



## PRIMARY SOURCE READING 19

### *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*

**W**orld War II erupted in 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland. In July 1941, Nazi leaders set into motion a plan to exterminate all the Jews in Europe—the Holocaust. During the next four years, the Nazis rounded up millions of Jews and sent them to concentration camps such as Auschwitz. The following interview describes the experience of one woman sent to the death camp at Auschwitz. She was there from the early days until the camp was liberated by the Allies.

**Guided Reading** *In this selection, read to learn how the Jews were sorted for slave labor or death when they arrived at Auschwitz.*

The brakes squeal with such finality that we know instinctively that our journey has ended. The doors are pushed open to a dull gray haze. We blink at the light stinging our eyes. The sign reads AUSCHWITZ.

“Get out of the car,” the Germans order. We shift from blank stares to the business of collecting our belongings.

“Go quick!” Men in striped caps and uniforms prod us with sticks, whispering under their breath, “Move quickly. We don’t want to hurt you.” The SS aim their guns, forcing these poor prisoners to hit us so that we jump from the car. And we jump, half dead, with our luggage, if we have luggage.

It is four feet to the ground. My knees, cramped from being stationary for so long, feel as if they will snap as I land. I turn to help the woman with her baby. A stick taps my shoulder, “Go quick.” I look for the eyes belonging to the voice, but there are only hollow black holes staring into my face.

“Get in line!” Orders are sharp, punctuated by whips against shining leather boots.

“Throw your suitcases over there,” the SS shout.

I place mine upright, neatly, next to the growing pile, then turn to ask one of the SS guards, “How are we going to find our suitcases later?” I figure I am a human being, I have a right to ask.

“Get in line and shut up!” he yells in my face, pointing his gun at me. The hair on my skin bristles. He doesn’t see that I am human.

There is an odor I cannot identify. It is not from human waste or people who have not

bathed in days, although those smells are also prevalent. It is the scent of fear permeating the air around me. It is everywhere, in the eyes of the men and women around me, in our clothing and our sweat.

The baby isn’t alive anymore, but its mother does not notice the limpness of the form in her arms. Her desperate grasp on its corpse spooks me. There is too much happening. Everything is so hurried, so haphazard, that there is no way to make sense of the situation. I look through the crowd for some direction, for someone to tell me why we are here and what will befall us. I see him. He stands before us, superior and seraphic [angelic], taking control, directing us to go this way or that. He is so neat and refined in his gray uniform; he is gorgeous. I smile into his blue eyes, hoping he will see me for who I am.

“Do you want to give up the child?” he asks the woman with the dead baby.

“No.” Her head shakes frantically.

“Go over there,” he says.

How kind of him not to point out to her that her infant is dead, I think to myself. How kind of him to send her over to the group who is obviously weaker. The elderly and the very young are gathered apart from those of us who are stronger, able to work long, hard hours. I have no idea how many men, women, and children are on the platform, but each of us is told to go either to the left or the right. The direction has no meaning to us. I wonder which way the man in the gray will tell me to go.

Parents try to hug their children before they are taken away. “We have to go work.” They try to comfort each other. “You are young enough



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not to have to come work with us. Grandmama will take care of you, . . ." they assure their flesh and blood. "Everything will be okay, you'll see. You'll be happier if you're not with Mommy and Daddy." Then Mommy and Daddy are separated.

I cannot bear the sound of children crying. This is madness. My mind begins to whirl. Struggling to focus on something, anything, to keep me from screaming, I stare at the man in gray. He is so stunning I am sure he must be considerate too. His orders are always obeyed. The SS around us defer to him quickly, answering, "Heil Hitler!"

His finger points. I answer by walking to the side of the other able-bodied young women. On the other end of the compound, we envy the group that will not have to work. They will go someplace warm, somewhere where they will be taken care of. It is natural to think this way—we are human beings, we assume we will all be treated humanely. I watch the proceedings with semi-fascination before lapsing into the fog where nothing needs to make sense. This is not

daydreaming, this is electric shock.

Trucks come and load up the old, the sick, and the babies. There is nothing nice or caring about the way they rush them. These feeble souls are herded onto the flatbeds like so many sacks of potatoes piled on top of one another. My stomach somersaults. For one sick moment it occurs to me that maybe they're not going to be treated as well as I've been thinking, but I chase that thought away. They're in a hurry, I chide myself. There are so many of us; they have only momentarily forgotten to treat them gently.

Many of the girls next to me wave good-bye to those being taken away. I watch their stricken faces realizing that my prayer has been temporarily answered. There is no one for me to wave to, and for one brief moment I feel a tiny shred of gratitude. At least when I said good-bye to my family it was not in this place. The tears around me are too plentiful, the pain too raw, as mothers and daughters are driven apart. I shut my eyes but I cannot shut my ears.

"Good-bye, Papa!"

"Good-bye, Mama!"

## INTERPRETING THE READING

**Directions** Use information from the reading to answer the following questions. If necessary, use a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why did Rena ask the Nazis about finding her suitcase later?

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2. How did Rena feel about the group that did not have to work?

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### Critical Thinking

3. **Making Inferences** How can you infer that the people being loaded onto the truck were being sent to death?

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4. **Determining Cause and Effect** Why do you think Rena tells her story in the present rather than the past tense?

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