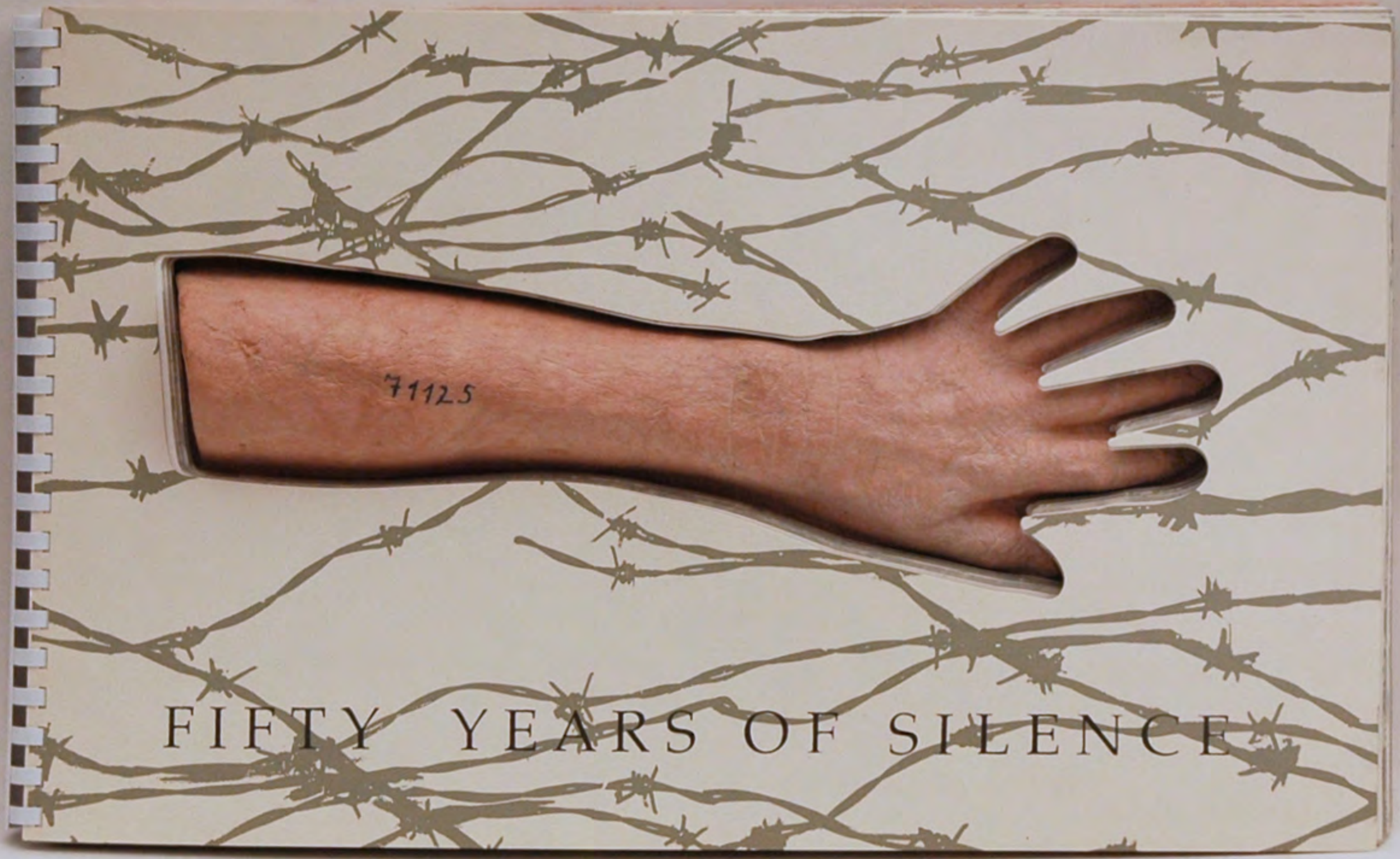
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FIFTY YEARS OF SILENCE

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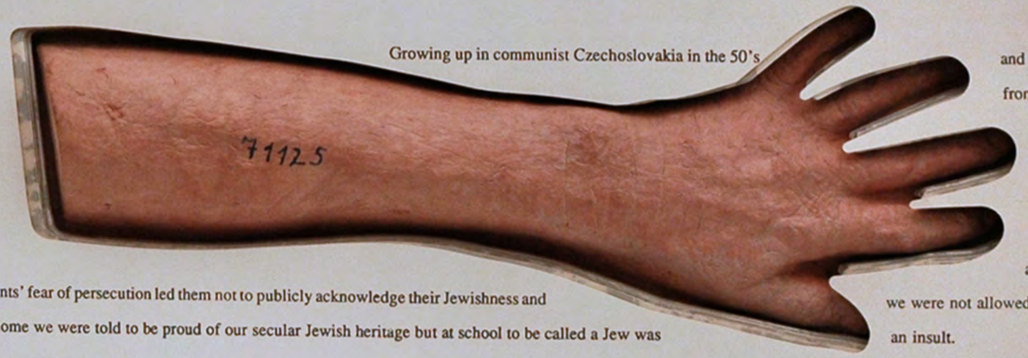
EVA KELLNER'S STORY

by Tatania Kellner

I have known since I was a child that my parents were concentration camp survivors, since both of them had a number tattooed on their left arm. I used to spend a long time studying their tattoos, wondering what it must have been like. My mother never talked about her experiences. My father only talked about it when he was scolding us, especially about eating everything on our plates. Once when I was at his side on an after dinner walk, he told a friend the stories of the medical experiments performed on him and the ten day transport when people began devouring each other. I think he must have forgotten I was there. I didn't inquire any further for fear of hurting him.

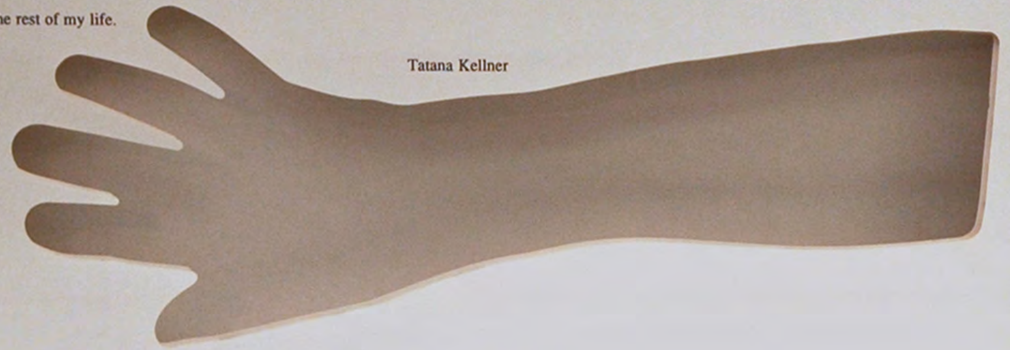


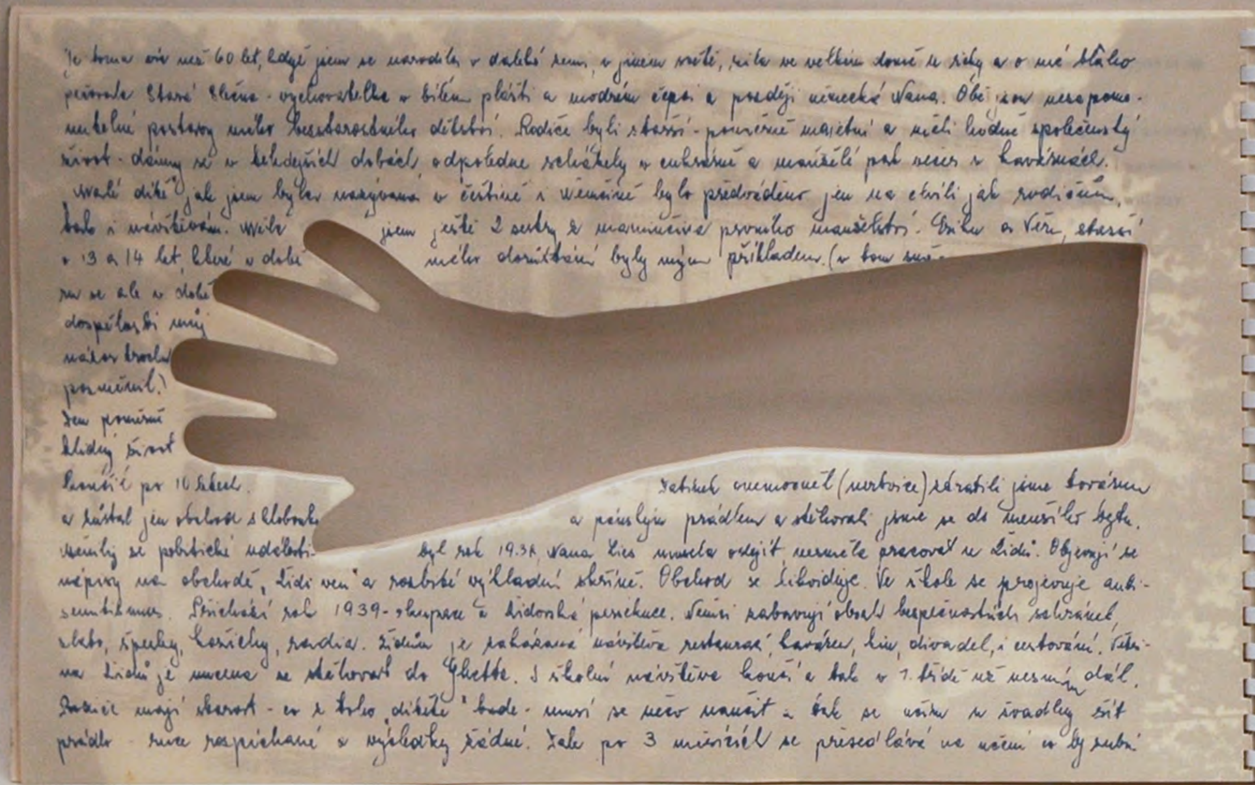
Growing up in communist Czechoslovakia in the 50's and 60's, as a Jew, from a pre-war bourgeois family, meant to be discriminated against. My parents' fear of persecution led them not to publicly acknowledge their Jewishness and we were not allowed to tell anyone. At home we were told to be proud of our secular Jewish heritage but at school to be called a Jew was an insult.

There was a constant fear and apprehension in our home. My parents learned to shade the truth, to hide their background. I had one brother and one sister and they told us nothing. The less we knew, the less we had to tell. Since people were encouraged to spy on each other, no one was to be trusted. Everyone whispered their views only to closest friends, who in my parents' case were other Czech Jews they'd met in concentration camps and who survived with them. As far as I know, we were the only Jewish children in our school. The only other Jewish children we knew were children of my parents' friends.

I always was curious about my parents' experiences and am very sad that I didn't ask my grandmother; her story died with her. I didn't want the same to happen to my parents' stories. Even after almost fifty years, they had some reservations to awaken these painful memories but when I explained why I wanted to record their reminiscences, they agreed to write them down in Czech. They sent them to me and I translated the text to English. Except for the questions I had in terms of accuracy, this is still not something we can talk about. After reading their stories I was driven to visit some of the former concentration camp sites which still exist. I travelled to Auschwitz, Terezin and Bergen-Belsen. Once there, I was simply overwhelmed. It was a very sad, ominous and awesome pilgrimage, an experience which will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Tatana Kellner





It is more than 60 years ago since I was born in a far away country in Central Europe. It was a different world. I grew up in a large house in Prague near the river Moldau and my well-being was assured by a nanny in a white coat and a blue bonnet; later this duty was transferred to Lies, a German nanny. Both women are unforgettable figures from my carefree childhood. My parents were older and considered well-to-do, with a busy personal and social life. During that era women in my mother's position met in the afternoons in sweet shops and the husbands spent evenings in coffee houses. I was introduced to my parents' friends as a "dear child" and was never allowed to spend more than a few moments in front of the company or my parents. I had two step-sisters from my mother's first marriage, Erika and Vera. They were 13 and 14 years older and during my childhood were my role models. This relatively blissful period ended when I was ten years old. My father became ill, lost his factory and was left with only a hat shop. We moved to a smaller apartment.

In 1938 the political situation in Czechoslovakia was changing. Nanny Lies had to leave us since she could no longer work for Jews. My father was forced to liquidate his shop. In 1939 Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia and the persecution intensified. Germans confiscated the contents of safe deposit boxes, gold, jewelry, furs, radios, cameras. Jews were forbidden to enter restaurants, coffee houses, theaters and movie houses. Travel was forbidden. We were forced to move into the ghetto. Jewish children could no longer attend public schools and mix with the Aryan children, so my formal education ended in 7th grade.

My parents were concerned about my future and decided I should learn something practical; who knew what kind of life lay ahead? It was fortunate that no one knew it at that time. I wasn't 14 years old and there was still some hope that this horrible situation would end one day. I was sent to apprentice as a seamstress, to learn how to sew fancy underwear; my hands were pricked, sore and swollen, and the results of my labor minimal. I worked there for three months and since I made no progress,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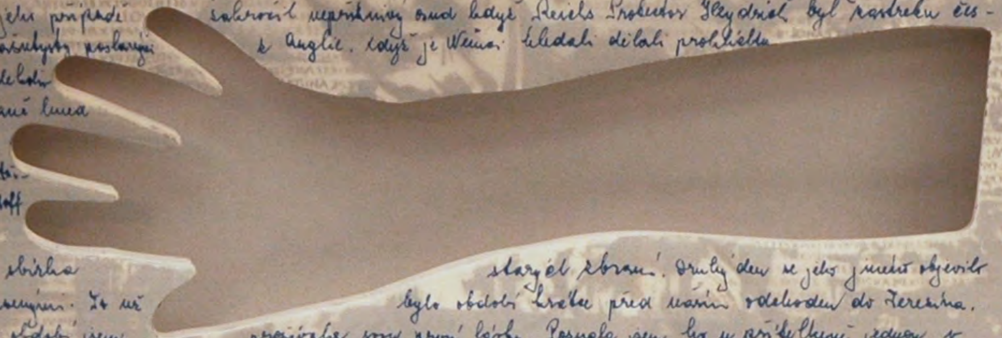
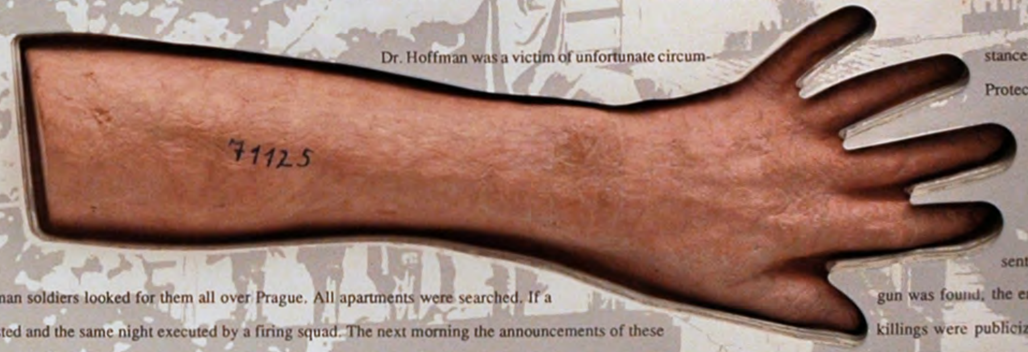
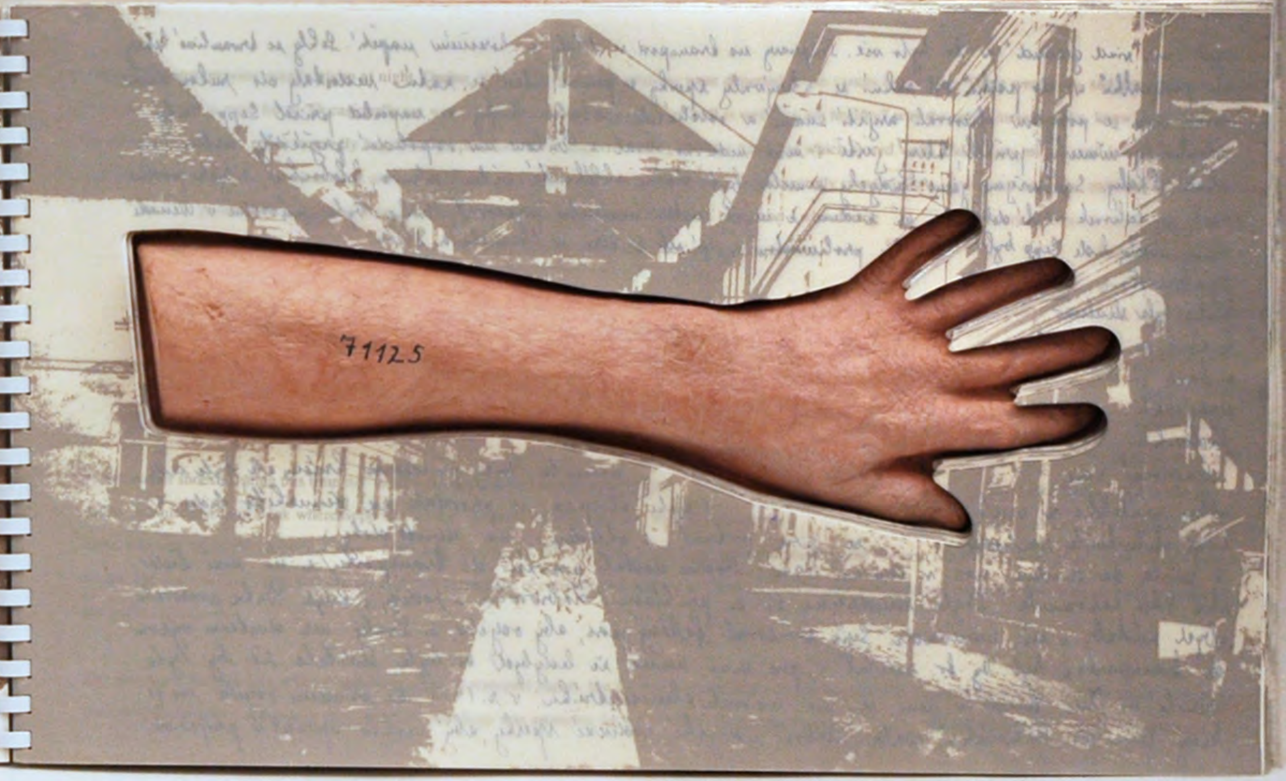


my parents decided I should learn something different. This time they apprenticed me to a dentist to become a dental technician. Dr. Kozak was not very interested in teaching me the trade; instead I was expected to come to work early to start the fire in the stove, to open and close the doors for customers and to go to the drugstore to buy condoms for the other dental technicians (who, concerned by my young age, sent their orders in sealed envelopes). Soon I was transferred to a more sympathetic dentist and I became his assistant. Even though I worked for free, the patients did not like the fact that I was a Jew, so I was fired. The last job I held before being deported was with Dr. Hoffman, a Jewish dentist. He had only a Jewish clientele and was forced to move his practice to his kitchen.



Dr. Hoffman was a victim of unfortunate circumstances. When Reich Protector Heydrich was assassinated by the Czech parachutists sent from England, German soldiers looked for them all over Prague. All apartments were searched. If a gun was found, the entire family was arrested and the same night executed by a firing squad. The next morning the announcements of these killings were publicized by the Nazis on red posters throughout the city. Dr. Hoffman was a collector of antique guns. It happened when I was present. A group of soldiers entered noisily, searched through the apartment, found the armory with old guns and took Dr. Hoffman away. The next day he was listed among the executed.

