

# AUSCHWITZ AND AFTER

SECOND EDITION

CHARLOTTE DELBO

Translated by Rosette C. Lamont

Introduction by Lawrence L. Langer



Praise for *Auschwitz and After*

“In this finely translated trilogy, Charlotte Delbo renders with economy and nuance pictures from the hell of Auschwitz. What she recalls in prose and verse would be unbearable except for the very precision of thought and sense she brings to it. No memoir of those times is more sensitive and less sentimental.”

—Geoffrey Hartman, Yale University

“Charlotte Delbo’s harrowing text, beautifully written in varying poetic prose, takes the fusion of form and content on to another plane, depicting inferno where death is ever present.”

—Emma Klein, *The Tablet*

“This powerful work should soon be both widely admired and read alongside other tragic narratives of the Holocaust. . . . One of the most important books to appear on the war. . . . The challenge of *Auschwitz and After* is this: to listen to the woman who is speaking, to hold the beauty of her words and the starkness of her images at once.”

—Elizabeth A. Houlding, *Women’s Review of Books*

“This poetry helps us touch the truth. It alone could communicate to us, make us feel the despair beyond all despair, martyrdom.”

—Francois Bott, *Le Monde*

“Translated into English for the first time in its entirety. . . . Delbo brings a humanity to these familiar scenes of inhumanity through her vivid rendering of her comrades, and she eschews the philosophical musings of other Holocaust literature for an intimate account of daily life in the camps. . . . A profound testimonial.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Perhaps more than any other survivor memoir, this one captures the hell of the death camp. . . . Delbo’s works present paradox after paradox, embodying and echoing the incredible truths that define the Holocaust.”  
—Myra Goldenberg, *Feminist Studies*

“This trilogy uses fresh images and innovative stylistic techniques to force readers to confront the horrors of the concentration camps and of the Holocaust. The author breaks new ground in addressing the psychology of Holocaust survivors.”  
—Richard Lachman, *Multicultural Review*

“Finally translated into English, this unique memoir will be able to reach the larger audience that it deserves.”  
—George Cohen, *Booklist*

“Because Delbo’s work is such a poignant reminder of the horrors of the concentration camp experience and addresses survivors’ difficulties in postwar life, it would be an excellent choice for an undergraduate or graduate class on the Second World War. It should also be required reading for graduate courses on the Holocaust.”  
—R. Wesley White, *German Studies Review*

“This book—Delbo’s profoundly moving vignettes, poems, and prose poems of life in the concentration camps and afterward—is a memoir of great value.”  
—*Translation Review*

## **Auschwitz and After**



**Auschwitz and After**

**Charlotte Delbo**

*Second Edition*

Translated by Rosette C. Lamont

With a New Introduction by Lawrence L. Langer

**Yale** UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## Translator's Preface

Translating Charlotte Delbo's trilogy proved to be a sublime duty. As I was working I recalled her impassioned tone as she explained that she had to transmit the knowledge she acquired in *l'univers concentrationnaire*. "Je veux donner à voir!" she kept on repeating. She was referring to the moral obligation she felt to raise the past from its ashes, to carry the word (the title of one of her plays). One might call her entire *œuvre* "a literature of conscience." In French *conscience* would signify both conscience and consciousness. It is Delbo's acute consciousness which makes her a privileged witness. However, to bring the word back requires a great deal of restraint. In order to bear and bare the unbearable, Charlotte struggled to render her style unobtrusive, almost transparent. Because she wrote from the extreme edge of being, she sought never to attract attention to the manner in which she expressed herself. How she said was important only because of what she had to say. The Holocaust experience, which she described as "the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century," spoke through her as its messenger.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to two friends who made this work possible. My former student, Dr. Cynthia Haft, who wrote her Ph.D. dissertation under my direction at the CUNY Graduate School, introduced me to Charlotte in Paris. I recall thinking as soon as I saw this tall, proud, beautiful woman: "She looks the way I envision Electra." Later I was to find out how important Jean Giraudoux's *Electra*, staged by her great master and friend, Louis Jouvet, was to her. In fact, the final poem of the trilogy, the one she entitles "Envoi," refers directly to this play.

