

# BLOND BRAIDS AT AUSCHWITZ

BY LIVIA E. BITTON JACKSON



PHOTO: ARTHUR MAGUIN  
Note: A model was used for this photo

**T**he following memoir is excerpted from *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* by Carol Rittner and John Roth [Paragon House, 1993]. Livia E. Bitton Jackson, the author of the account below, was deported to Auschwitz with her Orthodox Hungarian family in May, 1944. She had just gotten a bright yellow Schwinn bicycle with shiny chrome handlebars for her 13th birthday. Life changed overnight.

Before the Soviet Army liberated the camp in January, 1945, the Germans emptied out nearly everything from Auschwitz's storehouses. Still, seven tons of shorn human hair—only a small part of the total collected at Auschwitz—was found. The rest had been sold to German companies that transformed hair into mattresses and felt.

**S**ometime during the fourth night, the train comes to a halt. We are suddenly awakened by the noise of sliding doors thrown open and cold night air rushing into the wagon. A huge sign catches my eye: AUSCHWITZ. . . An officer in gray SS uniform stands facing the lines of women and children. Dogs straining on short leashes held by SS soldiers flank him on both sides. He stops each line and regroups them. Some to his right and some to his left. Then he orders each group to march on. I tremble as I stand before him. But he looks at me with a soft look in friendly eyes.

"Goldene Haar!" he exclaims as he takes one of my long braids into his hand. I am not certain I heard it right. Did he say "golden hair" about my braids?

"Bist du Jüdin?" Are you Jewish?

The question startles me. "Yes, I am Jewish."

"Wie alt bist du?" How old are you?

"I am thirteen."

"You are tall for your age. Is this your mother?" He touches Mommy lightly on the shoulder: "You go with your mother." With his riding stick he parts my Aunt Szeren from my mother's embrace and gently shoves Mommy and me to the group moving to the right.

"Go, and remember, from now on you are sixteen."

Our silent, rapid march ends. By fives we file through the entrance of a long, flat gray building.

"Sich auskleiden! Alles herunter!" Get undressed, everybody! Take off everything! "Los!"

The room is swarming with SS men. Get undressed, here? In front of the men? No one moved.

"Didn't you hear? Take off your clothes. All your clothes!"

I feel the slap of a whip on my shoulders and meet a young SS

soldier's glaring eyes.

"Hurry! Strip fast. You will be shot. Those having any clothes on in five minutes will be shot!"

I look at Mommy. She nods. Let's get undressed. I stare directly ahead as I take off my clothes. I am afraid. By not looking at anyone I hope no one will see me. I have never seen my mother in the nude. How awful it must be for her. I hesitate before removing my bra. My breasts are two growing buds, taut and sensitive. I can't have anyone see them. I decide to leave my bra on.

Just then a shot rings out. The charge is ear-shattering. Some women begin to scream. Others weep. I quickly take my bra off.

It is chilly and frightening. Clothes lie in mounds on the cement floor. We are herded, over a thousand, shivering, humiliated nude bodies, into the next hall, even chillier. More foreboding. It is darker here. Barer.

"Los! Schneller, blode Lumpen!" Faster. Move faster, idiotic whores.

We are lined up and several husky girls in gray cloaks begin shaving our hair—on our heads, under the arms, and on the pubic area. My long, thick braids remain braided and while the shaving machine shears my scalp, the hair remains hanging, tugging at the roots. The pain of the heavy braid tugging mercilessly at the yet unshaven roots brings tears to my eyes. I pray for the shaving to be done quickly. As my blonde tresses lie in a large heap on the ground, the indifferent hair butcher remarks: "A heap of gold." In a shudder I remember the scene at the selection—the SS officer's admiration of my "golden hair," the separation from Aunt Szeren. Where is she now? Is her hair shorn off and is she stripped of her clothes, too? Is she very frightened? Poor, darling, Szeren *neni*. If my hair were shorn before the selection, we would be together with her now. We would not have been separated. It's because of my blonde hair that Mommy and I were sent to the other side. Poor

darling. If only we could have stayed together!

The haircut has a startling effect on every woman's appearance. Individuals become a mass of bodies. Height, stoutness, or slimness: There is no distinguishing factor—it is the absence of hair which transformed individual women into like bodies. Age and other personal differences melt away. Facial expressions disappear. Instead, a blank, senseless stare emerges on a thousand faces of one naked, unappealing body. In a matter of minutes even the physical aspect of our numbers seems reduced—there is less of a substance to our dimensions. We become a monolithic mass. Inconsequential.