This was also the time when I first fell in love. His name was Egon and we met one Sunday afternoon in my girlfriend's house. He was 19 and I was 15. Egon played the violin beautifully; even now, when I hear Dvorak's "Humoresque" I'm reminded of him. Our love lasted only three months; he was transported to Terezin ghetto and even though I saw him later in Auschwitz, the different surroundings and circumstances changed our mutual feelings.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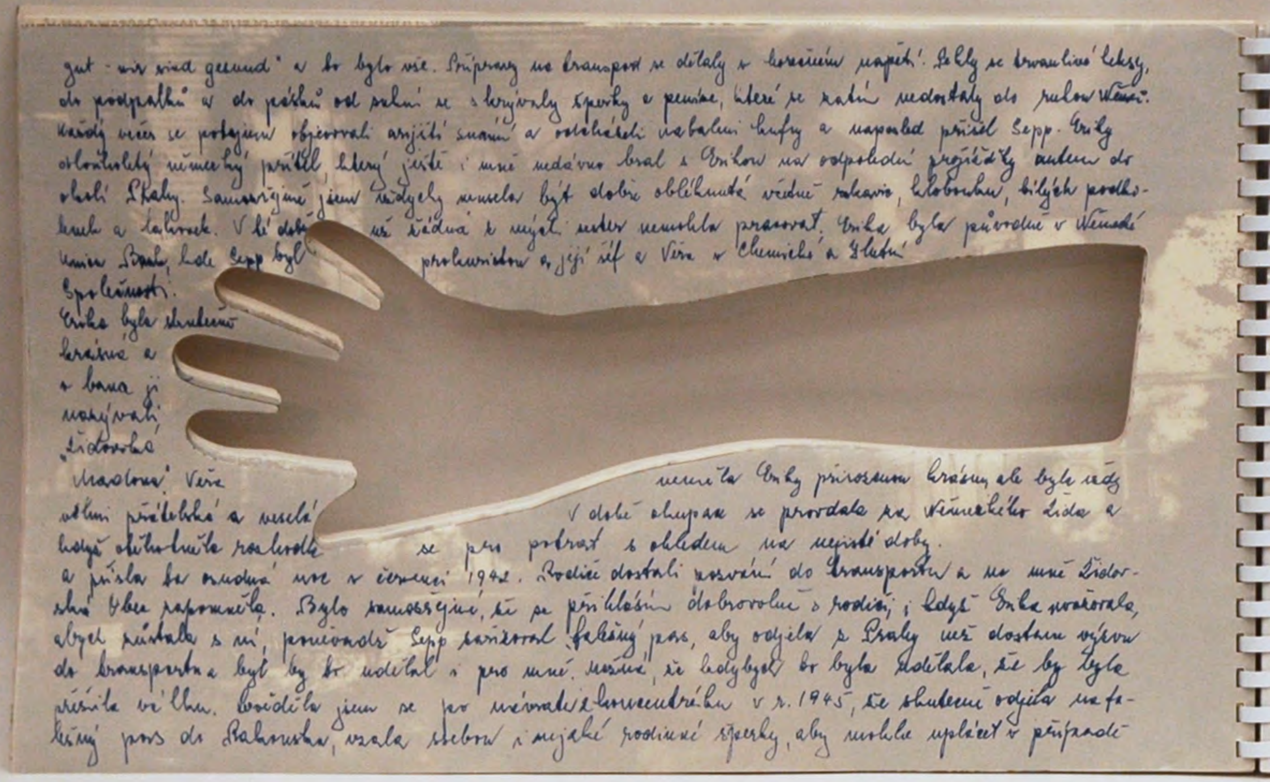
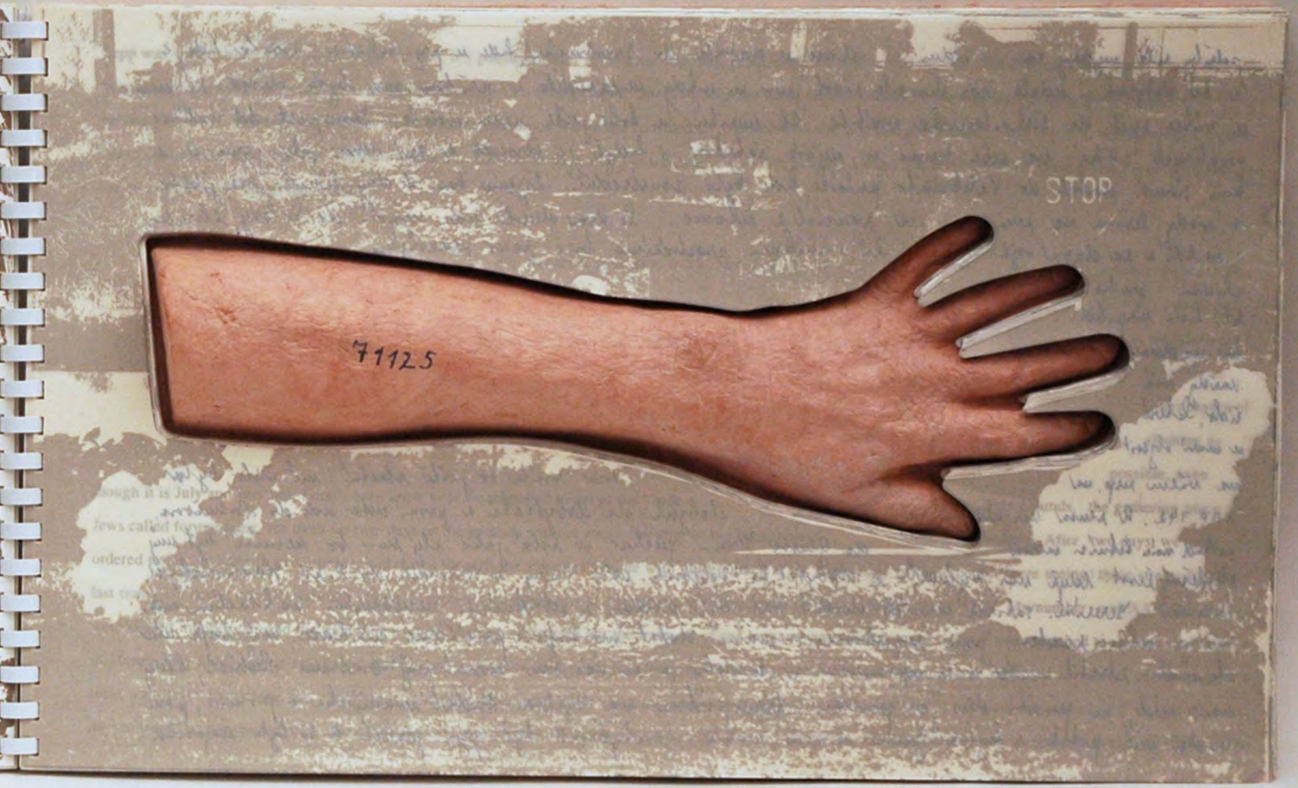


Orders for transport were usually given at night. During 1940-41 most of our relatives were deported to the camps in the East. These were very sad times; no one knew what destiny had in store for us. Occasionally we would receive a card from a relative; "All is well; we are healthy" was the entire message. We knew that it was simply a matter of time so we hurriedly began our preparations for transport - baking cookies (the kind which stored well), hiding any money and jewelry not confiscated by Germans inside belts, shoe heels and skirt hems. Every evening our non-Jewish friends would secretly come to our apartment and take suitcases filled with our possessions home with them. The last to come was Sepp - Erika's German boyfriend - who during my childhood would take me with Erika on Sunday afternoon rides in his car around Prague. (Of course, I always had to be in my finest for these excursions - white gloves, hat, white knee socks and patent leather shoes.) During this time my sisters were no longer allowed to keep their jobs. Erika had worked in the so called Bohmische Union Bank where Sepp was a Vice President and her boss and Vera worked in the Chemical and Metallurgical Company. Erika was very beautiful, like our mother - black hair, green eyes, tall and slim. In the bank her nickname was the "Jewish Madonna". Vera didn't have Erika's natural beauty but she was easy-going and always cheerful. During the occupation she married a German Jew, became pregnant and decided to have an abortion because of the political situation.

The fatal night came in July, 1942. My parents received transport papers, but my name was missing. It was decided that I should go with my parents voluntarily, even though Erika thought that I should stay with her, since Sepp was arranging for a false passport for her so she could leave Prague before being called for transport.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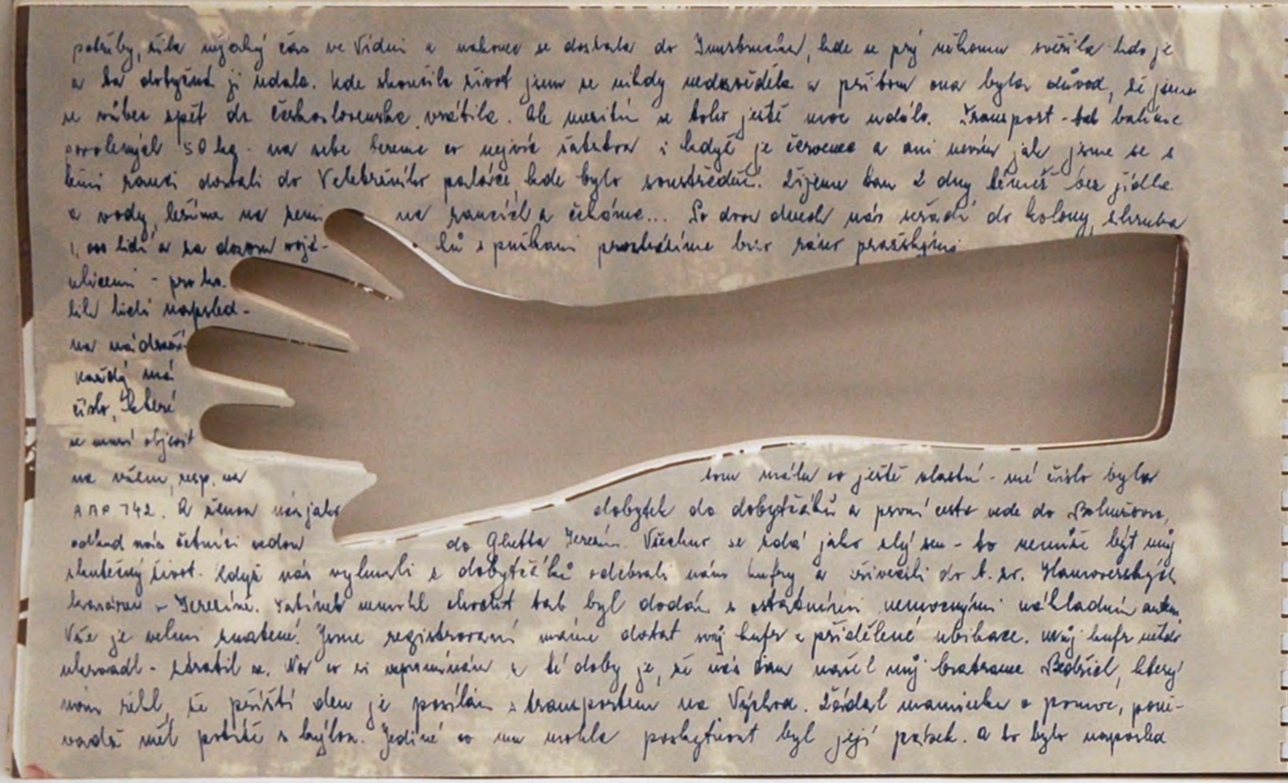
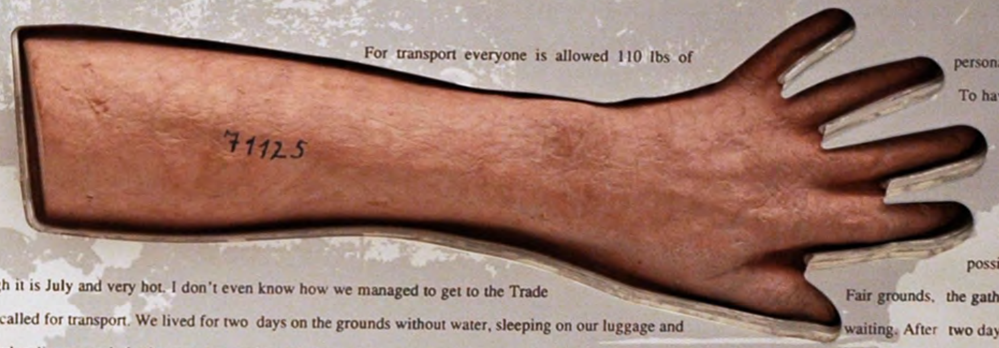
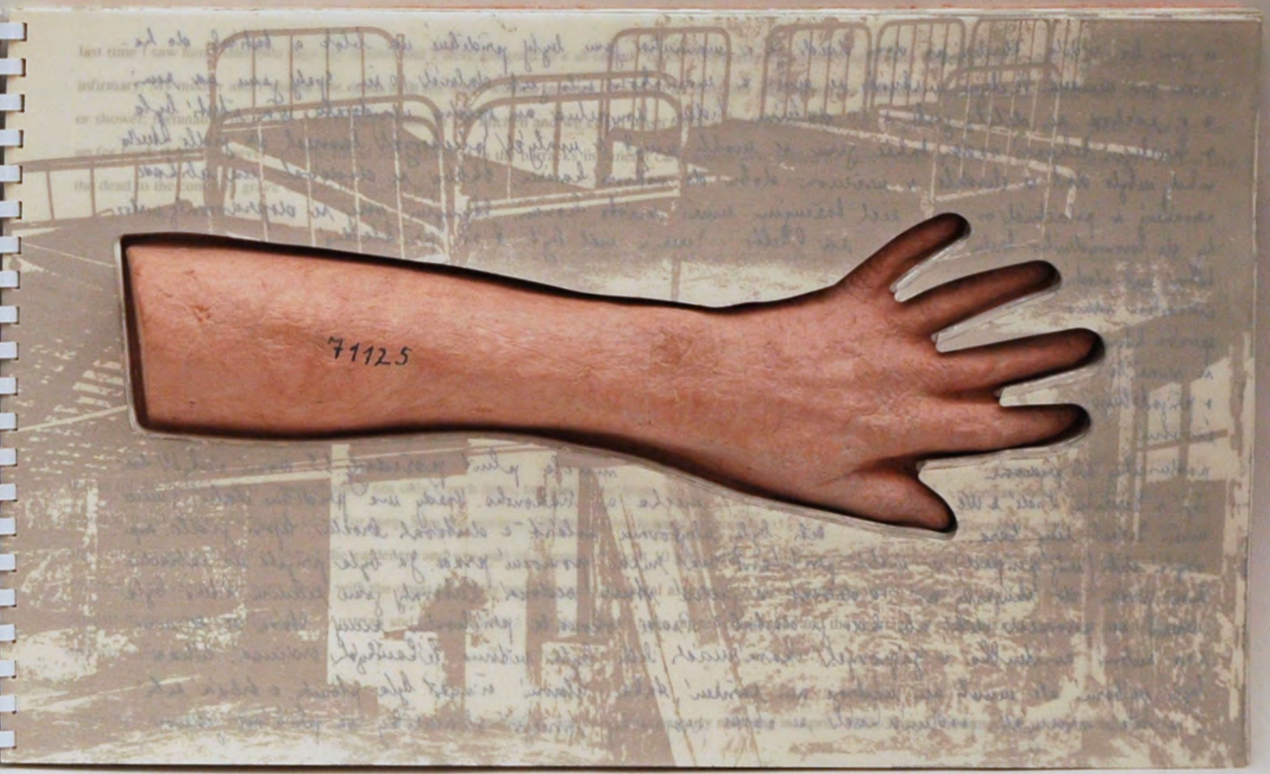


Sepp was willing to secure a passport for me also. It's possible that if I had gone with her, Erika might have survived the war. In 1945, upon my retrun from concentration camp, I found out that Erika indeed left for Austria with a false passport. She took with her some family jewelry so she had something to bribe people with, if needed. She lived in Vienna for a while, then moved to Innsbrook where she confided to someone who she was and that person turned her in to the authorities. I never found out how she died. The only reason I returned to Czechoslovakia after the war was to find her, because I knew the rest of my immediate family was dead. But before all this many things happened.



For transport everyone is allowed 110 lbs of personal possessions. To have enough to wear later on we wear as many layers of clothing as possible, even though it is July and very hot. I don't even know how we managed to get to the Trade Fair grounds, the gathering place for Jews called for transport. We lived for two days on the grounds without water, sleeping on our luggage and waiting. After two days, we were ordered to line up early in the morning, and march through the streets of Prague with guns pointed at us. How many of these people were seeing these streets for the last time? We ended up at the railroad station. Everyone was assigned a number that had to appear on all of our meager possessions. My number was AAP 742. We were herded into boxcars and the train took us to Bohusovic.. When we left the train, all of our luggage was taken from us and we were marched to Hannover barracks in Terezin. My father couldn't walk and was trucked with other sick people into the camp. In the barracks we registered and were supposed to receive our luggage, but mine was "lost". Everything was very chaotic. The only thing I remember about this time is that my cousin Bedrich found us upon our arrival and told us that the next day he would be transported to the East. He asked my mother for help, since he was in a lot of pain with hernia. All she could do was to give him her belt. That was the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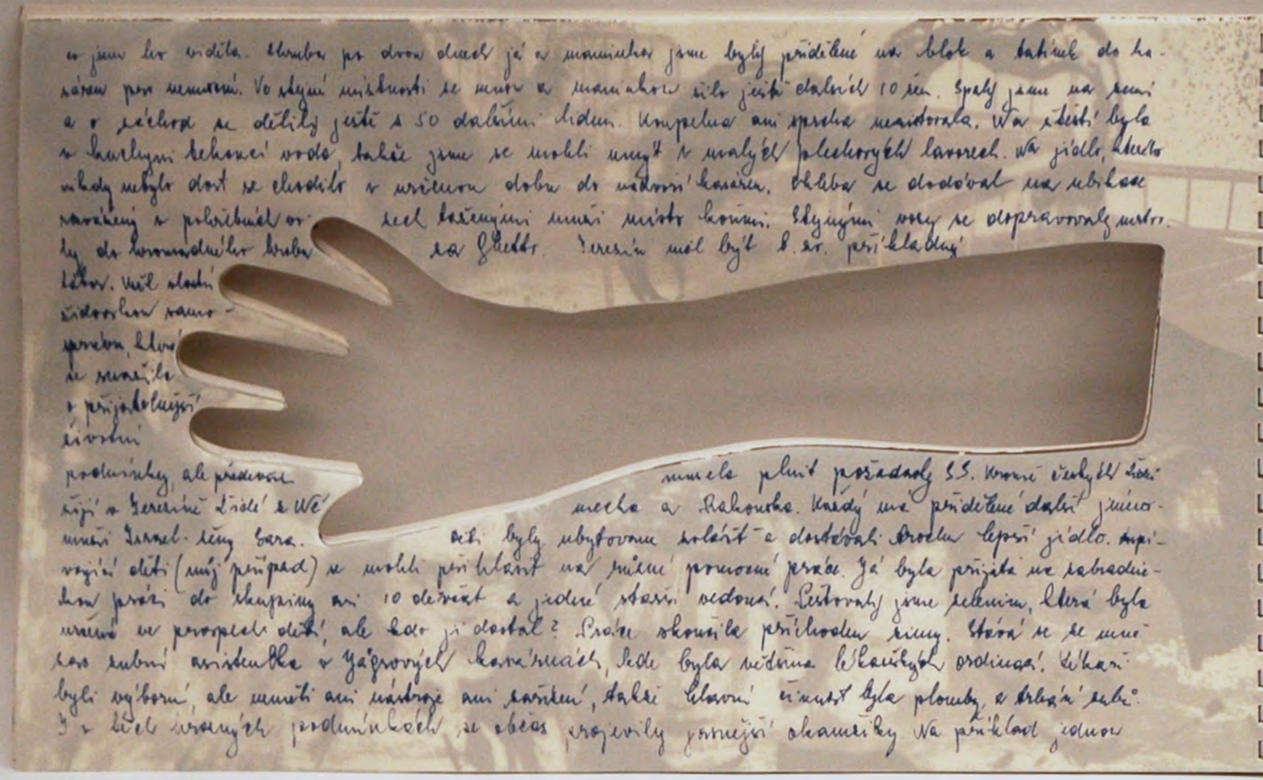
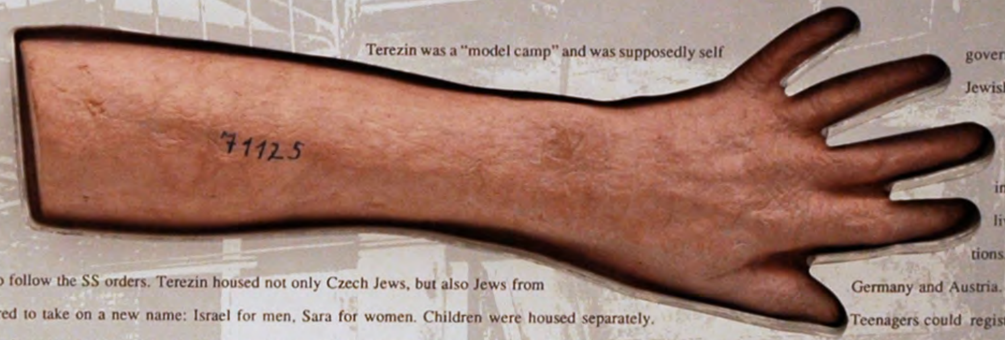
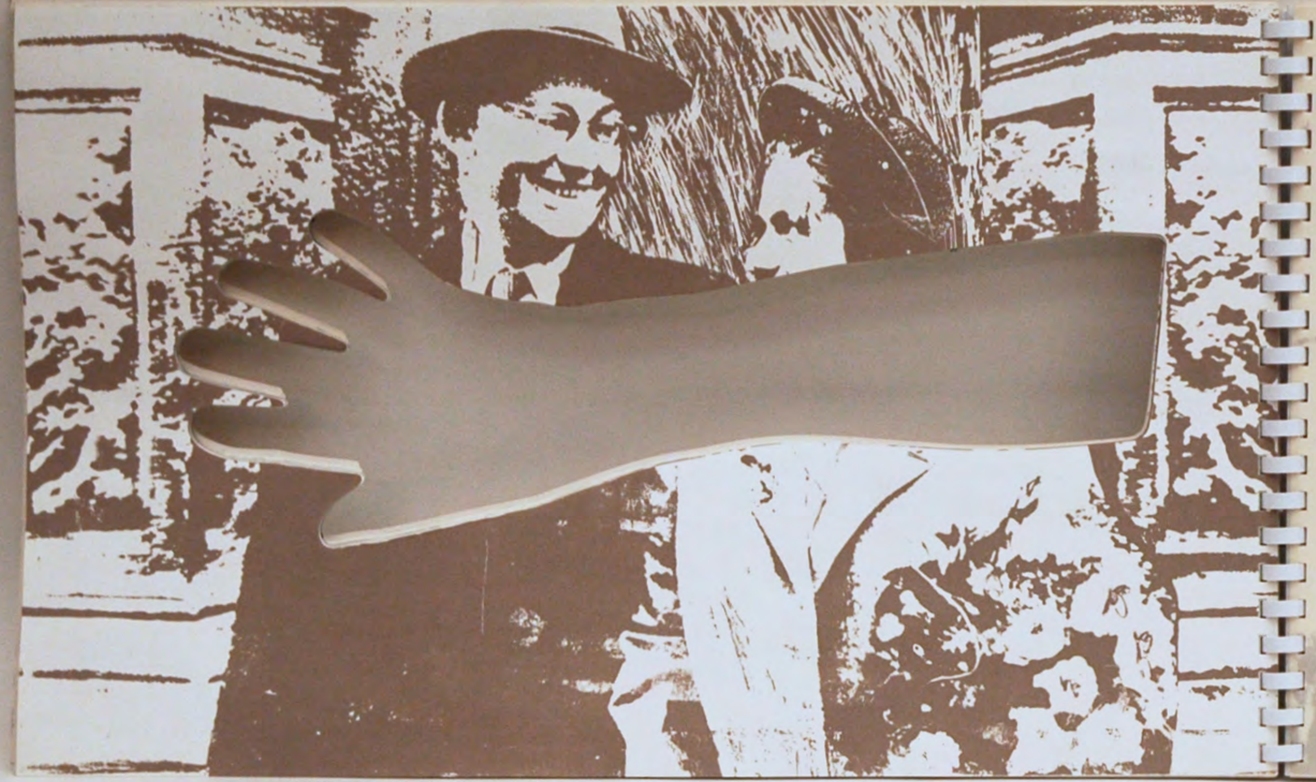


last time I saw him. After two days my mother and I were assigned to a so called "block" (formerly a two story apartment building). My father was sent to the infirmary. My mother and I shared one room with ten other women inmates. We slept on the floor and shared the bathroom with 50 people. There was nowhere to bathe or shower; fortunately there was cold running water in the kitchen and we could wash up in a small metal basin. At assigned times we went to the ghetto square to line up for food; there was never enough. Bread was delivered to the barracks in funeral carts which were pulled by men instead of horses. The same carts were used to take the dead to the common grave outside the ghetto walls.