Charlotte's close friend, the actress Claudine Riera Collet, Delbo's literary executrix, facilitated all the transactions that led to this publication. She also provided the photograph for the frontispiece and showed me some important papers and documents. Although Clau-

dine did not share the camp experience with Charlotte, they became close, loving friends. After Charlotte's death from cancer, Claudine and I grieved together, and we also made plans to ensure that our friend's message would reach future generations so that, as Charlotte kept on saying, "such a horror would not happen again."

## Introduction to the Second Edition by Lawrence L. Langer

### I

Nearly forty years after the end of World War II Geneviève de Gaulle, niece of General Charles de Gaulle (leader of the Free French Forces in England), reflected on her experience as a member of the Resistance in France during the war, and on her deportation to the Ravensbrück concentration camp:

What we in the Resistance had not foreseen—none of us—was the full implication of our commitment. We were aware that we could be arrested, that we could be tortured. That was not a reassuring perspective at all. You never know if you will resist under torture. I could never have predicted my response. You can stand up to some things but you have no idea of your limits. If one of my children or grandchildren had been tortured in front of me, I do not know what I would have done. That is how I feel today. It is terrible to have to contemplate such possibilities, but it was like that. Then there was death. We recognized that. Death was part of our Destiny.\*

An odd rhythm of alternating attitudes inhabits this paragraph, since it begins with a statement about lack of foresight and ends with a comment on the limits of retroactive awareness. In fact, judging from the testimony of numerous other women who belonged to one of the many networks that arose as part of the “Resistance” in wartime France, few initially expressed concern that death might be part of their destiny. Speaking about “how I felt then” from the vantage point of “how I feel today” risks distorting the actual state of mind of the women from all walks of life who chose to join in some form of protest against the German forces occupying their country. Most were

\*Cited in Margaret Collins Weitz, *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940–1945* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), 58.

young (though many were married, some with children), with limited education: they were housewives, farmhands, office workers, seamstresses, rural and urban, united by a patriotic spirit and a hatred for the German victors. There were few self-conscious Joan of Arcs among them. A good number were members of or had strong ties to the Communist Party, a sympathy strengthened after Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June of 1941. They also felt a disdain for the collaborationist Vichy government, whose propaganda insisted that the proper place for a woman was in the home, where her principal role was to be a wife and mother, and a support to her husband. And it is safe to add that none of the 230 women in Charlotte Delbo's convoy, whatever risks they thought they were taking by working with a Resistance group, could have foreseen in their wildest imagining that they might end up in a death camp in Poland called Auschwitz. Indeed, as Caroline Moorehead reminds us in *A Train in Winter*, Delbo's convoy was "the only train, during the entire four years of German occupation, to take women from the French Resistance to the Nazi death camps." No one has ever discovered the reason why.

During the early years of the German occupation of France, men and women shared in the tasks assigned to Resistance units, and from the vantage point of the present, the duties may seem fairly innocuous. The chief activity was the printing and distribution of political leaflets, posters, and underground newspapers, designed to support the spirits of a people who had lost their freedom and were suffering from increasing food shortages, restrictions on travel, and censorship of political and artistic expression. Women were usually used as couriers in such work because they raised less suspicion and were thus less likely to be checked as they moved about their regions of operation. In addition to performing editorial work, women were responsible for locating and transporting mimeograph paper, printer's ink, and duplicating machines, and for finding safe sites for hiding such material. They were also involved in more dangerous measures, such as aiding escaped prisoners-of-war to return to safe areas in France or concealing downed Allied fliers until they could be helped by the Underground to return to England. Perhaps

the most perilous venture was the concealment of weapons in attics, cellars, and barns or other outbuildings on their property.

