**Bidding Farewell to Dita**

A cacophony of voices reading excerpts from final letters, with music playing in the background:

“My dear and only sister Rivka! I am out of patience and I now lack the humanity to write...”

“My dear parents! If the sky were paper and the world ink, I still wouldn’t be able to describe to you my suffering and all the things I see around me. (...)”

“My dear, before I leave this world I would like to leave a few words to you. If this letter ever reaches you, you should know that I, and all of us here, will no longer be alive...”

“My dear! I am writing to you today for the last time. How strange life is. So much time has passed since our Yuzek is no longer with me. They took him from me. He died a true hero. He offered me comfort...”

“My dear, I am ready for my last journey. I have no debts and no obligations. I have nothing and I am leaving nothing behind...”

On July 7, 1944, in the city of Będzin, Poland, Sara Gerlitz wrote a farewell letter to her daughter, Dita, who was six years old at the time.

Letters and postcards written by Jews to family members or friends during the Holocaust have been preserved in various archives and private collections. The letters, many of which serve as the last sign of life from their authors, serve as an opportunity to hear the authentic “voice” of the victims at the time, bringing us closer to their emotional and intellectual reality and helping us understand how they experienced the world around them. These letters reveal the true, honest feelings of the victims as they face impending death. Many of the letters constitute a kind of last will and testament. We find in them a description of the harsh reality, suffering, and death that were the lot of the Jews in the Holocaust, pleas to remember those who perished, demands for revenge, and testaments to the values ​​they held dear. From these letters we can learn about a wide array of characters and ideals, despair and hope, and the about the humanity of individuals living in the shadow of death.

One of the main things that we learn is what was most important for them to say. What final message did they want to convey?

Very often, the letter is the only thing that remains of them. A fragment of a story. In most cases we do not know the story in its entirety. We do not know what happened to the writer during the war nor do we know their ultimate fate.

I am Irit Dagan from the International School of Holocaust Education and, this time, bringing you “Creating Memory,” the Yad Vashem podcast. Today we will be discussing the story behind Sarah and Yehiel Gerlitz’s letter to Dita. A letter… that was never opened.

**From the testimony of Sarah Gerlitz: *My beloved and most precious child. When I gave birth to you, my love, I did not imagine that six and a half years later I would have to write you this letter. The last time I saw you was on your sixth birthday, on December 13, 1943. I was under the false impression that I would see you again before we left, but now I know that that will not happen.***

These are the first lines of the letter that Sarah Gerlitz wrote to her daughter Dita in July 1944, a few hours before the final liquidation of the Będzin Ghetto and her deportation to the Annaberg labor camp together with her husband, Yehiel. Sarah is the woman who read the letter as part of her testimony at Yad Vashem in 1986. She survived the Holocaust and immigrated to Israel a few years after the end of the war.

But let us start at the beginning.

In 1936, Sarah and Yehiel Gerlitz married in the city of Będzin in western Poland. A little over a year later, in December 1937, their daughter, Dita, was born. A few days before the outbreak of the war, with a sense of foreboding in the air, the couple tried to escape east to a town called Chmielnik where Sarah’s parents lived. They were forced to return, however, due to the rapid advance of the Germans and the occupation of the town. When they returned to Będzin only a few weeks later, everything had changed. Their home had been looted, all their available cash had been spent on the escape to Chmielnik and the return to Będzin. In any case, the zloty – the Polish currency – was no longer of value in Będzin, since western Poland had been annexed to Germany and the only recognized currency was now the German mark.

Little by little, the Germans began to impose decrees against the Jews. At the end of October 1939, Jews were ordered to hand over their radios – seemingly a small matter, but it meant being cut off from news and current events. In November, a toll of gold and silver was imposed on the Jews of the city and they were required to wear a ten-centimeter-wide arm band with a blue Star of David. Wealthy Jews were evicted from their homes to house Volksdeutsche – German speaking Poles – or Germans from the Reich. Beginning in September 1941, the armband was replaced by a yellow patch, Jews were prohibited from taking public transportation, and additional property was confiscated from the Jews. Acts of violence took place in the streets and Jewish lives lost all value.