Terezin was a "model camp" and was supposedly self governed by the Jewish Religious Community which tried to improve our living conditions. However, it had to follow the SS orders. Terezin housed not only Czech Jews, but also Jews from Germany and Austria. Everyone was required to take on a new name: Israel for men, Sara for women. Children were housed separately. Teenagers could register to work as apprentices. I was accepted as one of the gardeners and was part of a group of about 10 girls with an older leader. We sowed vegetables, supposedly to benefit the children in the camp. This work ended with the onset of winter and I became a "dental assistant" in Jager barracks, which housed most of the medical offices. The dentists in the camp were first class - Austrian and German Jews - but they didn't have proper equipment and the shortage of materials reduced their practice to filling and extracting teeth.

There were even a few bright moments under these terrible conditions. For example, one early morning in April, 1943, Tomas, a young boy who was a member of

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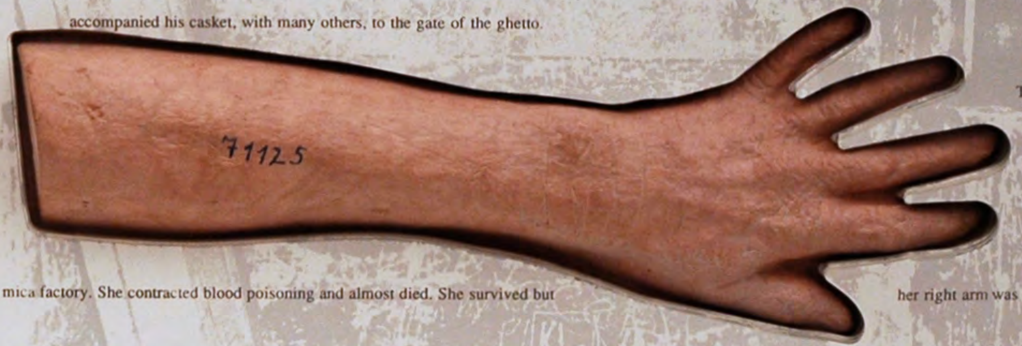
Ghetto Wache (Jewish police), brought me a bouquet of lilacs which he'd picked. Had he been caught, this act of kindness would have cost him his life. Saying goodbye to another friend was a very sad time. I gave him, as a keepsake, the only thing I had left from my childhood - a little gold ring. Neither one of these boys survived the camps.

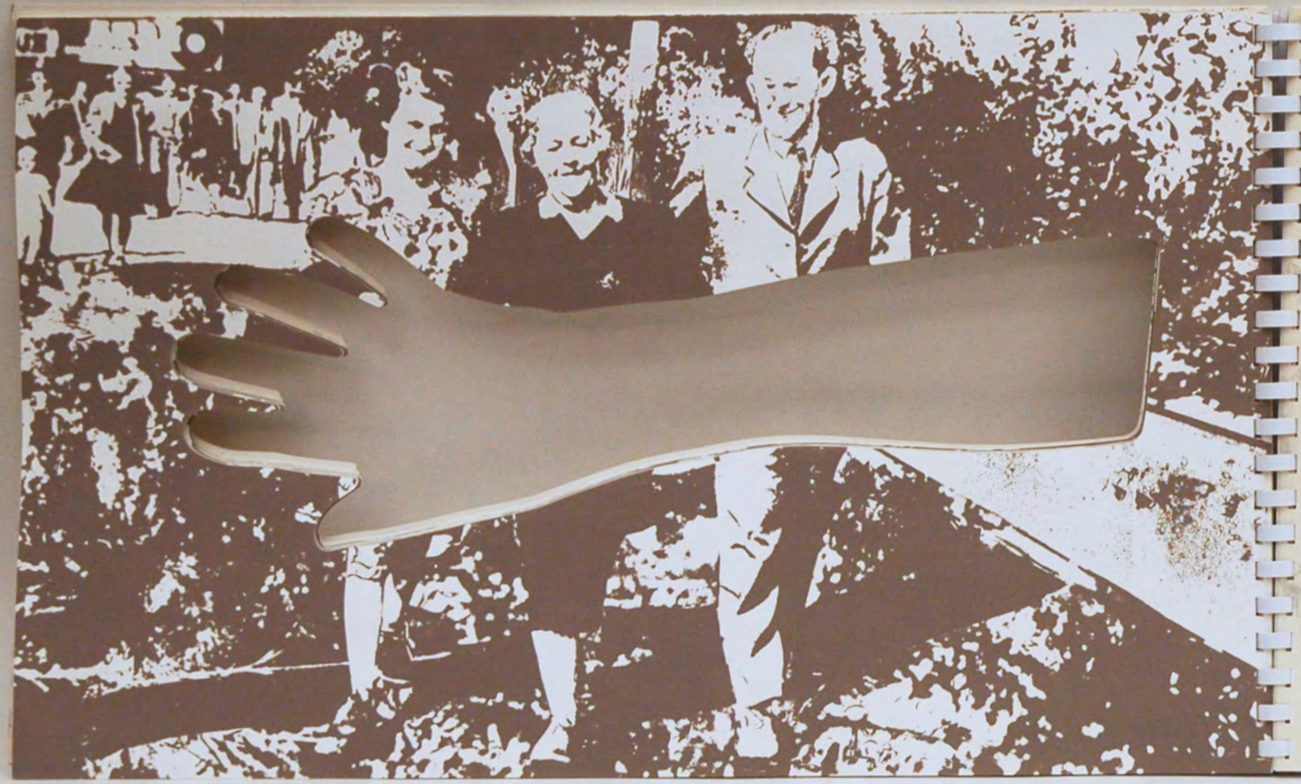
In 1943 Vera and her husband arrived in Terezin and she reported that Erica had been successful in obtaining a false passport. The same year my father died and we accompanied his casket, with many others, to the gate of the ghetto.

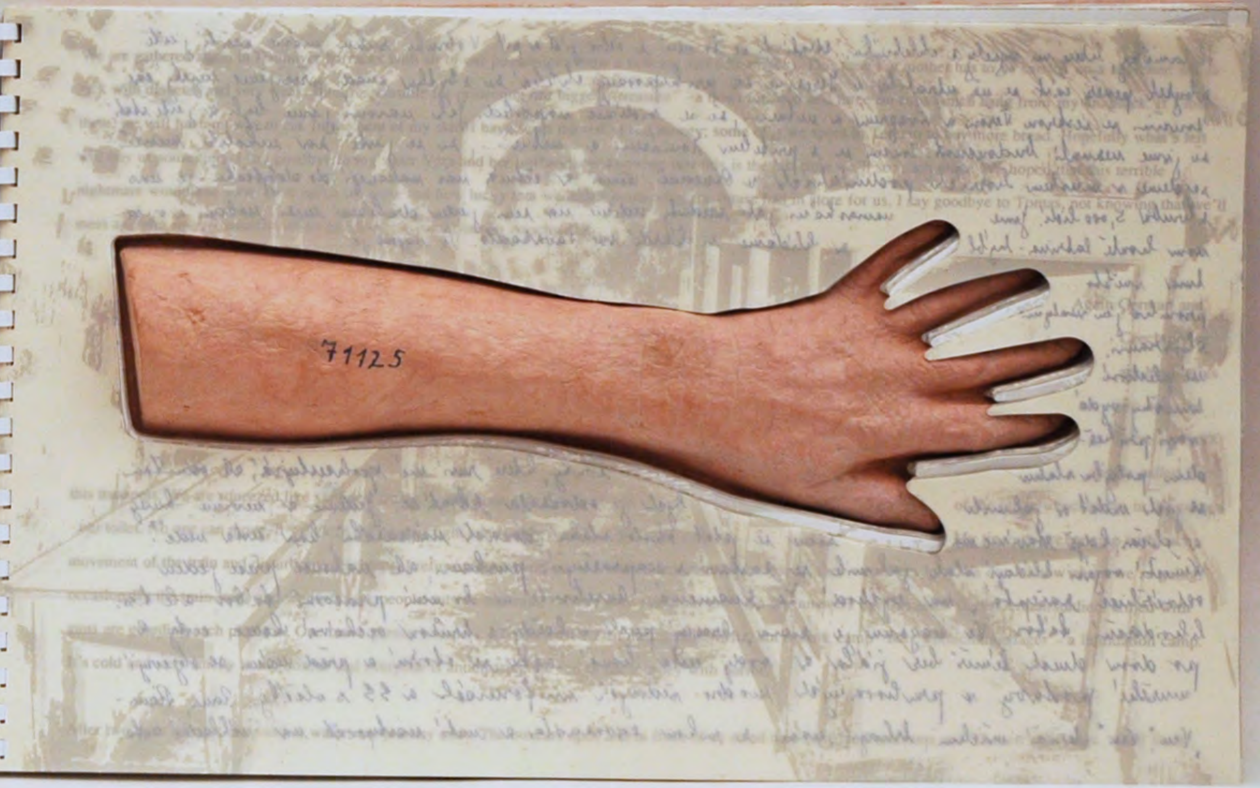


Then another misfortune: Vera was injured working in the camp mica factory. She contracted blood poisoning and almost died. She survived but her right arm was paralyzed.

November 11, 1943. The German and Czech police in the ghetto ordered all the prisoners to the Bohusovic meadow. No one knew why. Supposedly fifteen prisoners had escaped and the police decided to count the entire population of the camp (approximately 40,000 people). It took all day and all night and they still didn't manage to get the exact count. Maybe this was one of the many tricks to tyrannize and dehumanize the prison population.

December, 1943. It's our turn now to move on, supposedly to another work camp. To whom can we send the card "Es geht mir gut, Ich bin gesund" (I'm well, I'm healthy). This time only my mother receives transport orders and I volunteer to accompany her. I'm 16 years old.

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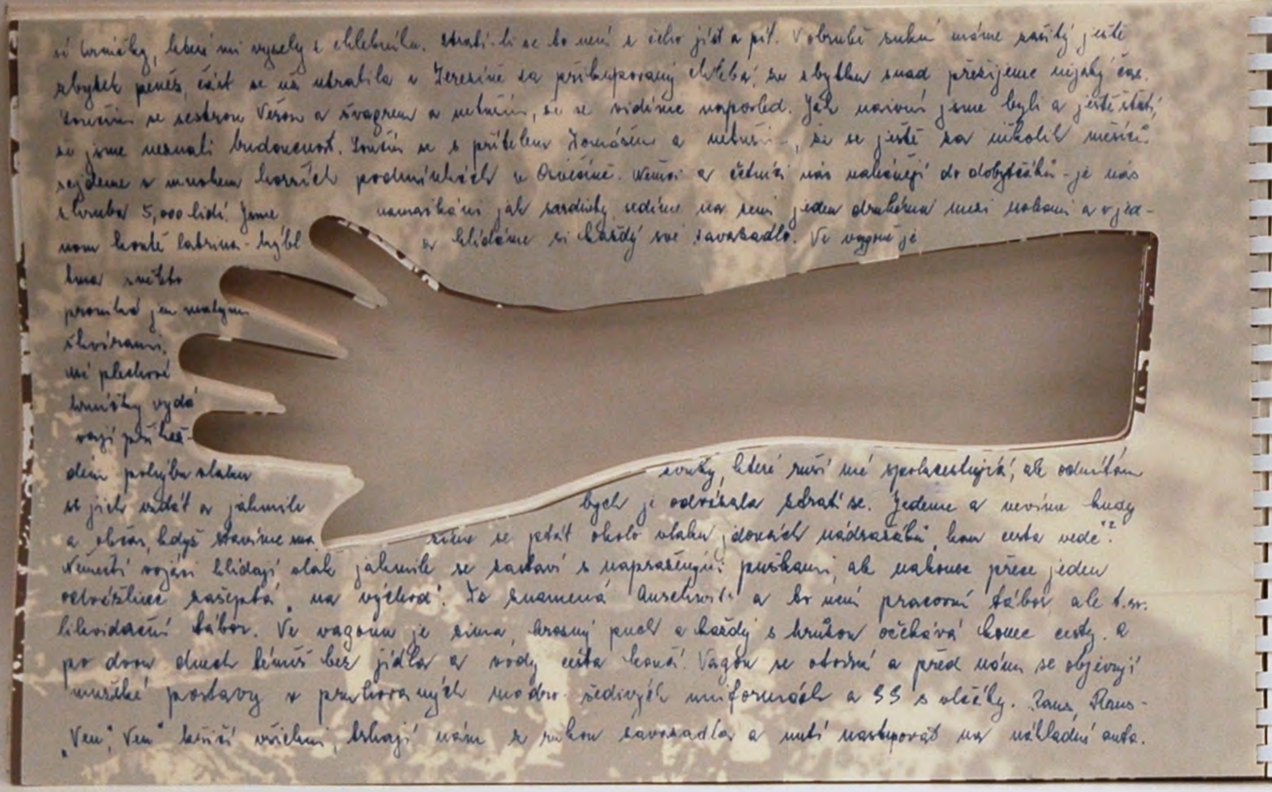

We are gathered again in Hannover barracks with all of our possessions (now a suitcase and a knapsack). This time my mother has to be carried on a stretcher; she is sick with diabetes and very weak. I am responsible for protecting our biggest "treasure" - a bowl for food and three tin cups which hang from my knapsack. If I lose them, we will have no way to eat. In the hem of my skirt I have sewn the rest of our money; some of it we spent in Terezin to buy more bread. Hopefully what's left will buy us some time. I say goodbye to my sister Vera and her husband, not knowing that this is the last time we'll see each other. We hoped that this terrible nightmare would end soon. How naive we were and how lucky that we didn't know what the future had in store for us. I say goodbye to Tomas, not knowing that we'll meet again in several months, under much worse conditions in Auschwitz.

Again German and Czech police are herding us into boxcars. There are 5,000 people called for this transport. We are squeezed like sardines, sitting on the floor, one person on top of the other; a bucket sits in the corner - our toilet. No one can move. It's dark in the boxcar; light enters only through very small openings. My tin cups are banging with each movement of the train and disturb my neighbors. I refuse to give them up; if I untie them from the knapsack, they would get lost. We don't know where we're going; occasionally the train stops and we try to ask people outside the train, "Where does this train go?" No one answers our questions since German soldiers armed with guns are guarding each platform. One brave person whispers, "To the East". That means Auschwitz, not a work camp but "Vernichtungslager"- a liquidation camp. It's cold and very smelly in the boxcar and everyone is anticipating the end of the journey with horror.

After two days without any food or water, our journey ends. The boxcars open and in front of us stand men in striped uniforms and SS men with dogs. "Out! Out!",


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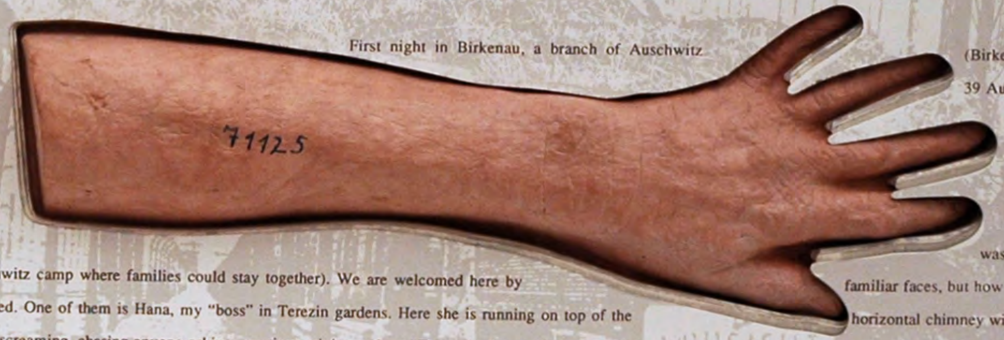
they all yell, ripping the luggage from our hands and forcing us onto trucks. It's beginning to get dark and it's very cold. Everywhere I look I can see only the barbed wire fences and guard towers. We enter the camp with the familiar gate sign, "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work Makes You Free) and are taken to the barracks. The barracks remind me of stables. Men and women are separated. Inside the barracks, which are called "blocks", are three levels of wooden bunk beds like shelves running along the length of the building. Each bed is for eight people. In the middle is a very long horizontal chimney. The floor is dirt and at the end are the very smelly latrines for use at night.