The penalty for such actions if one were caught grew increasingly severe. By 1942 some Frenchwomen accused of involvement with the Resistance were sentenced to terms in local prisons, but most were deported to the women's concentration camp at Ravensbrück, north of Berlin. With few exceptions, men arrested by the Gestapo or French military police were simply shot. Several of the women from Charlotte Delbo's convoy, including Delbo herself, were allowed to meet briefly with their husbands before the men were taken out for execution. Delbo was twenty-nine years old; her husband, twenty-eight. We will never know whether the difference in punishment between genders represented a bizarre sense of German chivalry or an effort to soften the hostility of the French population. The knowledge that if they were lucky enough to return after the war there would be no reunion with their spouse must have added considerably to the anguish of the deported widows' years of captivity. (Forty-nine husbands of the 230 women in Delbo's convoy were shot by the Germans, nineteen died in concentration camps, and one was a military casualty.) Of course, no such gender distinction obtained in the German treatment of Jewish men and women. Of the 75,000 French Jews deported from France (most of them not native born), only 2,500 returned after the war. A handful of women among the 230 sent to Auschwitz with Charlotte Delbo were Jewish or part Jewish, but there is no evidence that the Germans were ever aware of this fact. In the text of *Auschwitz and After* and in her conversations with me, Delbo freely admitted that however terrible conditions in Auschwitz were for the members of her convoy, the situation for Jews was worse. But she was irritated by some outsiders' assumption that because the Frenchwomen in Auschwitz were not Jewish, their ordeal could not have been that bad. She realized, however, as did leaders of the Resistance in France, that it would have been unwise knowingly to recruit Jewish women for clandestine work because they ran a much greater danger of being denounced by neighbors or rounded up by the Gestapo or French military brigades.

We have specific information about the women in Delbo's group because after the war, with the help of a handful of other returnees from her convoy, she tracked down details of the previous lives of all but one of the 230 women who were deported with her. Only 49 of them came back; she resolved not to let the others become victims of postwar amnesia. In the original French edition of Delbo's *Le convoi du 24 Janvier* (published in English with some updated material as *Convoy to Auschwitz: Women in the French Resistance*, 1997), which provided brief biographies of 229 of those women, she added an appendix (not included in the translation) that presents some revealing statistical data about the members of her convoy. Of the 75 women over the age of forty, only 6 returned. More than 160 of the 230 had no education beyond the primary-school level. Of the 49 survivors, 34 had political ties to communism, though not all were party members. A little more than half were married, leaving behind 96 children under the age of sixteen.

What can we infer from these statistics? It has sometimes been alleged that women were more successful than men in creating conditions in the camps that fostered survival. The women in Delbo's convoy offer valuable evidence for testing this assumption. Many of them collaborated in the Underground before their arrest, and lived together for as long as four months in dormitories in the prison fortress of Romainville after their roundup. Thus they were not total strangers: they were imprisoned together, were deported together, and arrived together at Auschwitz. They shared the same barracks, and for the first few months most of them toiled together in backbreaking work, draining marshes in the fields around the camp. And as Delbo testifies in the first volume of her trilogy, they tried valiantly to help each other stay alive. In other words, everything in their situation conspired to ensure a high percentage of survival among them. Unfortunately, however, Delbo's work is not a celebration of the value or the valor of gendered heroism in Birkenau. Despite the commendable efforts at mutual support, Delbo admitted succinctly in *Convoy to Auschwitz*, "On April 10, 1943—seventy-three days after our arrival—there were only seventy of us left." That adds up to a 70 percent mortality rate in less than the first three months—and

this in an exclusively non-Jewish population. For Delbo's women the enemy in a place like Auschwitz was not indifference to the welfare of others; the great foes were typhus and dysentery, which consumed all but a few of the early victims, the exceptions being a number of elderly and several very ill patients in the crude infirmary, who were selected for the gas chamber.