The shaving had a curious effect. A burden was lifted. The burden of individuality. Of associations. Of identity. Of the recent past. Girls who have continually wept at separation from parents, sisters and brothers now began to giggle at the strange appearance of their friends. Some shriek with laughter. Others begin calling out names of friends to see if they can recognize them shorn and

stripped. When response to names comes forth from completely transformed bodies, recognition is loud, hysterical. Wild, noisy embraces. Shrieking, screaming disbelief. Some girls bury their faces in their palms and howl, rolling on the ground.

"Was ist los?" What's the matter? A few swings of the SS whip restores order.

I look for Mommy. I find her easily. The haircut has not changed her. I have been used to seeing her in Orthodox kerchiefs, every bit of hair carefully tucked away. Avoiding a glance at her body, I marvel at the beauty of her face.

With all accessories gone her perfect features are even more striking. Her high forehead, large blue eyes, classic nose, shapely lips and elegant cheekbones are more evident than ever.

She does not recognize me as I stand before her. Then a sudden smile of recognition: "Elli! It's you. You look just like Bubbie. Strange, I have never seen the resemblance before. What a boyish face! They cut off your beautiful braids . . ."

## HAIR APPARENT: CONSIDERING ULTRA-ORTHODOXY AT 17

*Susan Josephs, 23, is a staff writer at New York's Jewish Week. Formerly she was an editorial intern at Ms. magazine, and before that editor-in-chief of U.C.L.A.'s Jewish monthly, Ha'Am. When Josephs was 17—six short years ago—"two roads diverged in a yellow wood" and she—she took the road to the left, and that's been hairy.*

When I was a child, my mother always made me cut my hair short. I have very thick, curly, dark, quintessentially "Jewish" hair. I love my Jewish hair, and I've always wanted it long. It was a constant, huge struggle between my mother and me. At 14, I began to grow my hair long, and my mother didn't interfere.

My hair became an extension of myself—how I was going to establish autonomy in my life. Sometimes when I'm frustrated, when I'm thinking and have a creative idea, I touch my hair—it's an external thing that's much more than a physical characteristic to me. Hair means independent thought; it means freedom.

When I graduated from high school in San Diego, I was in the depths of a spiritual quandary. I grew up in an Orthodox family, but went to public high school. I was also very involved in the Orthodox youth organization, N.C.S.Y.

In other words, I was fragmented: In public school I was doing theater, I had friends who knew nothing about my life in Judaism. In N.C.S.Y. there was a correct "brand" of Judaism—the ultimate thing to do was to observe everything halakhically, and to go study for a year in Israel when you finished high school to "find yourself."

### THE HAIR SHAVING HAS A CURIOUS EFFECT. THE BURDEN OF IDENTITY IS LIFTED.

#### "MY HAIR WAS HOW I WAS GOING TO PROCLAIM AUTONOMY IN MY LIFE."

I compromised by going to Brovender's yeshiva in Jerusalem for a summer. They have the reputation as the yeshiva with the most rigorous study program for women—at that time, they were the only yeshiva teaching Gemorrah to women.

I wanted to figure out who I was. I was very seriously trying to picture myself taking on all the trappings of a Strictly Orthodox Person. There was a lot of social pressure to wear skirts every day, and that was already oppressive to me. But in conversations with other students, it was—"Of course we'll cover our hair; when you get married you HAVE to cover your hair," and that's what really terrified me.

The skirts I was doing. Grappling with the Laws of Purity I was doing. But what really struck terror into my heart, what really made me angry, was the thought that I would have to take my hair THAT I LOVE and conceal it. That would mean suffocating. It would mean stripping me of me.

That was my critical watershed point because it was the only thing I knew without question: I would not be covering my hair. From that certainty, I looked at other facets of Orthodoxy.

Since beginning to grow my hair out at 14, my hair has been long. People describe me: "She has this kind of—Hair." "You can't miss her, she's the woman with the HAIR." "She has this HAIR." I wouldn't say it's beautiful, but I unquestionably love my long, dark, curly, thick, quintessentially Jewish hair. People tease me, "How come you never want to do anything new to your hair?"

I love it long—the longer it gets, the freer I am.

—Susan Schnur