First night in Birkenau, a branch of Auschwitz

(Birkenau was one of 39 Auschwitz camps set up in September 1939 to house inmates from Terezin. It was the only Auschwitz camp where families could stay together). We are welcomed here by familiar faces, but how they have changed. One of them is Hana, my "boss" in Terezin gardens. Here she is running on top of the horizontal chimney with a cane in hand, screaming, chasing anyone asking questions, giving orders, "Take all of your clothes off. Take your shoes off and exchange them. Tomorrow they'll take everything. If you give up your things voluntarily, some of it will be returned to you". We, the new arrivals are at the bottom of the ladder to be beaten and kicked mercilessly and endlessly by the other prisoners who have been here longer. First I exchange my leather boots for wooden clogs and gradually the rest of my clothes for dirty worn out rags. Orders are given to lie down on the wooden bunk beds and go to sleep. I lie down and am so unhappy, sad and lost that I can't even cry. I'm 16 years old and when I ask "Why?", no one answers. This is when I lost my faith in humankind and my character was changed for the rest of my life.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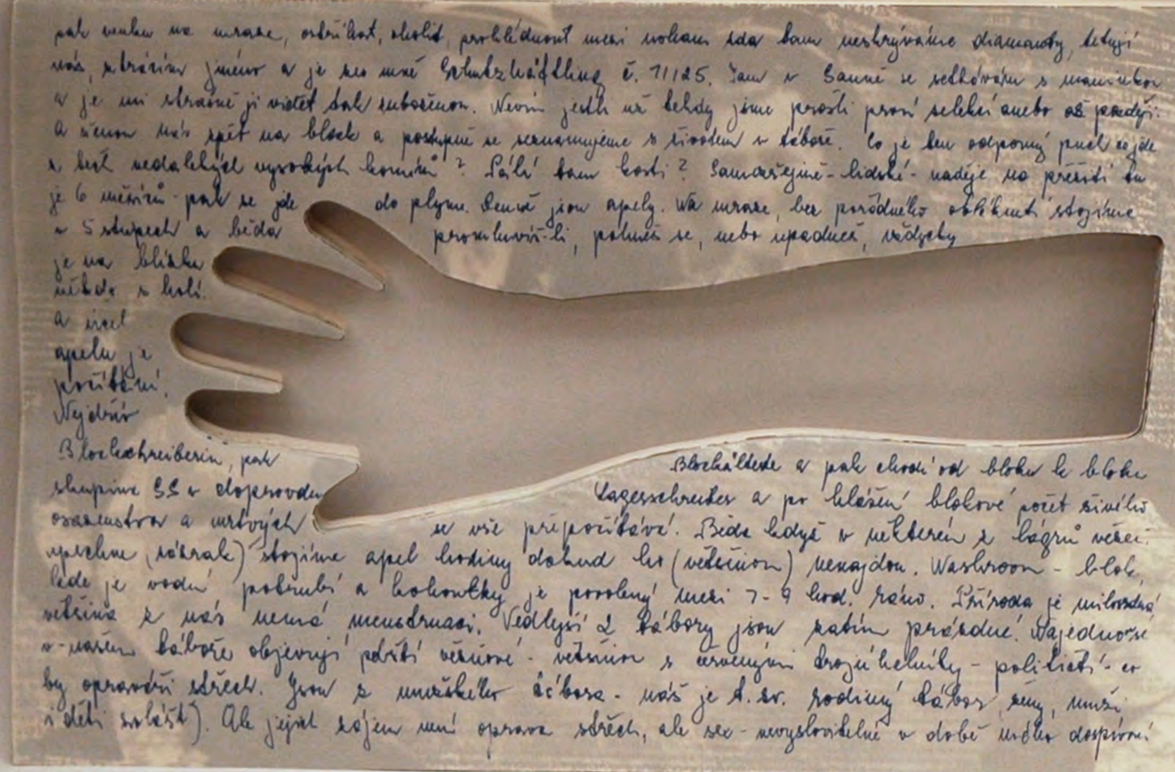
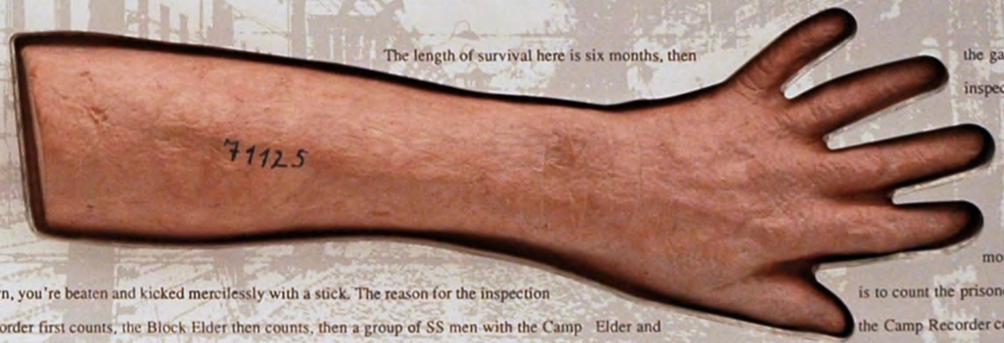
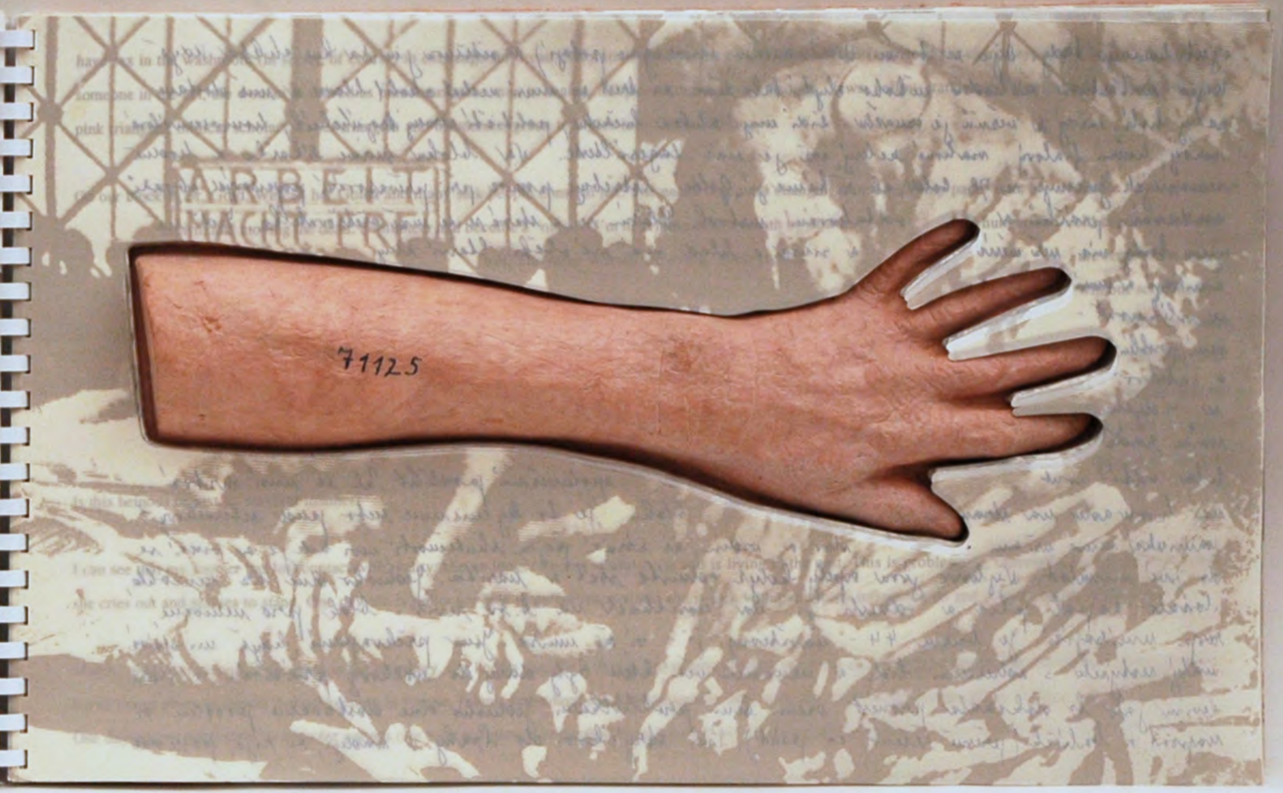


In the morning we go to the showers. We didn't know then that there was a choice of an ice cold shower or cyclon gas. Everything must be "Schnell! Schnell!" ("Quickly! Quickly!") or "On the double". We strip, shower, wait naked outside in the freezing cold, to have our heads shaved. Polish prisoners under SS supervision inspect our private parts for hidden diamonds. We are tatooed, lose our names; I become Schutzhaftling (prisoner in protective custody) number 71125. In the showers I meet my mother and I'm horrified; she looks wretched. I don't remember if the first selection happened then or later. Back to the block and we're beginning to get acquainted with life in the camp. What is the terrible stench emanating from the tall chimney stacks in the neighboring camp? Are they burning bones? Yes, humans.



The length of survival here is six months, then the gas chamber. Daily inspections. We stand in the freezing cold with almost no clothing. If you move, speak or fall down, you're beaten and kicked mercilessly with a stick. The reason for the inspection is to count the prisoners: the Block Recorder first counts, the Block Elder then counts, then a group of SS men with the Camp Elder and the Camp Recorder count again. They go block by block. After the Block Recorder gives a count of living and dead, the process starts again and everything gets re-counted. If a prisoner escapes (by what miracle?), we stand inspection for hours until the escaped prisoner is found.

We are allowed to use the washroom only between 7 and 9 am. Mother nature is more merciful; most of us here have stopped menstruating. The two camps next to Birkenau are empty. Suddenly Polish prisoners appear in the camp as thatchers. They are from the men's camp (ours is a family camp; men, women and children are living in the same camp, but in separate blocks). Their interest is not to thatch roofs, but to have sex; a dirty word in my childhood, even more disgusting here. They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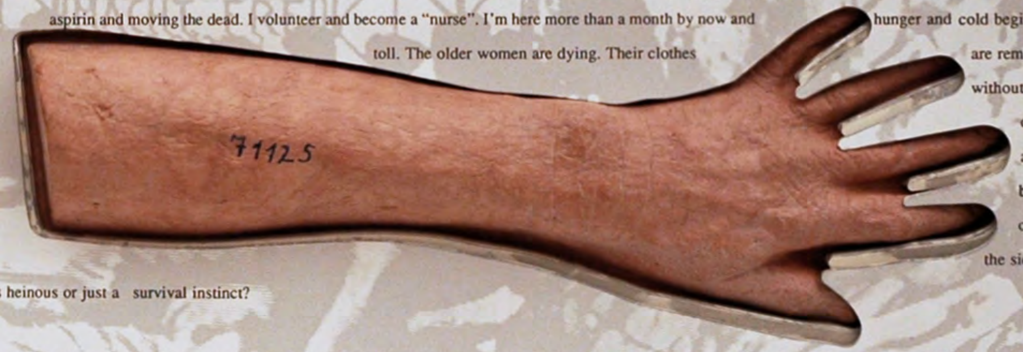
have sex in the washroom (in secret, of course) in exchange for bread. If by some unfortunate coincidence a Kapo (a prisoner in charge appointed by the SS) catches someone in the act, the woman is shaved as punishment; the man is beaten. All prisoners must wear badges - Jews, yellow stars; political prisoners, red triangles; gays, pink triangles; biblical scholars, violet triangles and murderers, green triangles (our Camp Elder).

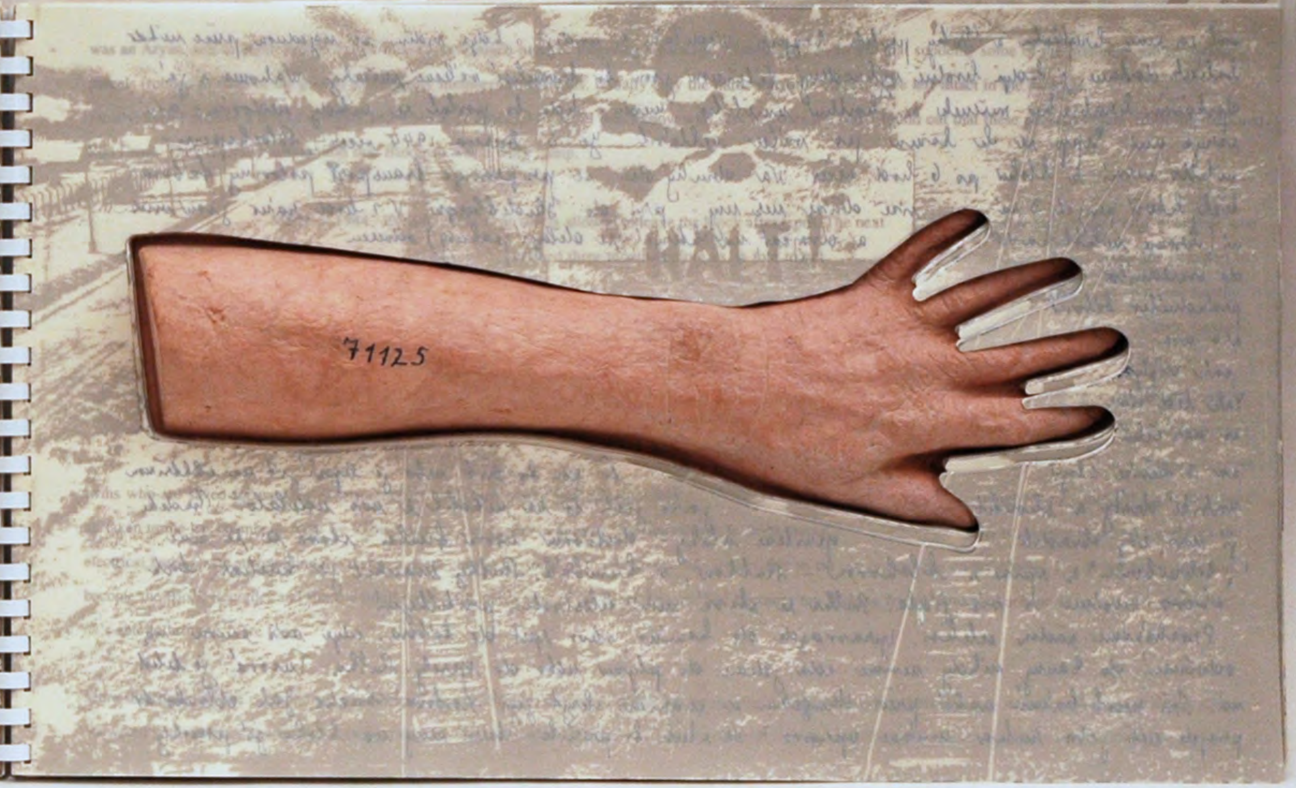
On our block is Dr. Gold. We call her Golda and many sick people come to her. She needs help with changing bandages (only paper ones are available here), giving out aspirin and moving the dead. I volunteer and become a "nurse". I'm here more than a month by now and hunger and cold begin to take their toll. The older women are dying. Their clothes are removed and used without scruples by other prisoners, and their dead bodies dragged onto one pile on the side of the block.



Is this heinous or just a survival instinct?

I can see that my mother has lost contact with reality; she no longer knows where she is and is living in the past. This is problematic, especially during roll calls when she cries out and refuses to stand. One day she is no longer able to go for inspections; she is sick with pulmonary inflammation and is taken to the infirmary.

March, 1944. I'm visiting my mother in the infirmary, she knows that she's dying. I'm surprised when she gives me a small notebook with names and addresses and a list of things given to friends for safekeeping in Prague. I don't know how she has managed to hold on to this little book through all the inspections and searches. One day we get permission to write for parcels (we have to follow a prescribed form letter). I write to my uncle in Prague in hopes that he is still alive since his wife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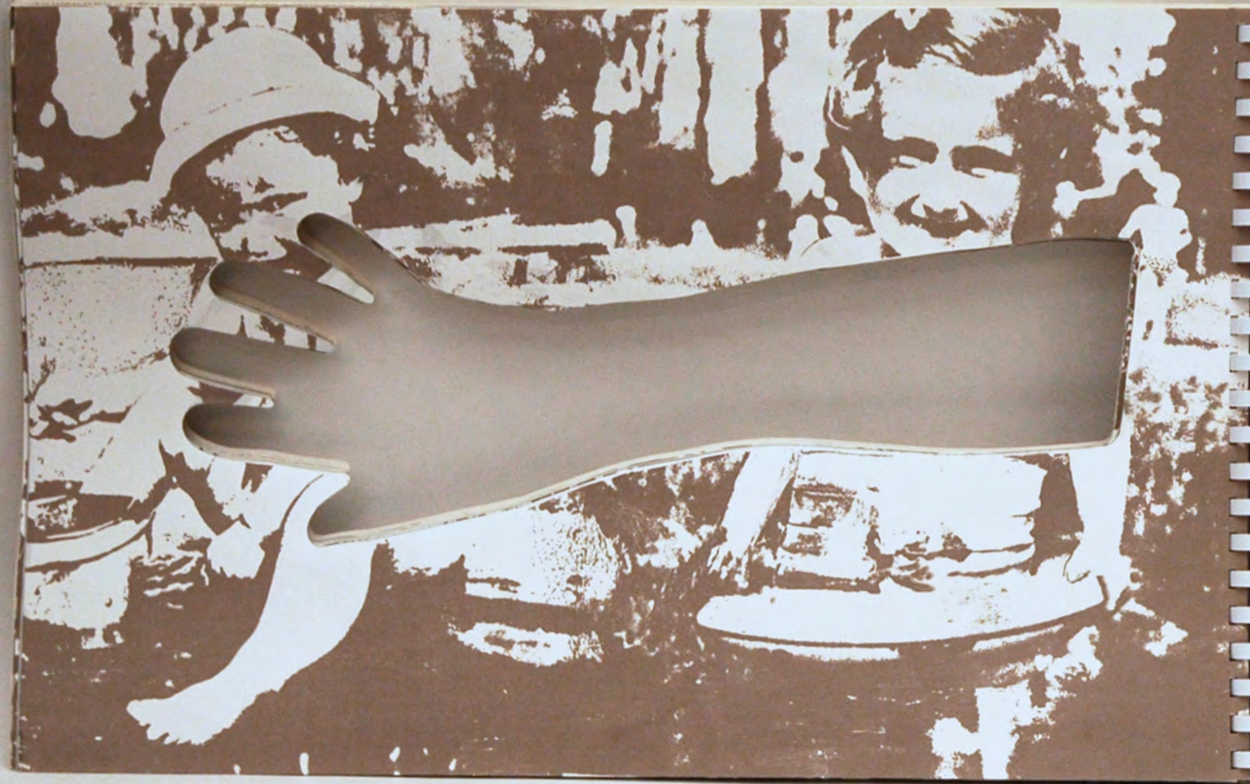
měl za zády křesťanka a Ariky přítel - Seppovi. Nedočkám se naděje, i když vidím, že nejsou přece někteří balíček dostanou i když hrstku vyhradený. Většinou jsou to krackliše válečné sušenky. Nakonec i já dostávám krabičku sušenek a kostku umělého medu - kdo to poslal se nikdy nedozvím - ani zbývá ani Sepp se k tomu po válce nehlásil. Je 6. března 1944 večer „Blockšperre" - nikdo nesmí z bloku po 6 hod. večer. Na druhý den se připravuje transport polovinu tábora, těch kteří přijeli 3 měsíce dříve než my - pěšky do Heidelbergu. V 7 hod. ráno jsou všichni (kromě některých VIP a dvojčat, na kterých se dělají pokusy) odvezeni do sousedního pomocného tábora v voze, pak dopoledne tak hned víme co nás čeká za 3 měsíce. Stojí to za to žít nebo je lepší jít na elektrický ostnatý drátěný a skončit jako jsme to už někdo z nás udělalo.[2] Pozdě-ji nás, aby obsadili uprázdněné bloky - dostáváme novou funkci - stává se ze mne „Schreiberin" a spíše s blokovou - Rutkou, u kancelářského stolu. Rutky manžel je kuchař, tak občas máme i víc jídla. Rutka se stává mou celoživotní přítelkyní.

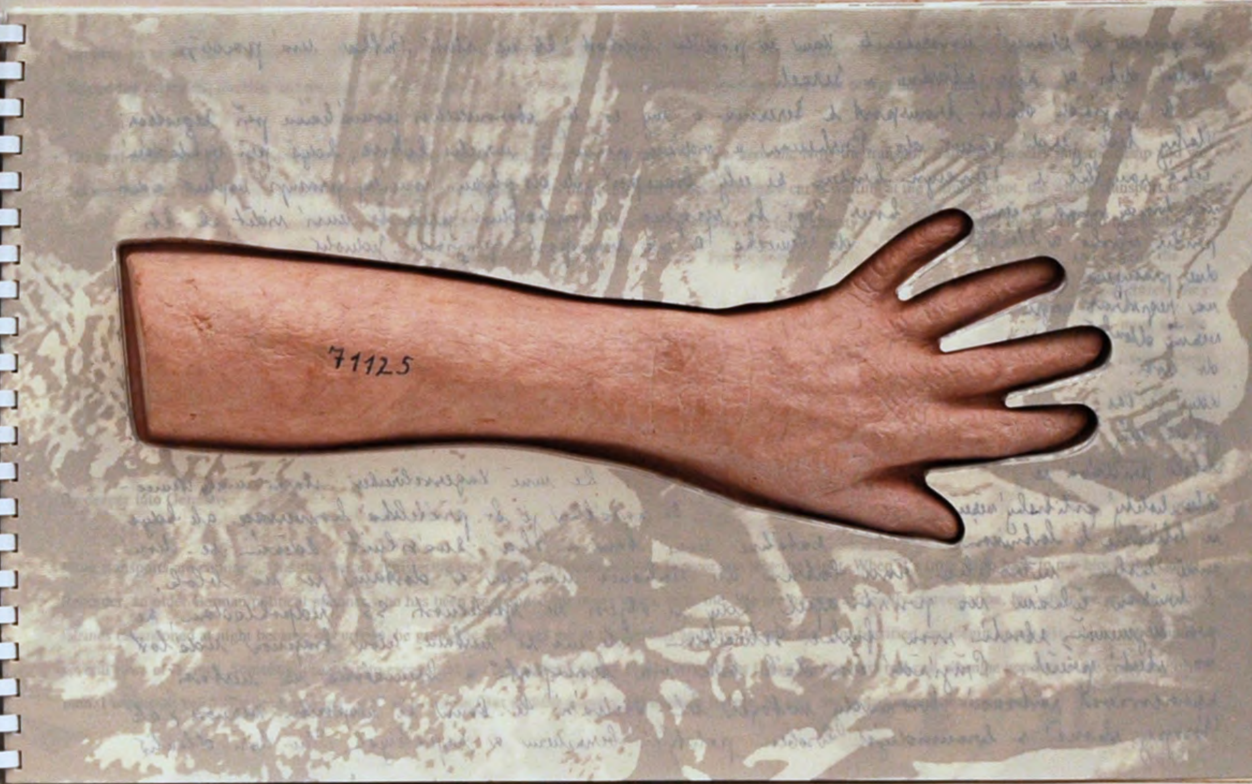
Proděláváme žádný selekcí. Vpravo jde do krematoria, vlevo zpět do tábora, když nás svlékají na odvšivení do sauny nikdy nevíme zda jdeme do plynu nebo do sprchy. Rutka Tucová je těhotná. Při probíhání nahé před Mengelem se snažíme skrýt její rostoucí břicho. Jak dlouho to projde než jeho kolem uvidí operovat? Na štěstí to přežila - stojí zeny na bloku jí pomohly

was an Aryan, and to Sepp, Erika's friend. I don't have much hope of receiving a package, even though I can see that suddenly some of the prisoners are receiving parcels (robbed of most of the goods) from family members and friends. Usually only the hard, war-time crackers are left intact in the package. Finally, even I receive a box of crackers and a block of artificial honey. I don't know who sent it. After the war I found out that these packages came from International Red Cross. They received information that Birkenau was a work camp.

