

Magda Blau

Title: *From Childhood to Auschwitz Birkenau*

Author: Magda Blau

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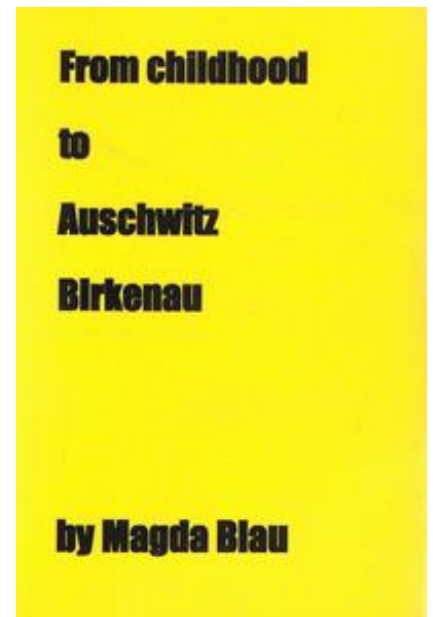
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library and Sydney Jewish Museum.

Cities/towns/camps: Slovakia: Michalovce; Poland: Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II-Birkenau; Germany: Ravensbrück and Malchow concentration camps; Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: concentration camp; prisoner-functionary; death march.



From Childhood to Auschwitz-Birkenau is the 100-page self-published memoir of Slovak kindergarten teacher Magda Blau, who was deported on one of the first transports of Jewish women to Auschwitz-Birkenau in March 1942. Over nearly three years in the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, Magda was forced to assume a series of prisoner-functionary roles, including responsibility for the infamous Block 10 where reproductive experiments were performed on hundreds of women. She was later made *Lagerälteste* (camp elder), overseeing approximately 30,000 women prisoners. After surviving the evacuation of Auschwitz and two death marches, Magda emigrated to Australia in 1956.

Pages 1-15 tell of Magda's life and childhood in Michalovce before the war. Pages 16-85 describe her incarceration in Auschwitz-Birkenau from March 1942 until January 1945. Pages 86-100 recount the death march in January 1945 to Ravensbrück and Malchow until liberation by Russian partisans in May 1945 and her subsequent return to Slovakia.

Magda Blau (nee Hellinger) was born 19 August 1916 in the Slovakian town of Michalovce, the second child and only daughter in a family of five children born to parents Ignac and Berta Hellinger. She had four brothers: Max, Ernest, Eugene and Arthur. Magda's father was a German-language teacher at the local Jewish school, and taught German to his daughter, which would become crucial for her survival. After matriculation, she later became a kindergarten teacher.

In March 1942, the twenty-five-year-old Magda was deported from Michalovce to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The women were told they would be working at a Bata factory. Despite several warnings, Magda believed what she was told and was sent together

with almost one thousand young women, on only the second transport of Jewish women to be sent to Auschwitz.

After a long journey crammed into crowded cattle wagons, the women arrived at Auschwitz I where they were stripped of their belongings, shaved, tattooed, and placed in overcrowded barracks. Due to her fluency in German and friendship with the block leader, Magda was given the role of a *Stubendienst* (room helper), tasked with keeping the block clean and carrying food from the kitchen. In exchange, she was spared from the back-breaking work commandos.

In early August 1942, after four months in Auschwitz-I, Magda and her group were transferred to Birkenau where Magda continued her role as *Stubendienst*. Throughout 1942 and 1943, the women's camp grew rapidly as transports arrived from regions across Europe. As the women's camp expanded, Magda was 'promoted' to the position of *Blockälteste* (block leader) in early 1943. Her new role placed her in charge of a block of French deportees, overseeing the barracks, maintaining order and distributing rations. Later, she was made *Blockälteste* of a group of severely traumatised Polish women who had barely survived the ghettos – and all of whom were eventually sent to the gas chambers.

As *Blockälteste*, Magda was required to be present at every selection, during which SS personnel chose prisoners for the gas chambers. In each case, she did her best to explain the routines of camp life to new arrivals and save as many as she could from selection – by distracting the SS, hiding the sickest prisoners at the back or in the middle of the group or suggesting special work details for the sick prisoners. These efforts were taken at grave risk to her own life.

Amid ongoing structural changes in the camp in 1943, Magda was moved between various blocks and roles throughout the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. These included Block 10, the experimental block where women were subjected to medical experiments, including forced sterilisation. She describes the *Mischlinge* block which housed children classified as half-Jewish, and the so-called "elite block" on the outskirts of the camp containing non-Jewish prisoners of various nationalities.

In May 1944, under the new leadership of Jozef Kramer, Magda witnessed the mass murder of Hungarian Jews in Birkenau. As she spoke Hungarian as well as German, she was made block leader for a transport of Hungarian women.

As Hungarian transports quickly filled the camp to capacity, authorities expanded the camp complex, building C Camp – where Magda became the new *Lagerälteste* (camp elder), coordinating food distribution, hygiene and work detachments for 30,000 women prisoners. During this period, she received direct instructions from SS overseers and had to report regularly to the camp authorities. Shortly after being appointed as *Lagerälteste*, Magda met her future husband Béla Blau and the two formed a close bond.

On 18 January 1945, Magda and the remaining prisoners were forced onto a death march in freezing winter conditions. After several days of walking, they were loaded onto open freight wagons bound for Ravensbrück. Exposed to the elements and without food or water, many died on the journey. Gravely ill, Magda survived with the aid of former Birkenau prisoners. After a few days in Ravensbrück, the prisoners were transferred to Malchow, a Ravensbrück sub-camp where many died from starvation and typhus.

On 1 May 1945, the prisoners at Malchow were forced onto another death march as refugees fleeing the Russian army crowded the roads. In the confusion, Magda encountered Russian women she had previously overseen in Birkenau who had since joined the Russian partisans. With their assistance she escaped the march and was given shelter by the partisans at a local mill. After liberation, she was transferred to a Russian refugee camp and subsequently repatriated to Slovakia.

Magda returned to Michalovce, and reunited with Béla two weeks later in his hometown Zilina. They soon relocated to Prague where they officially married on 13 March 1946. They couple had two daughters, Maya and Eva. After the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia, the family emigrated to Israel. In 1956, they left to join family in Melbourne.

From Childhood to Auschwitz offers an unusual contribution to Holocaust testimony, presenting a detailed account of daily life in the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex from the vantage point of a prisoner-functionary. It does not discuss her life and emigration to Israel or Australia.

The author's position within the camp hierarchy, and diverse roles across the camp complex, afforded her access to many aspects of camp life and administration not typically recorded in prisoner narratives. As a result the memoir provides insight into camp conditions, social hierarchies and operational structures. Owing to her prolonged contact with members of the camp administration, the narrative also includes substantial observations of key SS figures, including Irma Grese, Josef Kramer, and Josef Mengele.

The book has been criticised by some survivors, who accused Magda of collaboration and harsh treatment, but her account has not been broadly dismissed or historically discredited. The memoir reflects candidly on the impossible emotional and moral dilemmas faced by inmates and prisoner-functionaries.