of her without fault on her way to die, that those who have heard my testimony know that Janine is a central figure. Because her going to the gas and not growing old, her not becoming a mother, not becoming a grandmother, not becoming that woman that she would have been, is tied to my having lost all dignity, to my not being, in every sense, that person that I was hoping to become. I was alone in that moment, the prisoner who had saved herself, and nothing else mattered to me. In fact, the next day in the factory, I carried the same material to a different prisoner.

In January 1945, a year after I was deported, we began to hear the sound of airplanes over the factory. It had never happened before; they were Russian aircraft. We didn't know how the war was going,

we didn't know anything about what was happening in Europe. All we saw was the enormous force of the Nazis. A force that was there in all those that I met, without my knowing any of their names. A manner, an attitude, an insolence, that has been brought back to mind, at times in my long life, by certain gangs of bullies who, in a group, believe they are invincible. We have also seen an example, recently, of such a gang attacking a boy they considered "other" [*trans. note: Willy Montero Duarte, a twenty-one-year-old black man murdered by white gang members in Colleferro, Rome, on 6 September 2020*]. Later, however, arrested one by one, they were afraid, and asked to be put in solitary confinement for fear of reprisals from the other prisoners. There was, in the Nazis I saw, a certainty of their superiority, of their belonging to a superior race. But what race? The human race? No. The ones I encountered were not human. And there were a lot of them.

Sometimes I'm asked, "Have you forgiven?" No, I don't have that strength. And I haven't forgotten. Certain things I'm not able, and I've never been able, to forgive.

The Russians were getting closer. They had broken through on the Eastern Front after fierce battles because the Germans had received orders not to yield one meter, and in fact the Russians had to struggle. Meanwhile, in the factory, we came to find out that from one minute to the next we would have to move to other places because of the advance of the Red Army. And, just like that, as we were, we were told to prepare to march. The "death march" that I have always recounted in my testimony.

We were undernourished, emaciated, but we were forced to walk for hundreds of miles and for months. The Russians arrived at Auschwitz on 27 January, but the war was not over. In Europe, it would last until the beginning of May.

I say to you young people: don't blame others for your failures and weakness. We are strong, we are immensely strong! I learned that by experience in that time of my life when I too was an adolescent. So, when I hear all the talk today about adolescents, that, for example, we must be understanding, it is a difficult age, my answer is that they are

the strongest of all. They are no longer children and they are not yet adults. They have the force of life and of nature itself, and so everything is possible for them.

Only, life can be a hard march, and the march of death must be transformed into the march of life. But I repeat, I have seen how strong we can be: walking, one leg in front of the other, your feet full of sores, while those who fell got a rifle shot to the head. Nobody could lean on me and I could not lean on anyone else.

It was a terrible struggle. Savages, we threw ourselves onto dung heaps, soiling our mouths, to forage for something to eat. Therefore, in a time when almost a billion people are hungry and so many of them want to come to the West—as crazed as it is and for decades now slave to consumerism—to young people I also say: never waste food. This is asked of you by someone who has known hunger, someone who has foraged in a dung heap. In Milan, people throw away tons of bread every day; the restaurants throw out the food left on people's plates. Therefore, you young people, don't take out of the refrigerators in your houses only what you like, but look for things that are near the expiry date. Don't say, "I want this, I want that." Today you can choose even to buy strawberries in winter. But what is hunger? What's it like to be hungry? Hunger takes your brain away. How can a human being forage? And I choose the word advisedly. In German, the verb to eat for people is *essen*. For animals, instead, it is *fressen*. Well, that is how we were.

I have reflected a lot about what I would say today. I have been thinking a lot recently because to stop talking after thirty years is not a simple decision. And so I want to share with you a moment that I have recounted only rarely: the time when, during the forced march, we came upon a dead horse. Some of us, with their fingernails and teeth, with whatever sharp object they found there, had already started eating the raw meat. And I did it, too, I, who loved horses so much, who came from a family that had a special love of horses. It happened because that animal was important for us who were hungry. We found that meat, and each bite we took—and by now it was even hard for

us to swallow—we felt in our defrauded bodies the impulse given by that food. We were horrible, much worse than that horse. We were dead inside, but we wanted to live.

That march, which went on for so long, made us encounter dung heaps and dead horses, but never people. We passed through towns, cities, but no one, not even this time, opened a window. Where were the Humans? The Humans with a capital *H*, the ones who can look at themselves in the mirror and say, “I have a conscience. I did what I had to do.” There was nobody.

They moved us to various camps, all places of sadness, of continual tragedy, until we came to the last camp, in the north of Germany. I didn’t know where I was, I had no idea how long I’d walked. Later, I was amazed, looking at a map, by how many miles, one leg in front of the other, except for a few stretches on freight trains, I had traveled.