March 6, 1944 - Evening curfew, no one is allowed to leave the block after 6 pm. The next day half of the camp, everyone who arrived three months before us, is told to get ready for transport to set up a new family camp, supposedly in Heidelberg. At daybreak everyone in this group (except twins who are saved for medical experiments) is loaded on trucks and driven to the neighboring camp. At night they were all taken to the gas chambers. Now we know what we can expect in another three months. Is it worth living or is it better to throw oneself on the electrical barbed wire surrounding the camp, a death chosen by some of the prisoners. We are divided so we can occupy the empty blocks. I'm given a new function. I become the Block Recorder and share a small room with Rutka who is the Block Leader. She becomes my lifelong friend. Rutka's husband is a cook and sometimes he's able to bring us more food.

More selections. To the right, the gas chamber; to the left, back to the camp. When we are ordered to the showers for delousing, we never know if we're going to be showered with water or gas. Ruth Tucova is pregnant. During selections, when we have to run naked in front of Mengele and his cohorts we try to keep her close

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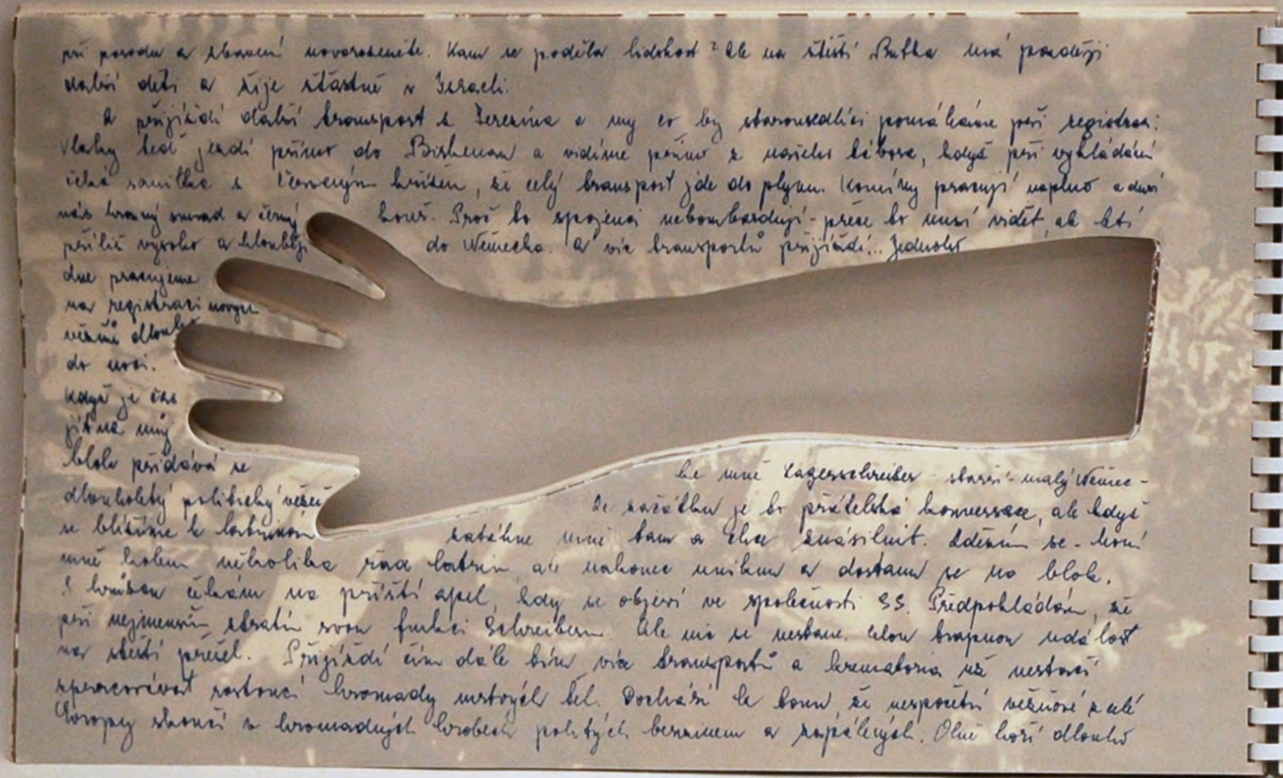
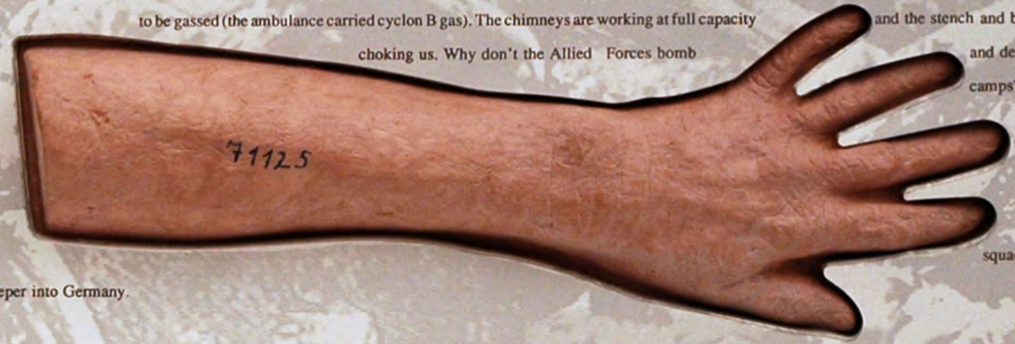
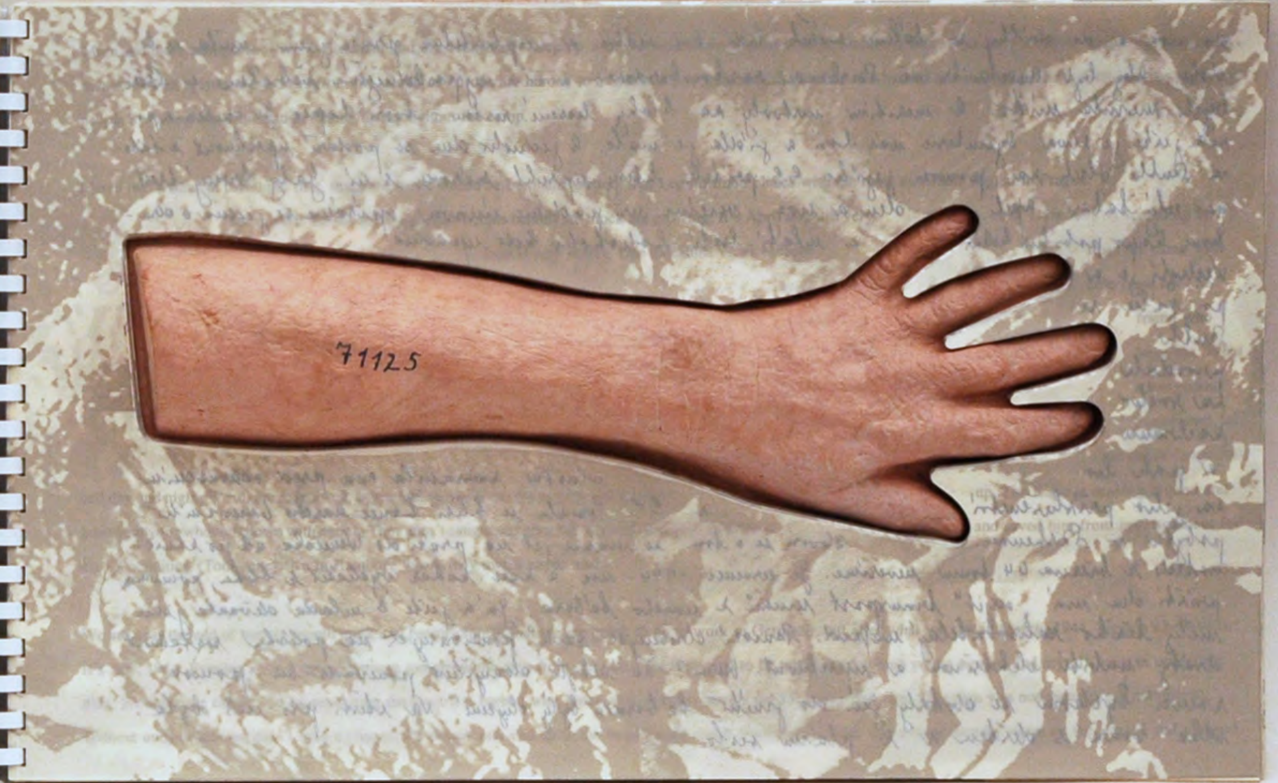


between us to hide her growing belly. He is the one who points his thumb left or right. Luckily she was not discovered. When her time came, other women on the block helped her during the birthing and disposed of the newborn. Did we loose our humanity? But Ruth survived, has other children and is now living in Israel.

The next transport arrives and we, as the established residents, help to register and tattoo the new arrivals. Now the transport trains go directly into the camp and we can see from our block past the barbed wire, the trains' arrivals. We know that if the Red Cross ambulance car is waiting at the train depot, the whole transport is going to be gassed (the ambulance carried cyclon B gas). The chimneys are working at full capacity and the stench and black smoke are choking us. Why don't the Allied Forces bomb and destroy the camps? Surely they must see the camps when they fly over; instead all the squadrons of planes fly deeper into Germany.



More transports are coming... One day we are registering newly arrived prisoners from Terezin late into the night. When it's time to go back to my block, the Camp Recorder, an older German political prisoner who has been imprisoned for many years, joins me. We are having a friendly conversation, but when we get near the latrines (abandoned at night because of curfew), he grabs me and drags me to the latrines and tries to rape me. I'm horrified and begin to run. He chases me around several rows of latrines. Somehow I manage to escape and get myself back to my block. With fright I wait for the next roll call when he appears in the company of SS men. I anticipate that I'll at least lose my "job" as Recorder. But nothing happen. Fortunately for me, he lets the embarrassing situation pass.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do noci a do dálky se bálem mrtvých lidí. Dvě velká a nepřetržitá přání jsem měla v té
době. Aby byl Auschwitz ve Birkenau rozbombardován a i s nejposlednějším ubohým v Praze
bych měnila místo. A mezitím mrtvoly na bloky rostou - tvoří lopce. Je duben a po-
řád ještě je zima. Dysenterie nás loví a jídla je málo. A jednoho dne se podaří uprchnout s tebou
Ruth Vlček za pomoci jejího SS přítele, který uprchl society s ní. Celý tvrdý trest
pro celý bábor - apel dnem a noc - všichni už jsou únavou, opírají se jeden o dru-
hého, kapo probíhá kolem a mlátí lidi kolikrokolik kdo upadne.

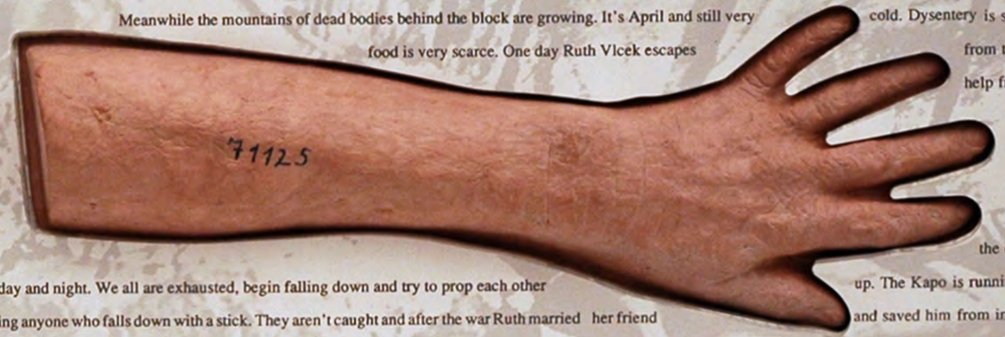
Uvažuji, že
po válce se
Ruth
provdala
za svého
zachránce
a pak ho
za jeho příslušnictví
pobytu v Birkenau.

Ve dvanáctém dni po ještě odroznění
v SS. Pomalu se blíží konec našeho bývalého
Stoví se o tom, že máme jít na práci do Německa, ale po zkuše-
nostech z března 44 tomu nevěříme. Je červenec 1944 - noc a zase kolem vyhlášení z bloku, pomocná
přání dne má „odjít" transport mužů z našeho tábora. Ja a ještě 3 mladé dívčáky jsme
měly lístky registrovaly odpad. Pomocí obrovských soudů pomocných na podlaze roztahovat
dráty nabité elektřinou a uprchnout. Kam? To nebylo dlouhodobé, používali bez pomoci
zvenčí bychom se dostaly jen do jiného tábora a byly chyceny. Na štěstí pro nás byla
velká bouře s deštěm a z plánu sešlo

More and more transports arrive at Birkenau and the ovens can't keep up with the mountains of dead bodies. Finally, a more expedient solution: transports of unknown numbers of unregistered prisoners from the whole of Europe are herded to a common pit, doused with gasoline and burned alive. The fires burn deep into the night and people's wailing and lamentation haunts us throughout the camp.

I have two wishes at that time: first, that Auschwitz would be bombed; second, that I could trade places with the most miserable beggar in Prague.

Meanwhile the mountains of dead bodies behind the block are growing. It's April and still very cold. Dysentery is spreading and food is very scarce. One day Ruth Vlcek escapes from the camp with help from her SS friend who joins her. What a horrendous punishment for the entire camp: roll call day and night. We all are exhausted, begin falling down and try to prop each other up. The Kapo is running around and beating anyone who falls down with a stick. They aren't caught and after the war Ruth married her friend and saved him from imprisonment for his SS activities. (Today they live in Hamburg where they own a paper mill.)



We are near the end of our six month mark and rumors spread that we are going to go to work in Germany, but after what we saw in March, 1944, we don't believe it. It's July, 1944. Evening curfew again, because tomorrow the men from our camp are supposed to be transported. Three young women and myself have an unrealistic plan. We think we can escape by separating the electrical barbed wire fence with wooden barrels used for soup delivery. This plan was not thought out completely. Without outside help we didn't have a chance; we would only end up in the neighboring camp. Fortunately, there was a huge thunder storm on the day of our planned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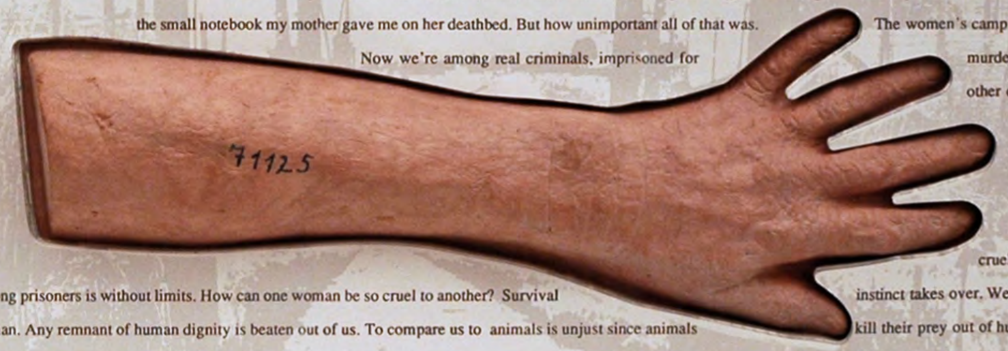
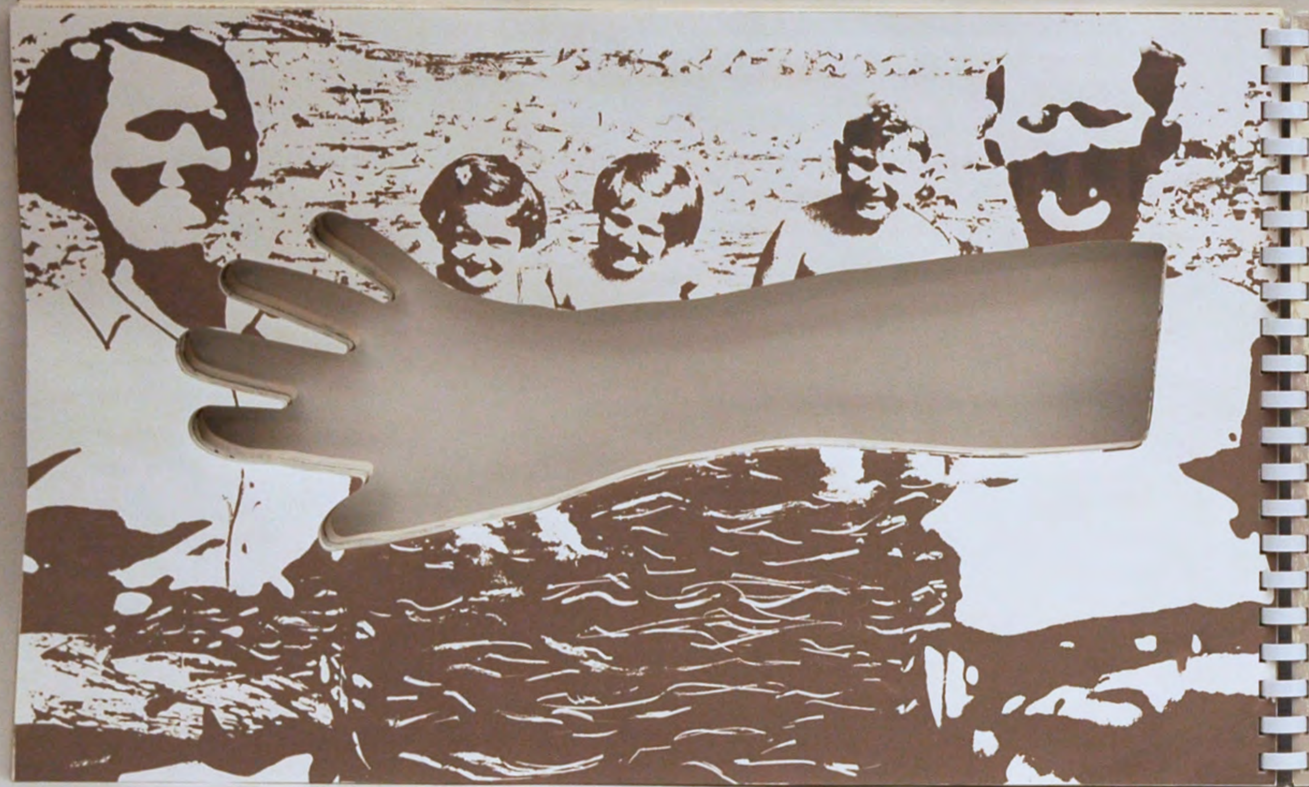
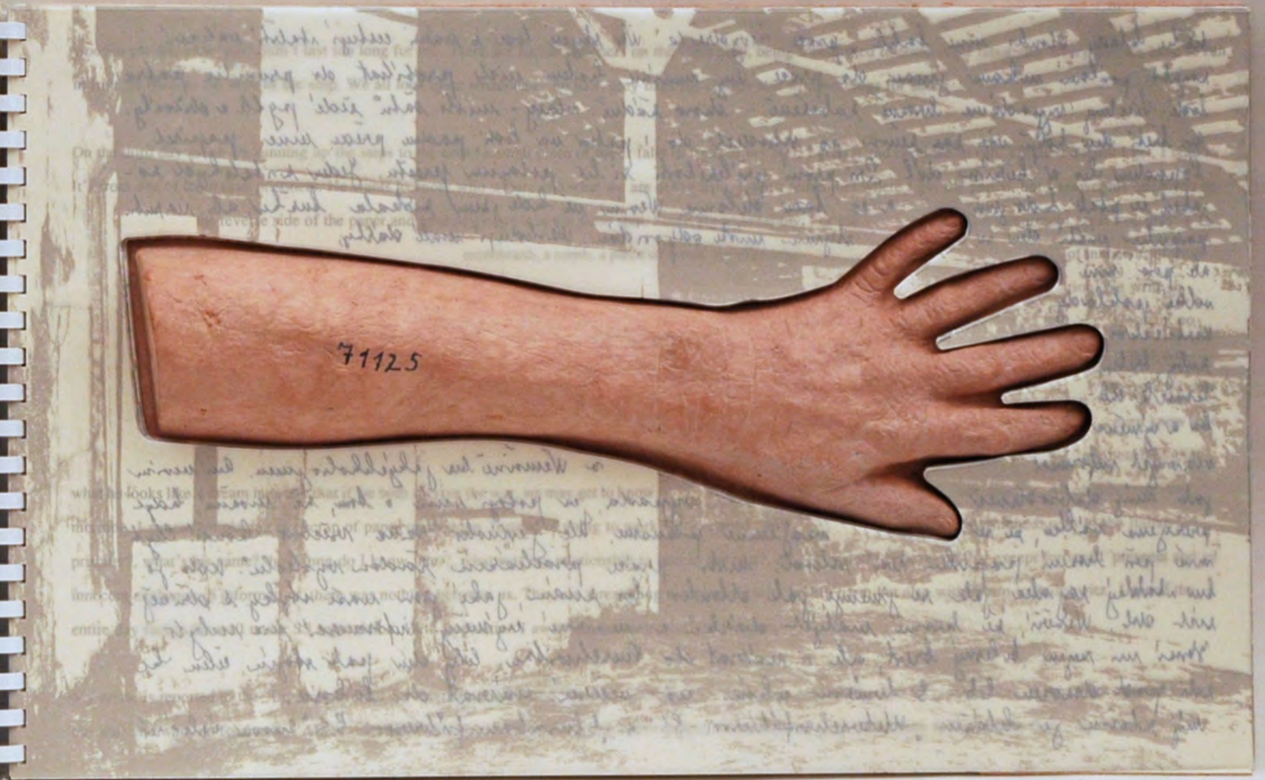
escape and we abandoned our scheme