Yehiel worked as an accountant for a Jewish-owned sewing factory until it was confiscated and handed over to a German named Alfred Rosner. Factories owned by Jews were confiscated and transferred to the so-called *Treue Hände,* that is, “faithful hands,” meaning that the new owners were *Volksdeutsche* – Germans from the Reich. A Jew, once the factory owner, now worked as an employee for starvation wages, as did the other workers, both Jews and Poles. This phenomenon, which occurred everywhere under the Nazi occupation, made a huge contribution to Germany’s economic recovery and its war economy. German industrialists received a considerable incentive to participate – an operating factory with trained workers, all for a very modest payment.

But let us return to Będzin, and to Alfred Rosner, who became the largest employer in Będzin, responsible for thousands of Jewish workers. The factory produced uniforms and textile products for the German army and was considered vital to the war effort. As a result, his workers were first protected from being sent to labor camps, and later protected from deportation to the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp. Each permit holder enjoyed some level of protection for themselves and for two family members. Thus, Yehiel, Sarah, and Dita were protected for the moment. The deportations from Będzin to Auschwitz began in the Spring of 1942. The first to be sent were welfare recipients, families with children, and the elderly, since these were considered by the Germans to be “unproductive.”

It should be noted that Auschwitz is just about 45 kilometers south of Będzin.

On the August 11, 1942, all the Jews remaining in Będzin were ordered to report the next day, ostensibly to register and have their certificates renewed. In truth, the goal was to deport more Jews to Auschwitz.

**From the testimony of Sarah Gerlitz: In 1942, on the twelfth of August, the first Aktion took place, when we were told that they wanted to exchange our identity cards. They gathered the whole population in three places. There was a sports field and two other places that I don’t remember. Everyone came, except for a few dozen who were sick and people who were afraid – who hid in their houses and didn’t come. They were only a few dozen from among thousands of Jews who came to exchange ID cards, having been told there would be no punishment. They kept us from morning until the next day, something like 36 hours. It rained terribly at night, and the next day it was hot – like in Israel – with the sun beating down on our heads. They sent thousands of Jews to Auschwitz. We still didn’t know that Auschwitz existed. I mean, we knew that there was a town called Auschwitz, but we didn’t know that there were crematoria there. But later it became clear to us where they took these Jews.**

On August 14, 5,000 Jews from Będzin were deported to Auschwitz. Dozens of Jews – among them children and babies – were murdered during the Aktion. Some, mainly unemployed and welfare recipients, committed suicide. The rest were returned to the town.

The Jews of Będzin were confined to a ghetto only in April 1943. The ghetto was located in an area of ​​the city called Kamionka that was set up as a large labor camp for the approximately 19,000 Jews who remained in the city after the Aktion and the deportations. Sarah, Yehiel, and Dita were also imprisoned there.

In June 1943, a major Aktion took place in Będzin. Today we know that this was the beginning of the liquidation of the ghetto. The Jews of Będzin, including Sarah and Yehiel, began to realize that their chances of survival were shrinking every day, even with Yehiel’s work permit. On June 22, the German police surrounded the ghetto area and their men gathered the Jews into the central square. This time, many Jews did not show up for selection – mainly old people, children and illegal residents – having realized that they would be deported. They tried to hide in “malinas” – hiding places around the ghetto. Sarah, Yehiel, and Dita came forward. The selection began – and the Germans started separating the Jews into two groups. This time, as Sarah testifies, they did not know whether they were in the group designated for work or for deportation, since each of the groups had a mix of young people, children, and the elderly. Suddenly, they see that one of the heads of the Jewish community removed his sister from their group and transferred her to the other. They realize that they are on the side designated for deportation. A short time later, a Jewish policeman grabs Dita and transfers her to the other group, as well. Sarah and Yehiel are seized with despair.

**From the testimony of Sarah Gerlitz: One of the Jewish policemen who had a bad reputation grabbed our daughter. I started shouting because I didn’t know where she had been taken. I fell into complete despair because I didn’t know which side I was on. If I was on the good side then my daughter is on the bad side, but if I am on the bad side then how will she manage without us? A little girl... if we have to die, then let’s die together with her. I remember that my husband sat down on the ground and grabbed his head… “let me think”... suddenly he got up.**

Yehiel begins to walk among the people – as if he sees and yet cannot be seen – and manages to reach the group to which Dita was taken. Sarah said in her testimony that it is a mystery to this day how they let him pass through, moving ever so slowly.