Because Delbo is not writing a personal autobiography of her experience in Auschwitz and other camps but a collective account of the fate of 230 women, most of whom were linked by language, geographical origin, and political sympathies, we have a rare opportunity to assess the results of their interactions in a way that is not offered to us by the individual memoirs of Resistance women whose authors either were never caught or were imprisoned separately but never deported to a death camp. By August 3, 1943, about six months after their arrival, only fifty-seven of the Frenchwomen were left. Although readers may be shocked by the rapid attrition of members of the convoy, Delbo does not see it that way. "If our convoy had so many survivors," she wrote, "—and for Birkenau in 1943, fifty-seven out of two hundred and thirty after six months was exceptional, unique in the history of the camp—this was because we already knew each other . . . and had formed small, tightly knit units within a large, homogenous group, helping each other in all sorts of ways, often quite small: holding each other's arms while walking, rubbing each other's backs during roll call; and of course we could talk to each other." She explicitly contrasts their "favorable" condition with the situation of Jewish women in Birkenau, "who suffered general punishments more often than we did, doing roll call on their knees with their arms in the air, for example: something we never experienced. Moreover, these Jewish women, thrown together on the eve of deportation, rarely formed cohesive, supportive groups." And perhaps most significant of all, the Frenchwomen as a group, unlike their fellow Jewish inmates, did not undergo periodic selections for the gas chambers.

This information prompts two seemingly contradictory responses. On one hand, if you were lucky enough to avoid or recover from the diseases that decimated the members of Delbo's convoy, mutual support

might enhance your chances of survival. Indeed, of the five women in Charlotte's group who clung together in Auschwitz as long as possible—she, Lulu, Carmen, Viva, and Mado—only Viva did not return. But this was far from a common example. The role of chance far outweighed the role of choice in the fate of the survivors, so that it would be a mistake to honor one while ignoring the other. For example, it has often been contended that family members—especially sisters—who remained together had a better prospect of surviving than those who were separated. There were seven pairs of sisters in Delbo's convoy, but only Lulu and Carmen returned home. Of the other six pairs, both sisters died in half the cases, and one sister in the others. There were also six mothers and daughters (though one was a daughter-in-law). Although we might have expected this relationship to have led to special nurturance, all the mothers died, as did four of the daughters. Finally, a pair of sisters-in-law also died. No conclusion about the value of mutual support can be drawn on the basis of these figures. The painful truth is that when typhus and dysentery and other physically assaulting conditions made onslaughts on the body in a place like Auschwitz, the spirit was helpless to resist. Indeed, considering that the remaining women, as Delbo reports, went sixty-seven days without washing, it is a miracle that anyone survived.

Delbo probably would not have, had not she and about a dozen other women been moved to a subcamp at Raisko in July 1943 to work on extracting latex (rubber) from the dandelion roots that grew profusely in the area around the camp. She had no scientific training, but one of her friends told the Germans that the "science group" needed lab assistants. At Raisko, Delbo explains in *Convoy to Auschwitz*, the "entire team moved into a new, clean, wooden barracks where there were hot showers, straw mattresses on individual beds, and toilets. . . . The women at Raisko could also write and receive parcels." There, mutual support flourished, but only because of the radical change in their external environment.

The data about the fate of most of the women in the convoy of January 24 are so crushing that one is forced to raise the question of how to

assess the worth of the Resistance that shaped their ultimate destiny. The clandestine pamphlets and newsletters may have temporarily bolstered the spirits of members of the population who read them, but they had no significant impact on the behavior of occupation forces or on the course of the war. German troops were slowly driven out of France by Allied forces after the D-Day invasion of June 1944. Diligent efforts by the Gestapo and French collaborationist military brigades led to the arrest of most women members of Resistance networks across France. To their credit, few revealed names under torture, but their pursuers garnered enough information from informers or from carelessly concealed lists to carry out their roundups successfully. French men were often involved with more violent actions, killing or wounding dozens of German soldiers in sudden strikes in metros, cafés, or other public venues, and although they too deserve immense credit for their courageous assaults, the price paid for such opposition far exceeded the achievements of these military Resistance networks. When the Germans couldn't find the assassin, they simply shot hostages in reprisal, sometimes a dozen, sometimes as many as a hundred for a single attack, though often those executed had nothing to do with a Resistance network. The penalty was so harsh that it leaves open the question of how to measure the value of the deeds against such ruthless consequences. Certainly the women in Delbo's convoy could not have divined the punishing ordeal they would have to face when they arrived in Auschwitz.