With much anticipation we awaited the men's departure from the camp. From behind the barbed wire fences we watched the SS men loading up the prisoners into boxcars. Where are they going? We don't know. But since the transport train left, we knew we were not going to be gassed at this time. The next day approximately 1,000 women are marched off to the women's camp in Auschwitz. Another sauna, which means delousing, shaving, hair cutting and inspections. This is where I lose the small notebook my mother gave me on her deathbed. But how unimportant all of that was. The women's camp in Auschwitz. Now we're among real criminals, imprisoned for murder, stealing and other criminal acts. Each category is marked by a different color triangle. The cruelty inflicted among prisoners is without limits. How can one woman be so cruel to another? Survival instinct takes over. We are no longer human. Any remnant of human dignity is beaten out of us. To compare us to animals is unjust since animals kill their prey out of hunger, not cruelty



My journey doesn't end in Auschwitz. Boxcars again. This time our transport goes to Germany, to Hamburg, where Germany needs prison labor. We've escaped the gas chambers. Is this going to be a real labor camp? In Hamburg we're housed in coffee warehouses on the bank of the river Elbe. Bunk beds again, long wooden tables and benches where we eat our meager meals. Our work orders (called komando) are for the lumber mills. Very early in the morning we're lined up, separated into groups and under the watchful eyes of older German soldiers, led by the SS, we are taken by ship to an offshore island. In the lumber mill we stock and move heavy

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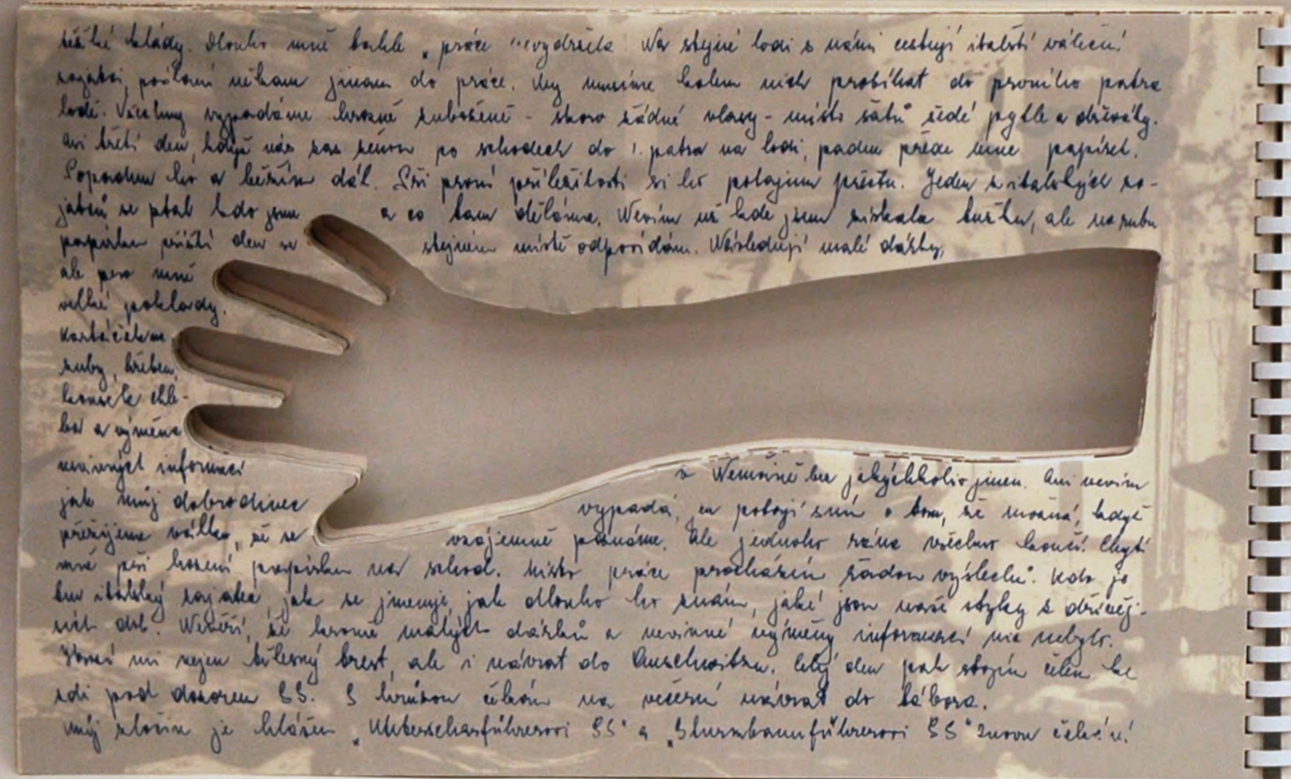
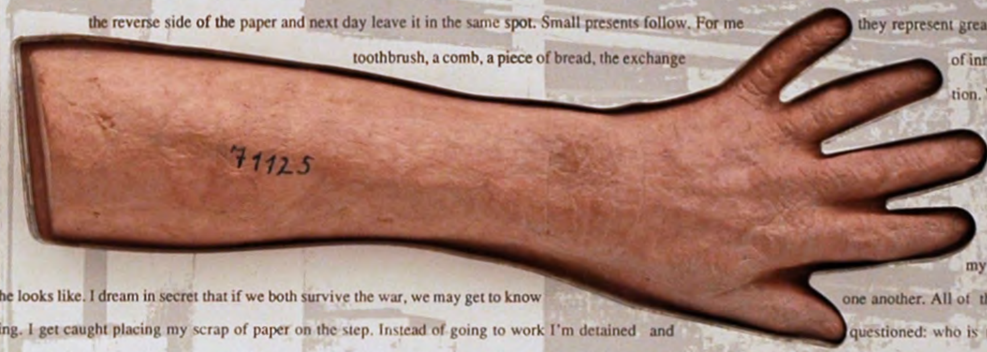


wooden planks. This "job" didn't last too long for me. There are Italian prisoners on the same ship, being transported to some other labor site. Every day we have to run in front of them to the deck of the ship. We all look quite emaciated - no hair, grey bags for clothes and wooden clogs for shoes.

On the third day as we are running up the steps to the deck, a small piece of paper falls in front of my feet. I grab it and continue to run. The first chance I get, I read it. It's from one of the Italian prisoners. He wants to know who we are and what we are doing here. I don't remember where I got the pencil, but I answer his questions on the reverse side of the paper and next day leave it in the same spot. Small presents follow. For me they represent great treasures: a toothbrush, a comb, a piece of bread, the exchange of innocent information. We write in German; no names are revealed. I don't even know who my benefactor is, what he looks like. I dream in secret that if we both survive the war, we may get to know one another. All of this ends one morning. I get caught placing my scrap of paper on the step. Instead of going to work I'm detained and questioned: who is the Italian prisoner?, what's his name?, how long do I know him?, what was my relationship to him in the past?, etc. They don't believe me that except for small presents and an innocent exchange of information, there was nothing between us. They are threatening me not only with bodily harm but also with return to Auschwitz. I spend the entire day facing the wall under SS supervision. With trepidation I await our evening return to the camp.



My crime is reported to the "Unterscharfuhrer SS" (section leader) and "Sturmbaunnfuhrer SS" (battalion leader), the two SS commanders. Again I am ordered to face the wall and wait; no food today. After what seems like an eternity, the platoon leader orders me to clean up soup that's been spilled on the floor, a slimy mess.

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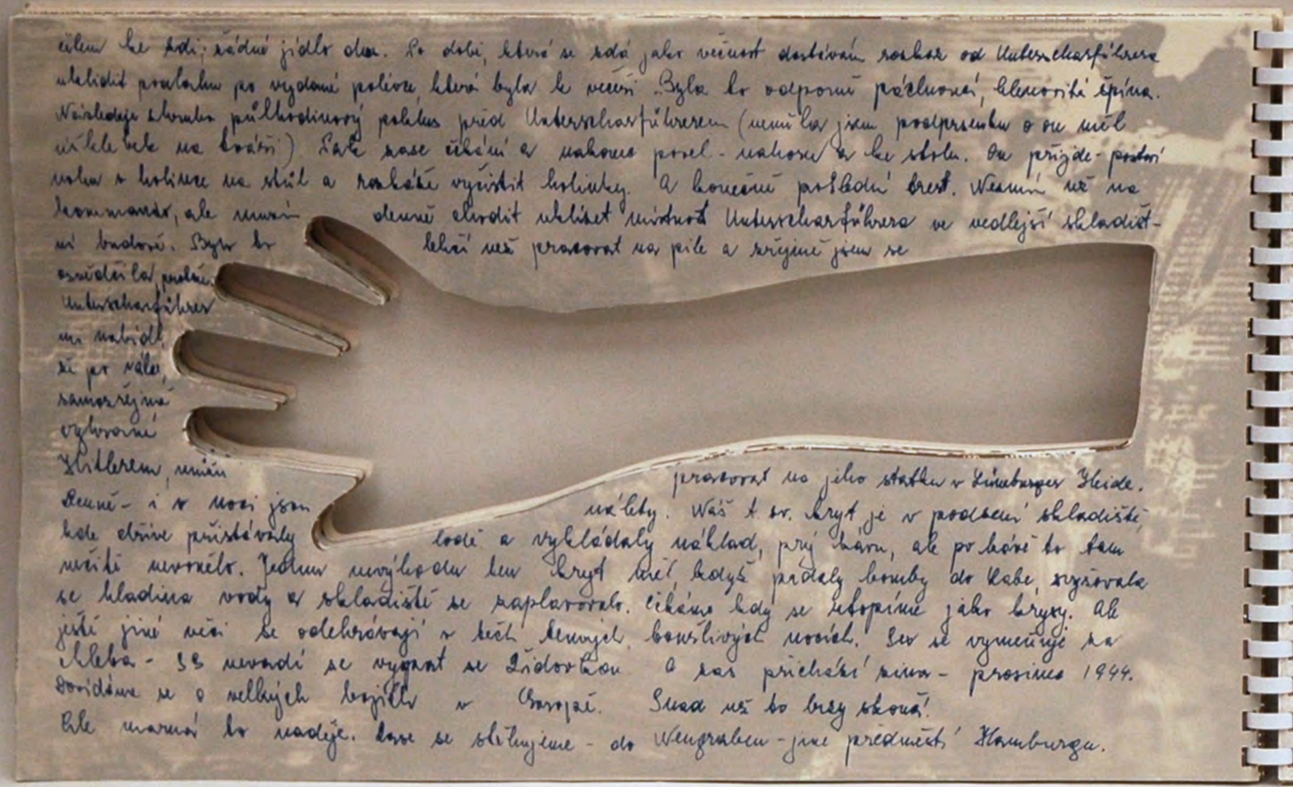
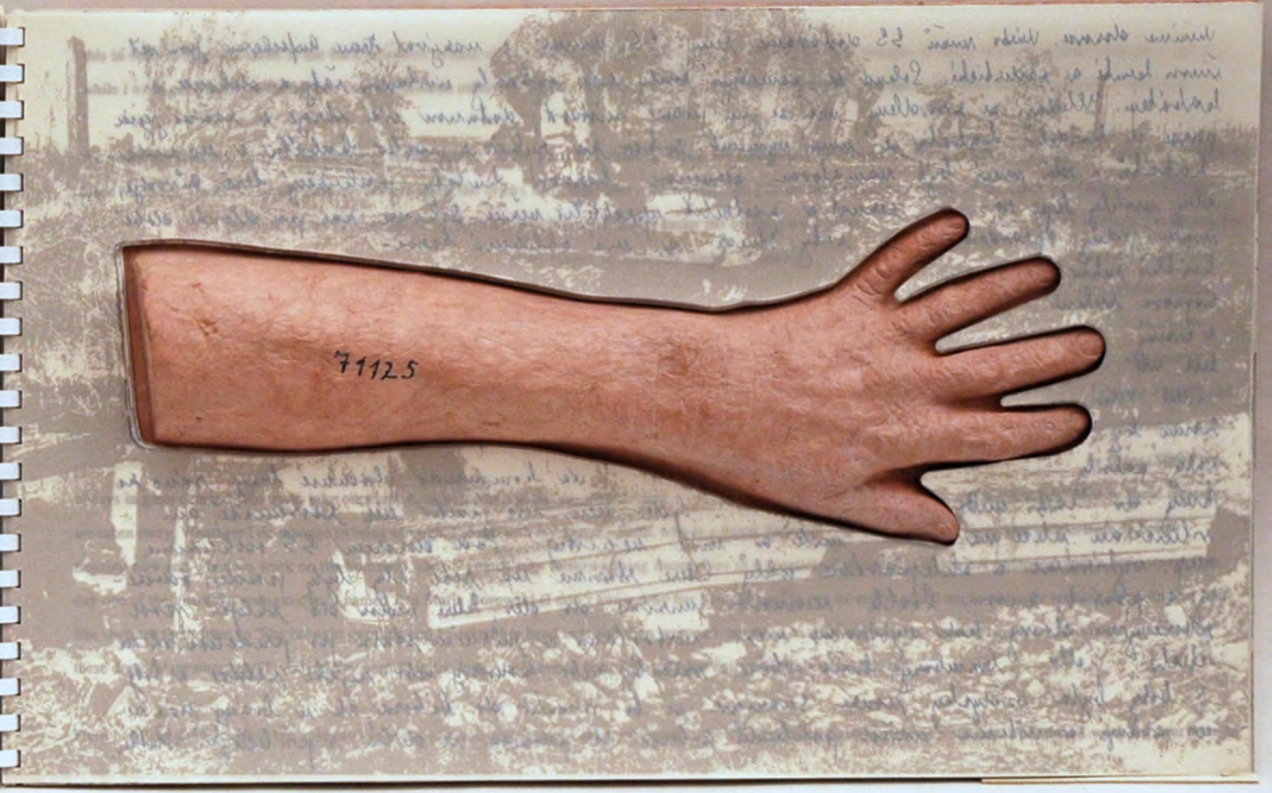


Then I am ordered to run in place for a half hour in front of the section leader. I don't have a bra; with a smirk on his face, he watches my bouncing breasts. More waiting and then another order - "To the table". He puts his foot on the table and orders me to clean his boots. And, finally, the last punishment. I am no longer allowed to join the komando in the lumber mill; instead I'm ordered to clean the Untersharfuhrer's room in the warehouse building next door every day. It was easier work than the work in the mill, and apparently I proved to be a good worker since the Untersharfuhrer gave me a standing offer to work on his estate in Luneburger Heide after Hitler wins the war.

Every day we are experiencing bombing raids. Our air raid shelter was underground in the warehouse which had been used before the war as a dock where they unloaded coffee. It certainly didn't smell like coffee now. The shelter had a serious drawback: when bombs fell into the Elbe river, the water level was raised and the warehouse flooded. I was sure we would drown like rats. But many other events played themselves out in these dark and stormy nights. Sex was exchanged for bread; the SS men didn't seem to mind sleeping with Jewish women.

Then another winter - December, 1944. We find out about the Allied invasion of Europe. Hopefully, the end is near. We hope in vain. We're moved again, this time to Neugraben, another section of Hamburg. The guards change. Female guards replace male. We have to call the guards Frau Aufseherin (Mrs. Warden). They are cruel and sadistic. If I remember correctly, we wear civilian clothes here; we even get a coat. They look for seamstresses and give them a room with sewing machines. Their work begins. Each coat must have it's sleeves removed and replaced with sleeves from a different color coat. On the back of each coat a bull's-eye is painted. All of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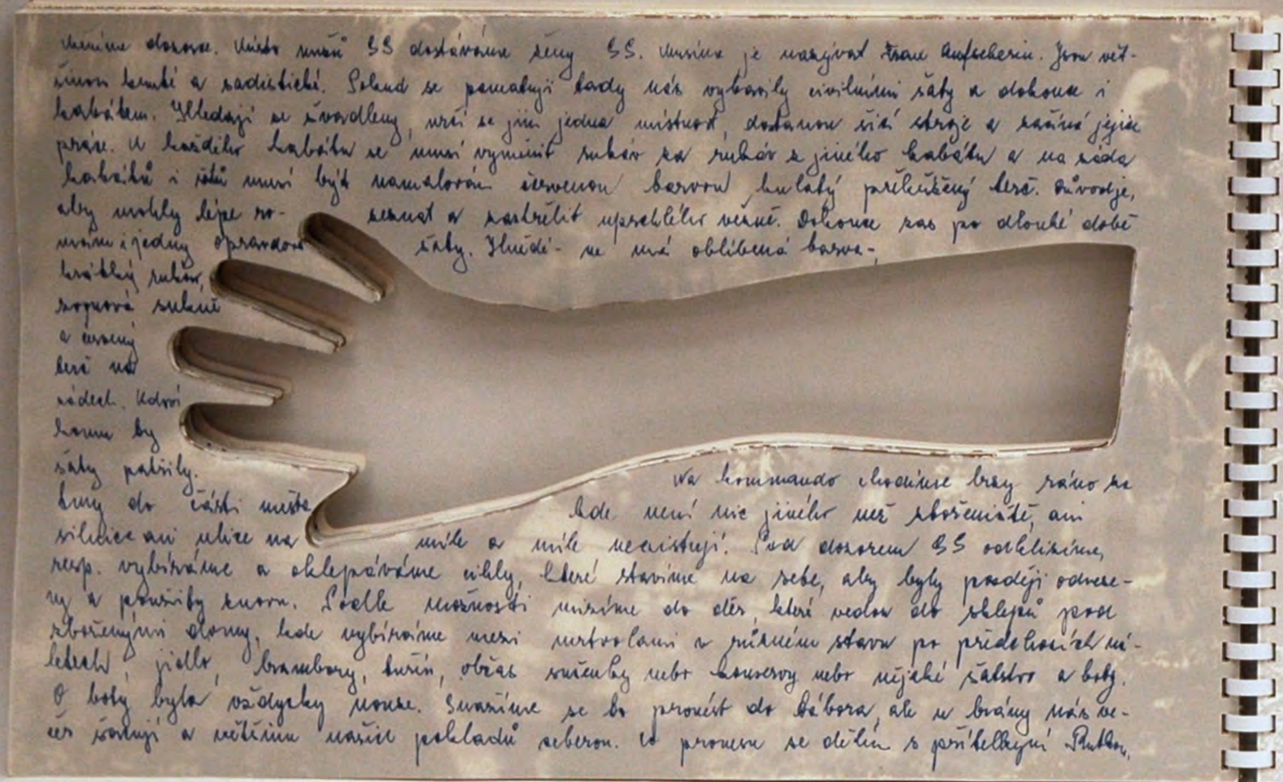

this in order to find and shoot in the back prisoners in case of an escape. I wonder that no one in all this time has thought of using this as a fashion statement. After a while I even get a dress - a brown one (not my favorite color), with short sleeves, an A-line skirt with a bull's-eye on the back. Who knows to whom it belonged.

We go on the komando early in the morning, before sunrise, to the parts of Hamburg which are completely destroyed. Nothing is left except ruins, no traces of streets or roads for miles. Under SS supervision we are salvaging the bricks and chisel away the mortar. We pile up the bricks; one on top of the other for future use. Whenever possible we try to disappear into the holes which lead to cellars under the bombed out houses, where we try to find food among the dead bodies in different stages of decay. Sometimes we find potatoes or turnips, sometimes crackers or canned goods and sometimes clothes or shoes. Shoes are always in great demand. We try to take our finds back to the camp, but we are searched at the gate and usually these treasures are taken away. Whatever I do manage to bring through, I share with my friend, Ruth, who is a Block Elder here. The temperature is below freezing now and when we work on the komando, the SS guards take turns warming themselves in a specially built small wooden hut equipped with a little stove. One day one of the guards, a young redhead named Eva Maria Borowski (I don't know why her name stayed in my memory) asked me to help her remove lice from her hair. She'd gotten them from us. She brought gasoline and I soaked her head in it and than wrapped her head in a towel. It was a pleasure to see an SS woman attacked by these dreadful creatures and I enjoyed the warmth in the hut. After several hour I washed her hair and combed the lice out.