**From the testimony of Sarah Gerlitz: Suddenly my husband returns, wearing a policeman’s hat. He takes me by the hand, and slowly we pass through. It turned out that of 17,000 Jews, about 400 were selected to live, and the rest were sent to their deaths. This is how he took me out. He left our daughter with a friend who hid her under her dress. He told me that he realized that if he found the girl among those who were to live, he would try to save his wife as well. After the Aktion of June 22nd we knew that this was the end... that the ghetto was being liquidated.**

Following the Aktion, Sarah and Yehiel understood that Dita must be taken out of the ghetto and hidden with a Polish family. It was a very difficult decision, and a complex one, as well – first of all, from a technical point of view – that is, finding a Pole willing to take the risk of hiding a Jewish child. In Poland and the territories of Eastern Europe, helping Jews was punishable by death, and often whole families were killed for doing so. Of course, remaining in Będzin was risky for Yehiel, Sarah, and Dita, in the event they were caught and deported. This complex decision is difficult emotionally, as well. I think that we can understand why it took more than a year from the beginning of the deportations until Yehiel and Sarah come to the decision to hand Dita over into hiding. There is a slow internalization of a reality that is hard to come to terms with – a reality in which innocent people are hunted down and sent to their deaths. Even when news arrives about what happened in the places where people were being sent, the natural tendency of most people was to think that it won’t happen. People were taken, but they didn’t take me... I work for the Germans, which means I’m essential for them, so they won’t send me. Only when new Aktions take place do they come to understand the intent of the final solution – an overall, total destruction of the Jews – and that it is only a matter of time until it reaches you. The final straw is for parents to recognize that they can no longer protect their children. It took some time for Sarah and Yehiel to truly understand that they could no longer protect Dita.

Sabina Glocerowa, a nurse in the Warsaw ghetto, who also decided to hide her daughter on the Aryan side of the city after a long and difficult emotional struggle, said in her testimony, “In order to save the most precious creature in my world, I had to separate myself from her. I did not stop thinking about my daughter for a single moment.”

This, in essence, is the main point of the story. Handing over children during the Holocaust, is, in a sense, a violation of an unwritten contract between parent and child that the parent will always be there to protect the child and take care of them, mediate the world for them. During the Holocaust, in many cases, the only way to protect your child or save their life was by handing them over – usually to strangers. This is the opposite of our natural instinct. When there is danger or a difficult and frightening reality, our instinct is to hug close. In this case, parents had no choice but to do the opposite, and push away their children.

I want to illustrate the difficulty of parents forced to decide whether to hug close or push away with another story, and here too I will start with a letter – a letter from Genia Judzki. In August 1943, the Sosnowiecghetto was liquidated. Genia’s husband, Ber, was caught and murdered, but she managed to escape with their son Michál to the Aryan side and she succeeds in obtaining fake identity certificates for both of them. She turned Michál over to the care of a Polish woman named Bronja, while Genia found a job running the household of a German physician. On September 29, 1943, Genia sends the following letter:

**Dear Mrs. Bronja! It has been so hard for me to write to you lately... Bronja, I am writing to you and begging you, please, take care of my little son, be his mother. Make sure that Michál eats as much as possible, because who knows what awaits him, so it is important that he be big and strong. Again, I ask that he always have warm clothes and socks, I can’t write anymore, I’m out of tears. May God protect you. Sending kisses.**

Genia’s mental distress is obvious from the letter, yet she and her son are both already in a relatively safe place, no longer in the ghetto, in reasonable living conditions. We understand that her distress stems from the distance and separation from her son.

The doctor, instructed to relocate to Vienna for his work, offered to bring along Genia and her son. Sometime later, Genia’s identity was revealed; she was taken to a prison, while Michál was placed in an orphanage. When the Gestapo informed Genia of her imminent deportation, she decided to take her son with her, fearing that the orphanage would be destroyed.

In 1944, the mother and son were deported to Auschwitz and murdered. The children in the orphanage survived.

Let us return to the Gerlitz family, and to the decision made by Sarah and Yehiel. Sarah’s uncle, her father’s brother, was also in Będzin. He was there with his daughter and with two of his grandchildren. He managed to get a message to Theodor Florczak, a Pole of German origin, with whom he had business relations before the war. Florczak managed to sneak into the ghetto by wearing a yellow patch on his chest so as not to arouse suspicion, and he arrived at the uncle’s house. He did not agree to take the grandchildren because they looked too Jewish, he said. A short time later there was a knock at the door. Out of fear, the uncle asked Sarah to have Florczak enter her apartment.

