

## 5.1. Excerpt from “Gypsies” by Charlotte Delbo

*Charlotte Delbo, a French non-Jew, was imprisoned in Auschwitz in January 1943 as a political dissident and spent the remainder of the war in concentration camps. A writer of prose and poetry, Delbo managed to survive and died in 1985.*

*Source: Charlotte Delbo, *From Days and Memory*, trans. Rosette Lamont (Marlboro Press, 1990). Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois. Used with permission.*

At last they're all in place, lined up for the roll-call, on each side of the road running down the middle of the camp.

They shall have to wait hours and hours before daybreak, before the counting. The SS do not arrive until it is light.

First you stamp your feet. The cold pierces to the marrow. You no longer feel your body, you no longer feel anything of your self. First you stamp your feet. But it's tiring to stamp your feet. Then you huddle over, arms crossed over your chest, shoulders hunched, and all squeeze close to one another

but keeping in rank because the club-wielding furies are there and watching.

Even the strength to raise one's eyes, to look to see if there are stars in the sky

there's a chilling effect to stars

to cast a glance about

even the strength that takes must be saved and no one looks up.

And to see what in that darkness?

The women from the other barracks, also reeling and falling, trying to form their ranks?

all these ranks stretching from one end of the camp to the other, on each side of the road,

that makes how many women, how many thousands of women, all these ranks?

these ranks bobbing up and down because the women are stamping their feet and then they halt because to stamp one's feet is exhausting

You see nothing, each one is enclosed in the shroud of her own skin,

you feel nothing, neither the person next to you, huddling against you, nor that other who has fallen and is being helped up.

You don't speak because the cold would freeze your saliva.

Each feels she is dying, crumbling into confused images, dead to herself already, without a past, any reality, without anything,

the sky must have grown light without anyone noticing.

And now, in the pallid light of the night drawing to a close,

the ranks across the way suddenly emerge, the ranks of the Gypsy women like ourselves all blue from cold.

How would you know a Gypsy if not by her tattered dress? The Jewish women do not have striped uniforms either, they have grotesque clothing, coats too long or too tight, mud-spattered, torn, with a high red cross painted on the back.

The gypsy women have tatters, what's left of their full skirts and their scarves.

And suddenly there she is, you can make her out, the one in the front row holding, clutched to her breast, a bundle of rags.

In her gaunt face, eyes gleaming so bright that you must look away not to be pierced by them

her eyes gleaming with fever, with hatred, a burning, unbearable hatred.

And what else but hatred is holding together these rags this spectre of woman is made of, with her bundle pressed against her chest by hands purple from cold?

She holds the bundle of rags to her, in the crook of her arm, the way a baby is held, the baby's head against its mother's breast.

Daylight.

The Gypsy stands straight, so tense that it is visible through her tatters, her left hand placed upon the baby's face. It is an infant, that bundle of rags she is clutching. It became obvious when she shifted the upper part of the bundle, turning it outward a little, to help it breathe perhaps, now that daylight has come.

Quickly she shelters the baby's face again and hugs it tighter

then she shifts the bundle of rags to her other arm, and we see the infant's head lolling, bluish, almost black.

With a gentle movement she raises the baby's head, props it in the hollow between her arm and her breast,

and again she lifts her eyes, and again the impression she gives is of tension and fierceness, with her unbearable stare.

The SS arrive. All the women stiffen as they move down the ranks, counting. That lasts a long time. A long time. Finally, one side is done. You can put your hands back in the sleeves of your jacket, you can hunch up your shoulders, as if it were possible to make yourself a smaller target for the cold.

I look at the Gypsy holding her baby pressed against her. It's dead, isn't it?

Yes, it's dead. Its purplish head, almost black, falls back when not supported by the Gypsy's hand.

For how long has it been dead, cradled in its mother's arms, this rag-swaddled infant? For hours, perhaps for days.

The SS move past. Counting the ranks of the Gypsies. They do not see the woman with the dead baby and the frightening eyes.

A whistle blows. The roll-call is over. We break formation. Again we slide and fall on the sheet of ice, now spotted here and there with diarrhea.

The Gypsies' formation breaks up too. The woman with the baby runs off. Where is she heading for shelter?

The Gypsies are not marched out of the camp for work. Men, women, children are mixed together in a separate enclosed area. The camp for families. And why are there Gypsy women over here, in our camp? Nobody knows.

When the roll was called that evening she was there, with her dead baby in her arms. Standing in the front row. Standing straight.

The following morning at roll-call she was there, hugging her bundle of rags, her eyes still brighter, still wilder.

Then she stopped coming to roll-call.

Someone saw the bundle of rags, the dead baby, on the garbage heap by the kitchen.

The Gypsy has been clubbed to death by a policewoman who'd tried to pull the dead baby away from her.

This woman, hugging her baby to her, had fought, butting her head, kicking, protecting herself and then striking with her free hand . . . a struggle in which she had been crushed despite the hate that gave her the strength of a lioness defending her brood.

The Gypsy had fallen dead in the snow. The corpse collection squad had picked up her body and carried it to where the corpses are stacked before being loaded on the truck which dumps them at the crematorium.

The mother killed, the policewoman has torn the baby from her arms and tossed it on the garbage heap in front of which the struggle had taken place. The Gypsy woman had raced to the edge of the camp, tightly cradling the baby in her crossed arms, had run till she was out of breath and it was when she was blocked by the garbage pile that she turned to face the fury and her club.

The corpse collection squad picked up the mother. The baby, in its rags, remained on the garbage head, mixed with the refuse.

All the Gypsies disappeared very fast. All gassed. Thousands of them. The family camp was emptied out, that made room for the next arrivals. Not Gypsies. We saw nothing more of Gypsies at Birkenau. Gypsies are less numerous than Jews, it didn't take much time to dispose of them.