From handling the bricks and the cold my hands are raw and bloody and I am transferred to the SS Command headquarters as a servant. This time I work for four female

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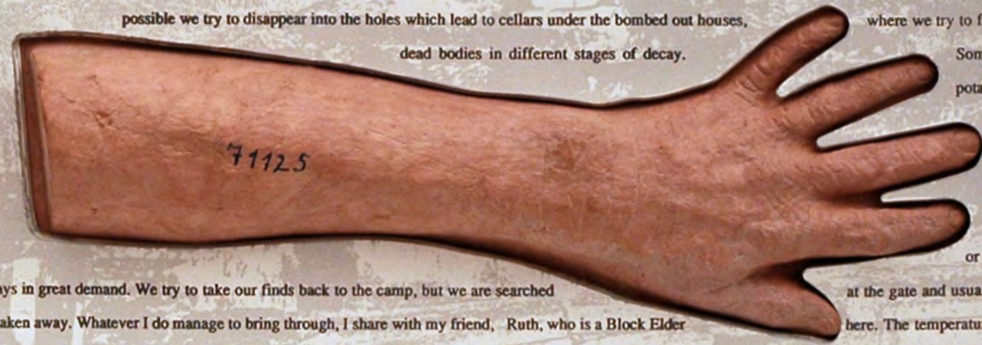

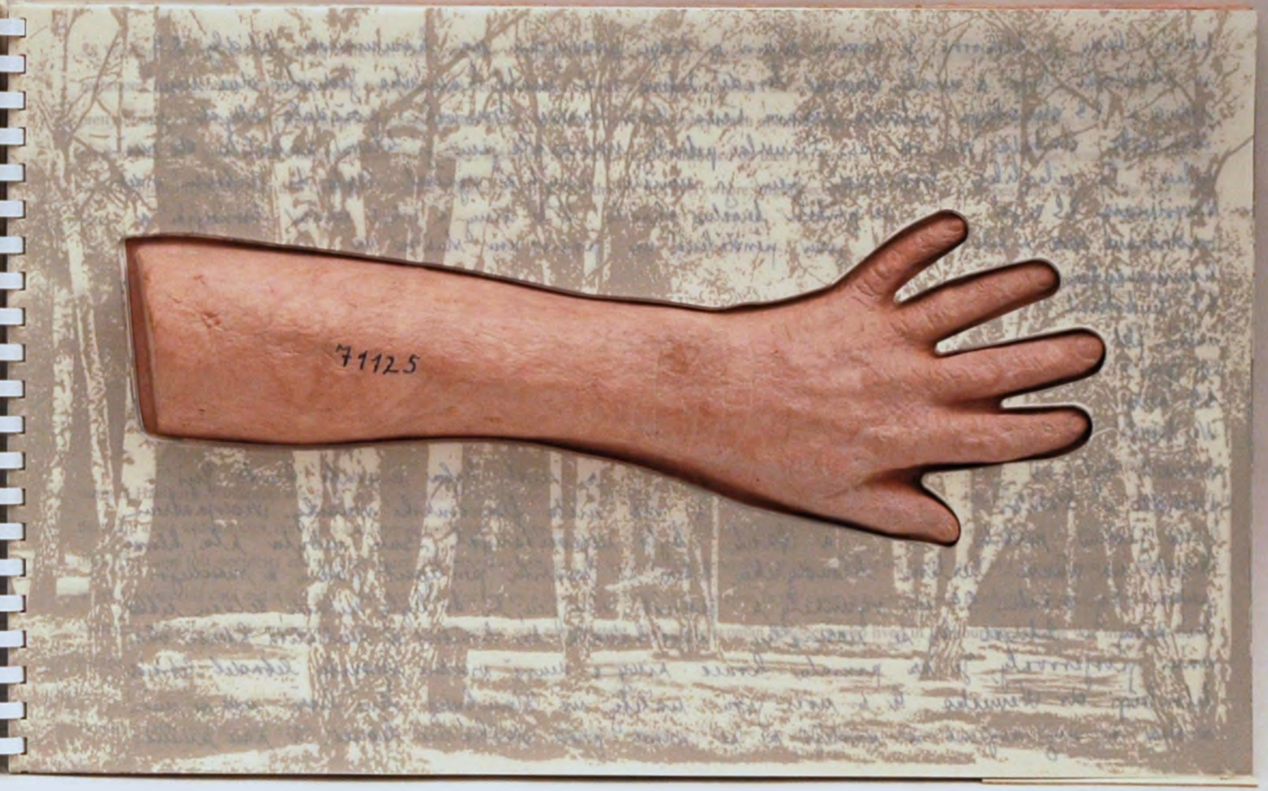
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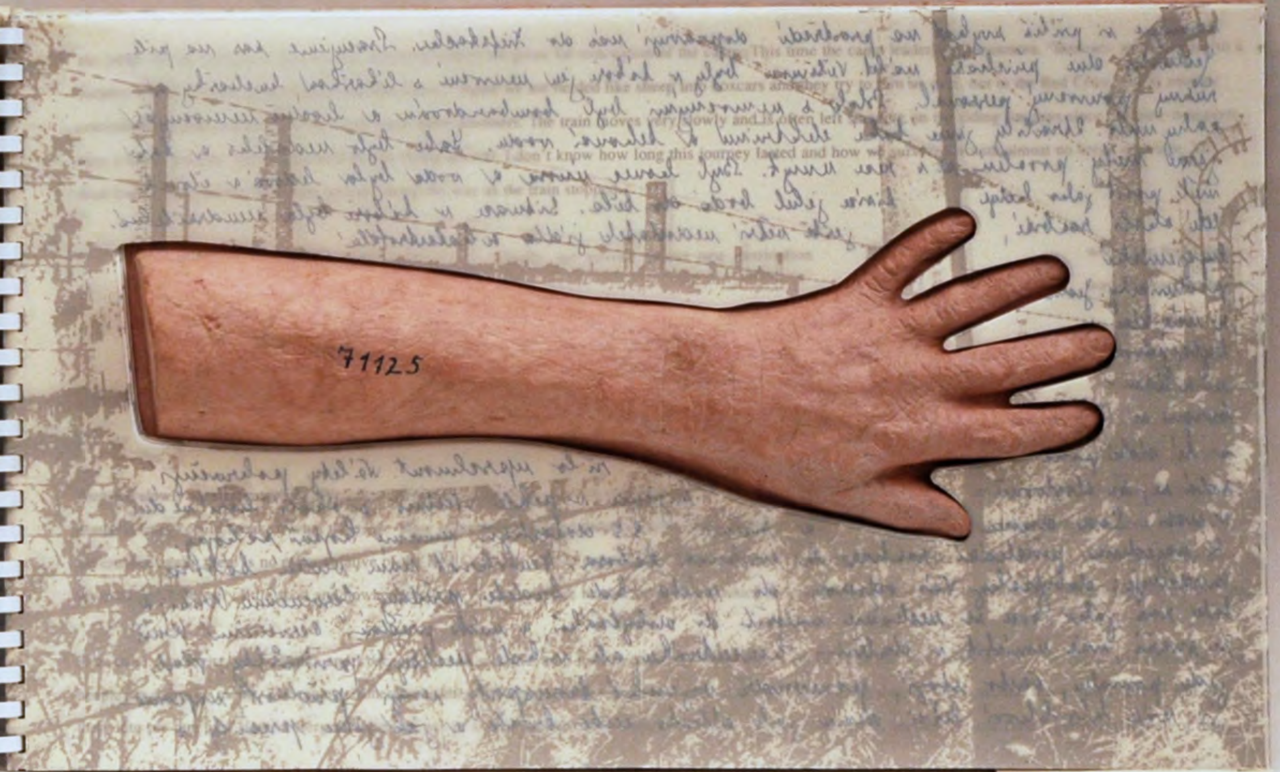
SS Wardens and they are not easy to work for. The worst one was probably fat Anita. Her husband was an SS stationed in Paris and she had French perfumes in her bathroom. I accidentally broke one of the bottles and she beat me mercilessly. SS Bubi (nicknamed "Little Boy") was not so bad. She had a crush on Nanne, a very pretty blond prisoner, and she tried to give her easier work and more food. I don't remember much about the other SS wardens. I only know they were young women, good looking and one wouldn't have expected the cruelty, bestiality and violence they inflicted on their prisoners. It's almost the end of winter here and we can see a lot of airplanes flying deeper into Germany. At night Hamburg is bombed: there's fire everywhere; night becomes day. We live in hopes that we'll see the end of the war.

Another change. They don't want us to get used to our surroundings. Another transport to a new camp in Hamburg - Tiefstack. We work again in a mill. One day our camp is bombed. Mainly only sick prisoners were left in the camp along with a doctor, the cooks and support personnel; the rest of us were at the mill. The infirmary was leveled and many of the patients died. The camp lost electricity and running water. The Elbe was near and we were allowed to wash in the river. Washing in the river in February was not pleasant; the water was freezing cold and it felt as if your body was pricked by a thousand needles. The situation in the camp was unbearable. Everything for miles was bombed; shortages of food reached catastrophic proportions and hygiene was non-existent. One of the woman prisoners who lived in Hamburg before the war managed to escape.

Bombing raids continue and it feels as if we are really living in hell; everything around us is on fire day and night. It looks as if the Nazis won't be able to hold on to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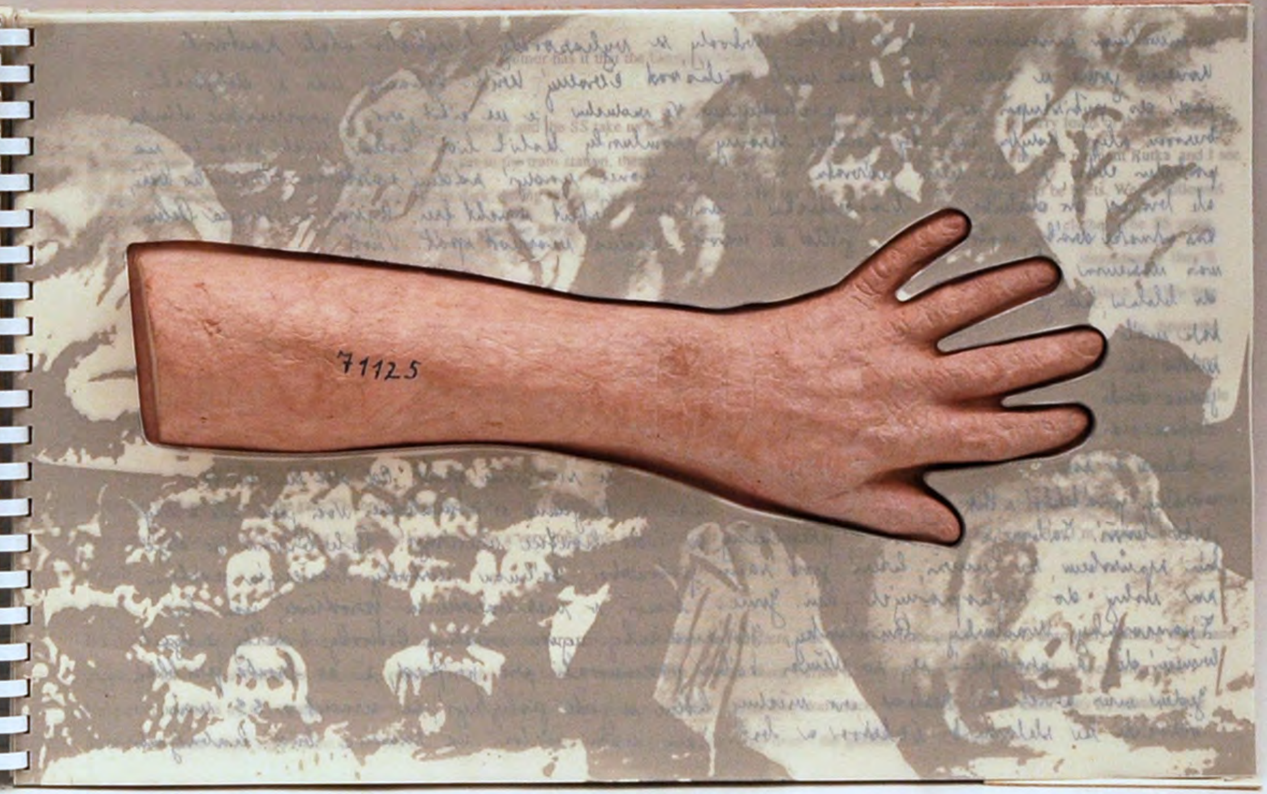
the camp. We are ordered to dig trenches. Suddenly orders are given for evacuation of the camp. This time the camp leadership announces, "Boxcars will take you to a location where you'll be given over to the Red Cross." Again we are herded like sheep into boxcars and they try to turn us over, not to the Red Cross but to another concentration camp in Germany. No camp wants more prisoners. The train moves very slowly and is often left standing on the siding for days since military transports have a higher priority. We are attacked by low flying aircraft. I don't know how long this journey lasted and how we survived it with almost no bread or water. The dead bodies were thrown out of the boxcars along the way as the train stopped.

Finally, we arrived at our new destination where the Red Cross was supposed to be awaiting our arrival. The guards throw us out of the train, lining us up five deep and slowly we start marching. We can smell spring in the air as we walk through an avenue of birch trees. If only these beautiful trees could speak of what they saw - how many people passed them on their last journey, a journey with no return. Our hopes are crushed again: there is no representative of the Red Cross but instead a gate to yet another camp with its sign "Work Makes You Free". We are in Bergen-Belsen. More barbed wire, very little food and nowhere to sleep. At night we are herded into a block which is so crowded that we have to sit in each other's lap and try to sleep.

Ever since Auschwitz, where Rutka and I became friends, we have tried to help each other. The nights are bad and the days, even worse. The camp is overcrowded and people are dying en masse. The male prisoners, who themselves are half dead, are in charge of removing the dead; they tie a belt around the corpses' ankles and drag them into pre-dug pits. Here in Bergen-Belsen we are in an international environment; there are French, Hungarians, Rumanians and Dutch prisoners, not all of them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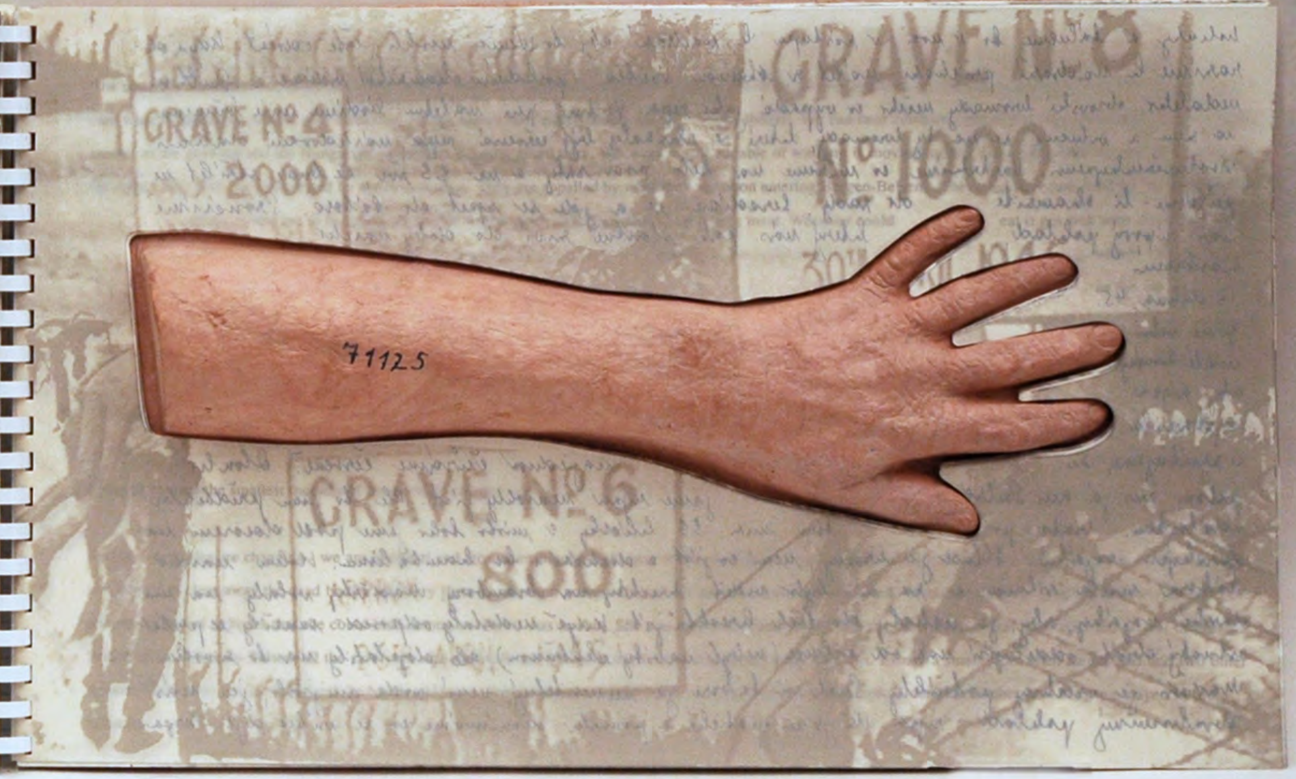
Jews. In the distance we can hear the thunder of cannons and rumor has it that the Germans have laid mines under the camp in case the front comes too close.

One evening all of us who can still walk are ordered to line up and the SS take us to a warehouse full of uniforms and boots. We have to carry loads of them to the train station, as they are trying to save the goods! When we get to the train station, there is another bombing raid and all the lights go out. At the last moment Rutka and I see a large pile of something which looks like food. In the dark, during the raid, we throw down the load and dive into a pile of what turn out to be beets. We're followed by other prisoners. I don't remember what we were wearing, but we stuffed the beets into our clothes. The SS starts yelling that if we don't line up immediately they'll shoot us. We line up, throw the uniforms and boots on a pile and march back to the camp. We manage to carry our "treasure" through the gate. The beets end up being our only food till the liberation of the camp on April 15, 1945. We eat very small pieces, hoping it will last. Our urine turns red. For a very long time after the war I wasn't able to eat beets. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It's April. Soon after the beet incident, the SS guards disappear and are replaced by Hungarian soldiers. The hunger is unbearable; there is absolutely nothing to eat and people are turning into cannibals. There is a road around the camp behind which stood a wooden shack buried halfway in the ground, probably a root cellar. The Hungarian prisoners try to negotiate with the guards in Hungarian for permission to go there. When they don't receive any answer from them, they try climbing the barbed wire fence which didn't have electricity running through it. They ended up paying with their lives - the guards shot all of them.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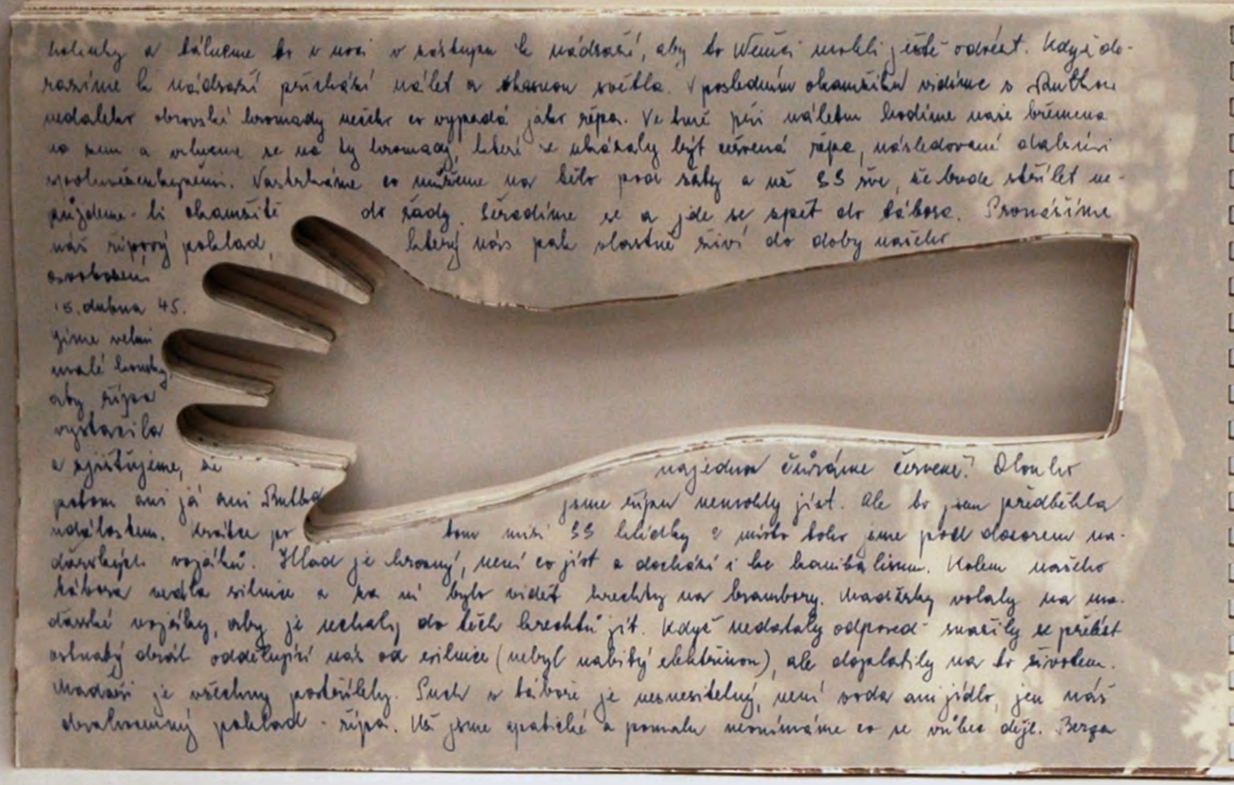
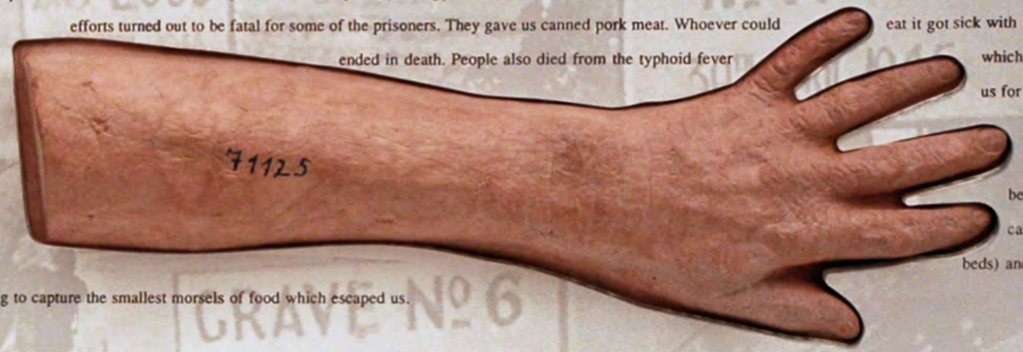


The stench in the camp was unbearable. No water or food. We only had our treasured beets. We're becoming apathetic and loosing contact with reality; we no longer care what is happening around us. I think that no one knows how many people died in Bergen-Belsen. We can hear constant cannon fire. The mountains of dead bodies around us are growing and the Hungarian guards are standing guard duty. Whoever is still capable of walking is moving around like a ghost and we are all waiting...