In the last camp, which was called Malchow, we didn’t work anymore, we almost never ate, we no longer felt anything. If the war had not ended, there would have been no need to kill us because we would have died from weakness. But something extraordinary happened in that camp. It was small; beyond the barbed wire you could see a meadow, some trees, spring. That spring that was being born even there and that made us rejoice that we still had sight, that allowed us to take pleasure in that tender green and to think that nature had nonetheless continued its cycle, regardless of the war, the cities destroyed, the viciousness of men. There was grass, buds were sprouting on tree branches.

And that’s not all. Almost every day, some young Frenchmen passed by there. They were prisoners of war. France had fallen right away and they were sent to work in German factories, healthy young men, not skeletons like us. It was my first human contact since the prisoners in San Vittore in Milan. They looked at us, at our figures without sex and without age. They saw us, and they yelled to us from outside the camp: “*Qui êtes-vous?*” And we, with all the effort it took us to speak, responded in chorus: “We are Jewish girls.”

Girls? They had pity, that extraordinary word that we no longer knew. It was nectar to hear ourselves called “poor things,” while until

now only horrible words had been directed at us, which I learned but that I have never pronounced in my testimonies. Tremendous words, directed at us guilty of being born. Instead, these young Frenchmen told us, “Don’t die, don’t die at this point. The war is about to end, the Germans are losing. The Americans are coming from the West, the Russians from the East.” And us? We were used to the horror, the mourning, the losses, the untreated illnesses, our sadness that was of interest to no one, and now someone was saying to us that the war was about to end and the Germans were having the worst of it. It was something to make your head spin!

“But are you telling us the truth?” we asked. “Yes, that’s how it is! It’s a matter of a few days, don’t die.” And we went to those of us who weren’t getting up anymore, because they weren’t able to, lying on those pallets full of disgusting insects. “Laura,” we said to one of our companions, “Laura, get up, the war is about to end. Get up, don’t lie there.” And she, with a heart condition, with big eyes, beautiful, reduced to a skeleton, replied: “I can’t do it, I can’t.” “Yes, you have to get up, come on!” Her sister Luciana had to leave her there and never saw her again, because Laura died just a few days after the liberation of the camp. Luciana Sacerdote from Genoa, however, died a few years ago, and she and I always remained very close.

The order came down to leave Malchow, too. But how could we? We were the ones from January, the prisoners of the death march, it had been months that we hadn’t eaten anything, we were wasted, subjects without volition, without feeling. But we got ourselves back on that road, on that German road where no one had ever given us anything. And we touched the leaves. I remember that I tore one from a branch and put it in my mouth. My teeth were already starting to loosen from pyorrhea. It was hard to chew and so I sucked that leaf, the chlorophyll that I hadn’t tasted for so long.

It was not easy to find the strength again to walk so as not to die. But it wasn’t for long because suddenly something extraordinary happened, something we would never have imagined. Our guards starting getting into civilian clothes and sent away the dogs, those poor dogs, that I would be afraid of for the rest of my life; those dogs trained to

kill that were the very symbol of the SS. They sent them away, saying, “*Weg, weg, weg!*” but the dogs kept coming back because they were used to blind obedience. The guards threw away their uniforms, they were afraid of us. And in that moment, the civilians started coming out of their houses. They loaded up everything they had and that was possible to transport onto wagons and wheelbarrows. That part of Germany was going to be under Communist domination for years, maybe they understood that, and wanted to make it to the other side.

We, on the other hand, didn’t understand anything, yet again. All those civilians, who had never looked at us, didn’t look at us even in that moment, and they thought we were dangerous.

Then another incredible thing happened. It was the first of May. The commandant of the last camp was walking next to me. He was a cruel man, he had a bullwhip that he carried with him and used to distribute lashes to us even though we were by now almost insensible. He was a tall man, elegant. He tore off his uniform. Down to his underwear. He was nearby. He never showed me any consideration, not to me nor to any other prisoner. For him we did not exist. But I, on the other hand, had observed him with terror. He threw his pistol down to the ground as well. And I, who was not the person I am today, who had been nourished on hate and revenge, who, after leaving the blessed hand of my father, had, day by day, become another, an insensitive being, the being that they wanted me to become, thought: “Now I’ll grab that pistol and shoot him.” Because it seemed to me a just ending to that incredible period to which I had been a witness. I, still alive, on that day.

It was an instant. A crucially important instant, decisive for my life. I understood that I would never, for no reason in the world, be able to kill someone. I understood that I was not like my murderer. I did not grab that pistol, and from that moment—I have always, in the course of these years, ended my testimony this way—I became the free woman and the woman of peace that I still am today.