## II

When *Auschwitz and After* was first published in translation in 1995, Charlotte Delbo was still little known in the United States and not very well known in her own country, even though her memoir about her experience in Auschwitz and Ravensbrück and her return to France after her liberation shows the pen and imagination of the genuine artist. The first volume, *None of Us Will Return*, had been published in English separately in 1968, but at that time her name drew a blank from most American readers, and her unique minimalist style proved challenging to

those unfamiliar with the details of the Auschwitz ordeal. But since then, her trilogy has deservedly become a classic of Holocaust literature. She writes not as a heroine but as a victim. Her language is exquisite, but the pain of her memories is not, and this may help to explain why it took so long for her audience to grow.

She was born in Vigneux-sur-Seine, near Paris, in 1913. As a young woman, she worked as assistant to the theater impresario Louis Jouvet and was on tour in South America with his theatrical company when the Germans occupied her country in 1940. After learning that the Gestapo had executed a close friend, she decided to return home, and in November 1941, in spite of Jouvet's strong opposition, she made her way back to Paris via Portugal and Spain and the unoccupied zone of France to rejoin her husband, Georges Dudach, who was working for the Resistance.

In March 1942 French police arrested the couple in their apartment, where they were producing and editing anti-German leaflets. Delbo believed that the police had followed the courier who had come to deliver the leaflets. The French turned Delbo and her husband over to the Gestapo, who imprisoned them. Georges was executed by firing squad in May, after Charlotte was permitted to visit him in his cell (an encounter she returned to often in her writing, most notably in a brief dramatic piece, *Une scène jouée dans la mémoire*). Delbo remained in prisons in France until the end of 1942, then in January 1943 she was sent to Auschwitz from Romainville in a convoy of 230 women, most of whom were not Jewish but were involved in French Underground or anti-German political activity. Only 49 returned.

Delbo stayed in Auschwitz, and the subcamp at Raisko, until January 1944, when she was sent with a small group of her compatriots to Ravensbrück. Near the end of the war, she was released to the Red Cross, who moved her to Sweden to recuperate from the severe malnutrition and ill-health that resulted from her camp experiences. Although she has written numerous plays and essays, Delbo's masterpiece is the trilogy *Auschwitz and After* (*Auschwitz et après*). She finished the first volume, *None of Us Will Return* (*Aucun de nous ne reviendra*) in 1946 but

put it away in a drawer and did not let it be published in France until 1965, when, as she said, it had stood the test of time. The second volume, *Useless Knowledge* (*Une connaissance inutile*), sections of which were also written in 1946 and 1947, appeared in 1970 and was followed soon after by its sequel, *The Measure of Our Days* (*Mesure de nos jours*). Delbo's last work, *La mémoire et les jours*, translated as *Days and Memory*—it contains some of her most subtle reflections on her Auschwitz experience—appeared in 1985, soon after her death.

Delbo's ambition as a writer about the Nazi concentration camps is enshrined in one of her favorite expressions, which became the ruling principle of her art: *Il faut donner à voir*, which we might translate as "they must be made to see." In *None of Us Will Return* she says about the new arrivals in Auschwitz, "They expect the worst [*le pire*]*—not the unthinkable [l'inconcevable].*" She then resolves to reveal to her readers "the way it really was," so that when later generations in France remember the ordeal of the Nazi years they not only will focus on the charitable behavior toward Jews of the villagers of Le Chambon, celebrated by Pierre Sauvage in his film *Weapons of the Spirit*, but also will recall the daily struggle of Delbo and her friends to stay alive while besieged by hunger, thirst, abuse, fatigue, and despair. Each of these, at one point or another during her time in Auschwitz, had nearly driven Delbo to surrender to death.

Delbo must have realized, as she was writing *Days and Memory* toward the end of her life, that the challenge to future readers would be how to remember these years whose "unthinkable" incidents no one really wished to reawaken from the slumber of forgetfulness. She began that volume with the words *Expliquer l'inexplicable*, "Explain the inexplicable," and like Primo Levi, she was still trying to do it forty years after the event, even though, again like Levi, she had made the attempt in other works many times before. She spoke of two selves, her Auschwitz self and her post-Auschwitz self, and used the image of a snake shedding its skin to conjure up a sense of her "new" nature emerging after the camp years. Unfortunately, unlike the snake's skin, which shrivels, disintegrates, and disappears, what Delbo called the skin of Auschwitz