On April 15th, 1945, we're liberated by the British army. They are appalled by what they see upon entering Bergen-Belsen. They tried to secure food for us but their first efforts turned out to be fatal for some of the prisoners. They gave us canned pork meat. Whoever could eat it got sick with dysentery which ended in death. People also died from the typhoid fever which accompanied us for the three years in the camps, along with lice, bed bugs (in our case even without beds) and cockroaches trying to capture the smallest morsels of food which escaped us.



And now our roles are changing - we are liberated and free, even though right now we have no place to go. Captured SS guards under the supervision of British MPs are ordered to clear away the dead bodies and bury them in common graves. One of our previous guards, Bubi, tried to escape this fate. She changed her uniform for prisoner's clothes in hopes that she could hide among us. But it was in vain. She was discovered and had to join the other SS. Several days after the arrival of the British army in Bergen-Belsen, all the survivors who can walk are moved to the former Hungarian army barracks. I share a small room with Rutka Jokl and two other women. Each of us has her own bunk bed with a blanket. This is a luxury compared to our previous life in the lager. I don't remember how long we stayed in the barracks.

RAVE
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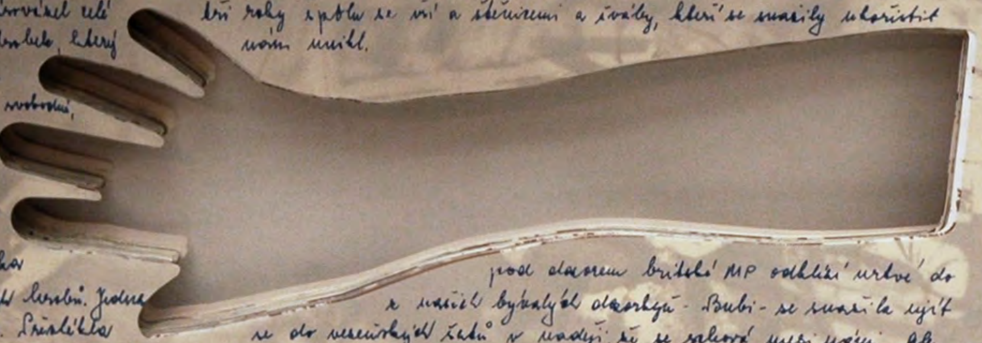
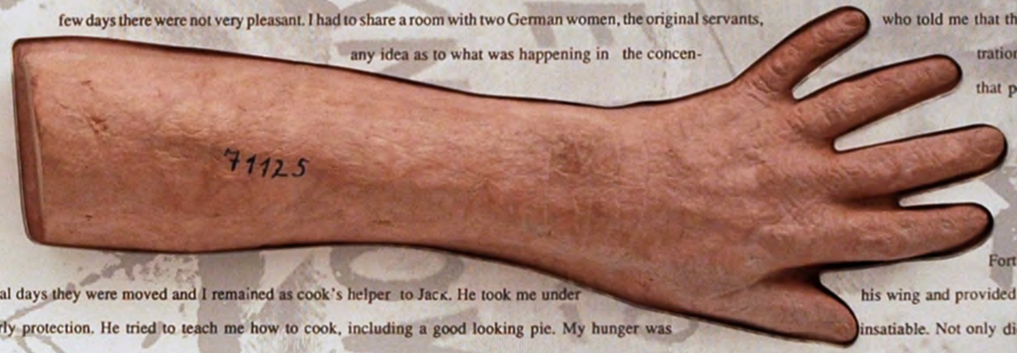
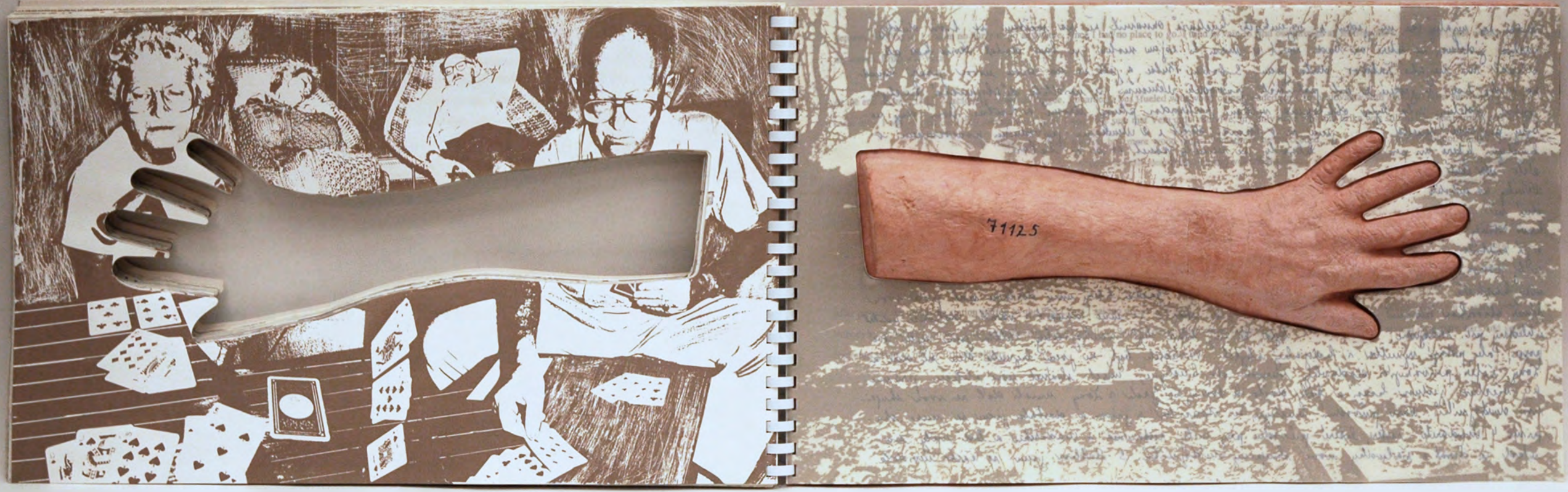
Belsen - myslím, že nikdo není hrdlo lidí bam vlastní zakryuto. Stále je vidět dnešní dél. Vrtná bila se
kromadě kolem nás a kradčení stojí lidičku. Kdo ještě může chodit se pohybuje jako mátoha a čeká...
A je 15. dubna 1945 a jsme osvobozeni britskými armádou. Asi se zdržili co nás v Bergen - Belsen.
Snažovám se navážit pohybující jídlo, ale pevní vůli bylo pro mnohou z nás osudné. Byly to
kromovy vepřiřlo naše a kdo to mohl jíst dostal těžkou otravu střevní smrt. Nebo to byl typus?
Ten nás doprovázel celé
ten malý chodník, který
z ještěry se
mění - jsme svobodní,
i když se
nemáme kam
kam jít.
Sochy bomb
SS poručíka
kromadných hrobů. Jedna
bam mada. Snažila
mramor - byla objevena a mnoho mezi ostatní SS. Za několik dní po průchodu britské armády
je náš tábor, resp. zbytek přeživších a pohybujících se, prostřednictvím dr byt. maďarských
Kanárem. Ironií osudu jsme v malém kumbále se 4 pokojovými ještě 2 děvčata.
Byla to případová proti zimě v táboře. Nevím už jak dlouho jsme tam byly, ale jednoho dne
přišla výzva na dobrovolnou práci na vojenské kuchyni. Přihlásila jsem se a byla přijata.
Zaplat jsem pořád hladová a využila jsem té příležitosti k možnosti získat víc jídla.



One day a call came for voluntary work in the army kitchen. I was hungry all the time, and this was a great opportunity to have access to more food. I volunteered and was accepted. After some time one of the army cooks told me about the new officer's kitchen and dining room being set up outside of town. He said if I was interested, he'd help me get transferred there. I had only the prison uniform to wear and he was able to find some clothes for me. I said goodbye to Rutka and departed for my new job which was a few miles from the camp. The officer's dining room was in a nice German townhouse surrounded by a large garden with trees and flowers. The first few days there were not very pleasant. I had to share a room with two German women, the original servants, who told me that they didn't have any idea as to what was happening in the concentration camp. How was that possible? Were they so ignorant to happenings around them or really part of it? Fortunately, after several days they were moved and I remained as cook's helper to Jack. He took me under his wing and provided an almost fatherly protection. He tried to teach me how to cook, including a good looking pie. My hunger was insatiable. Not only did I inhale my portions, I secretly ate whatever I could put my hands on. This resulted in my increasing size from day to day. Tony, the chauffeur, who delivered groceries to the kitchen, had to find larger clothes for me.



But nothing lasts forever. Jack and Tony had to move on with their group of officers. Our kitchen was merged with another and I found myself among four Hungarian sisters who'd originally owned a restaurant in Hungary. They were in charge of filling the stomachs of a new group of officers. I didn't see Ruth often. Several times Tony gave her a ride over to see me. One day I found out that Erich, her husband, together with Rudy Rosen (who came for his wife) came to pick them up and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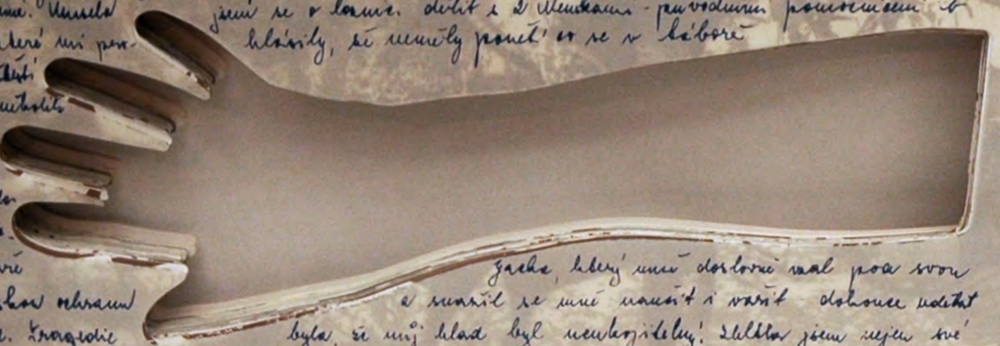
a tak za nějaký čas mi jeden z vyznamných kuchařů oznámil, že za městem se tvoří důstojnická jídelna, se kterou on bude vařit a mám-li zájem nastoupit se taky dostat. Ukázal hlad, ale schválil mi nějaký šaltbor, dala jsem S bratem Pulkem a jelo se na novou práci. Konečně za město. Tak v jedné z vil patřících původně Němcům se zařídila důstojnická kuchyně. Válka byla obklopená velkou zahradou plnou stromů a keřů. První dny nebyly příjemné. Unesla jsem se v lágru dělit s 2 Němkami - původními pomocnicemi v kuchyni, které mi prohlásily, že nemůžu pomáhat ve lágru



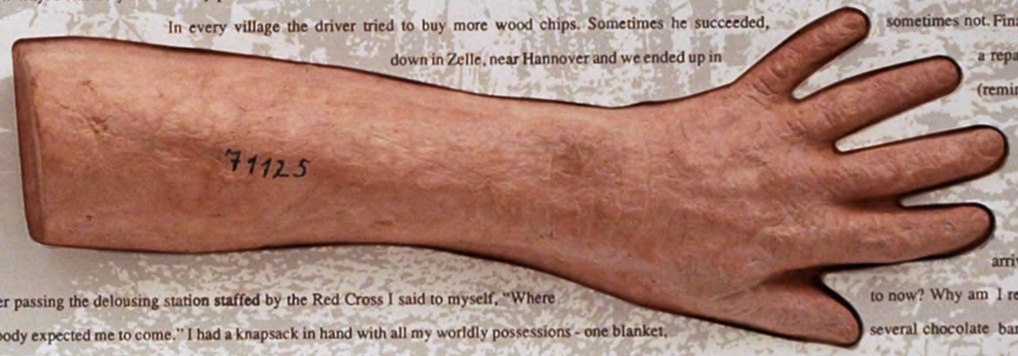
Vá dětí Němky za mnohého dní hekaw rozsaly a já zůstala vlby pomocnice kuchaře Němů obrovskou zahradu úhledný pit. Krajnodie

Zacka, který mně dosloužil vzal pod svou a snažil se mně naučit i vařit dokonce udělat byla, že můj hlad byl neukojitelný. Zkoušel jsem nejen své pomocníky, ale potají vymyslel i hodjaký zbytek. Všichnoka byl, že jsem bezmula dlouhé se dne a Tony, šofér přivážející dodávky surovin do kuchyně, musel shánět nové oblečení pro mě. Ale všechno jednou končí a bohužel došlo k tomu, že Zack i Tony museli dál se svou skupinou důstojníků. Naše původní kuchyně se sloučila s jinou a dostala jsem se mezi skupinu 4 Maďarek - sester, které původně prý měly restauraci v Maďarsku a teď měly za úkol se starat o zásobovaly nové skupiny důstojníků. S Pulkem jsem se často neviděla.

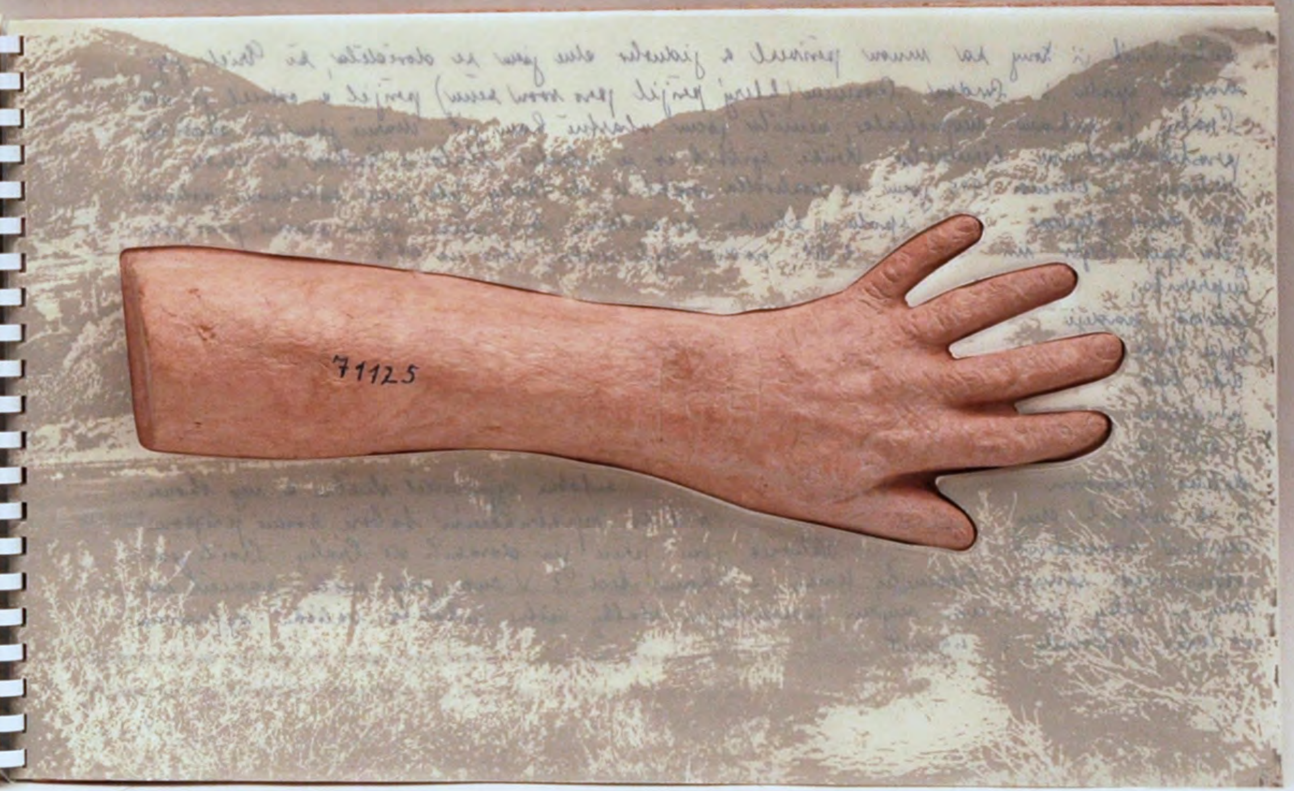
departed for Prague. I was in no hurry to go anywhere, since I had no place to go. I tried in vain to find out through an intermediary of the Red Cross what happened to my sisters, Erika and Vera.

At the end of July, 1945, I decided to return to Prague. I boarded a bus (fueled with wood chips) headed for Czechoslovakia with about 30 other survivors. I don't know why. I was 18 years old. My parents were dead. I was 99% sure that Vera didn't survive; my only hope was that Erika was still living. The journey was terrible.

In every village the driver tried to buy more wood chips. Sometimes he succeeded, sometimes not. Finally the bus broke down in Zelle, near Hannover and we ended up in a repatriation camp (reminiscent of a concentration camp) for several days. Finally we arrived in Prague.



After passing the delousing station staffed by the Red Cross I said to myself, "Where to now? Why am I really here? Nobody expected me to come." I had a knapsack in hand with all my worldly possessions - one blanket, several chocolate bars and some cigarettes given to me by British soldiers.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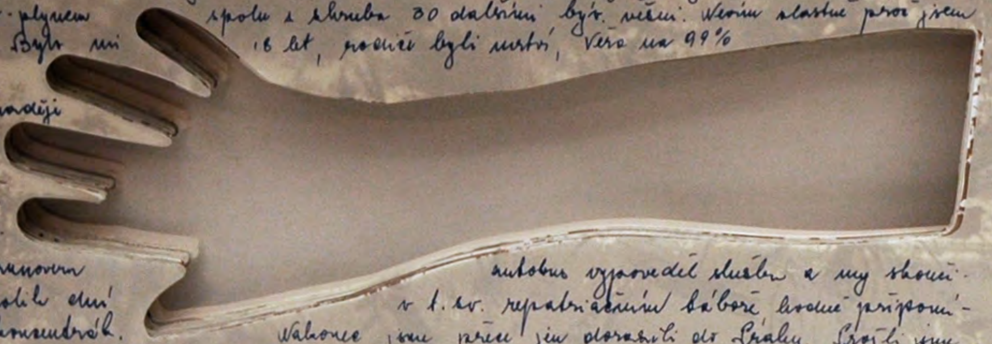
Několikrát jí Tony za mnou přišel a jednou mu jsem se dověděla, že Gréel - její manžel, spolu s Burdou Bossem (který přijel přes svou zemi) přijel a odvezl ji do Prahy. Já nikam nepřicházela, neměla jsem vlastně kam jít. Mamu jsem se snažila prostřednictvím Červeného Kříže zjistit co se vlastně stalo s Gréem a Věrou. Koncem v červenci 1945 jsem se rozhodla vrátit se do Prahy. Jela jsem autobusem poloautomatickým dřevo-plynem. Jela zpět. Byla mi nepřeložila, jediná naděje byla Gréa, která byla ponížená. V Belle, na dalekém Slovensku, ti se několik dní napřímí koncentrák. Nakonec jsme přece jen dorazili do Prahy. Stavili jsme se u Červeného Kříže a kam bod? V ruce jsem měla ranec nabalený z deky se všemi mými poválečnými statky včetně několika balíčků vyfasovaných vojínkou čokolády a cigaret.

spolu s chlapci 30 dalšími byl. věmi. Všem vlastně proč jsem 16 let, pouze byli muží, Věra na 99%

autobus vyzvedl chlapce a my chodili v t. zv. reparačním táboře kromě přípomí-



Special thanks to Ann Kalmbach, Margaret Henkels, David Matlin, Anita Wetzel, Annie O'Neil, Ivan Rezucha, Evzena Jameson and WSW for their help and support.

This project is made possible in part through a grant from the Decentralization Program of NYSCA administered by the Dutchess County Arts Council.

Text paper has been provided by Mohawk Paper Mill. Die cutting was done by Rylance Printing.

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