**From Sarah Gerlitz’ testimony: I took him to my home. My daughter was four years old. He saw the girl and said, “This little angel I would take with me.” Since the events of June 22, I had prepared the girl for this possibility, but I hadn’t yet worked out a plan about who to give her to. I had said to her: Would you be willing to go to some Pole? So she says: Why? Am I keeping you from being saved? I said to her, no, you’re not stopping us, but you know that grown-ups can manage cold and heat and hunger and thirst, but you’ll need to pee. Or maybe we’ll have to cross some river – we know how to swim… Then she says: So father will take me on his back... I said: But what about all the other things... We don’t want to get rid of you. We want you to live and it will be easier for us to be saved. Then she said: But I want to live and die with you. I said to her: You saw on June 22 how they separated parents and children. So even if we die, we won’t die together. But this way, maybe we will manage to live together. When this person came and said “This little angel I would take with me,” I asked her: What do you think? And she looked at him from head to toe and said, “I am willing to go with this man, but only on the condition that you do everything to stay alive. Otherwise I don’t want to live either.” That afternoon he came with his wife. It was Wednesday or something like that, and they took her. I only gave her one change of clothes and said: Well, we’ll try... let’s see how she adjusts there... The next day, Thursday, he came with his wife and two daughters, with the girl already wearing a cross, to take more things. He wanted to show her that there was a way back... that she could go back and forth. But she already is wearing a cross... and she has a different hairdo... she already looks like a little *shiksa*. I gave him a bunch of clothes. On Saturday, he brought her to visit before noon, together with his wife. And I was so tempted, that I told him maybe she’d stay with us for one night because there is never an Aktion on Sunday. But he says: “I wouldn’t put her in that kind of danger.” The last train to Katowice left at 4:10 in the afternoon. They left the house before four. I was still looking through the window and saw the girl. The girl left before four. At eleven that night, the ghetto was surrounded. The Gestapo and SS had already surrounded the ghetto with searchlights. The liquidation of the ghetto had begun.**

On August 1, 1943, the Germans returned and entered the ghetto with reinforcements and began a week-long liquidation Aktion. In the course of this Aktion, which was carried out at the same time as a similar Aktion in the Sosnowiec ghetto, approximately 30,000 Jews from both ghettos were deported to Auschwitz. Sarah and Yehiel miraculously managed to be among those Jews who continued their jobs in the workshop, which became a sort of work camp for the Germans. After a few weeks, the Germans sent Jews to the ruins of the ghetto to collect valuables that remained there in order to send them to Germany. Yehiel volunteered to go, and he managed to reenter their apartment in the ghetto, remove valuables and hide them. A few days before they were deported from Będzin, a German named Roeder who helped the Jews in the shop managed to smuggle in Theodor Florczak (who was hiding Dita) and arrange for Sarah and Yehiel to meet with him. They gave him the valuables to help support the family, together with the farewell letter that Sarah wrote to Dita.

***My beloved and most precious child,
When I gave birth to you, my love, I did not imagine that six and a half years later I would have to write you this letter. The last time I saw you was on your sixth birthday, on December 13, 1943. I was under the false impression that I would see you again before we left, but now I know that that will not happen. I do not want to put you in danger. We will be traveling on Monday; now it is Friday evening… I am taking with me your beloved image, as you were in our home, your childish, sweet talk, the smell of your pure body, the rhythm of your breathing, your smile and your crying... I am carrying with me the terrible, abysmal fear that cannot be relieved even for one second... Remember your grandparents, your uncles and aunts, and the entire family. Remember all of us, and please, don’t blame us. And with regard to me, forgive me, forgive me, my dear child, for having given birth to you. I had wanted to bring you to the world so that you would live your life in your community, and if things turned out differently, it is not our fault. I therefore beg you, my darling baby, my only child, please don’t blame us. Try to be a good person, like you father and your ancestors, and love those people who are standing in for your parents, for they will certainly tell you about us. I would like you to recognize how much they are sacrificing on your behalf and you should make them proud so that they will not regret having taken you in. Another thing I want you to know is that your mother was a proud person, despite all the humiliation we suffered from our enemies, and if it is her destiny to die, she will die without protest, without weeping, with a scornful smile for her hangmen. I hug you to my heart, kiss you fervently, and bless you with all the power of a mother's heart and love.***

Sarah writes this letter to Dita with the understanding that they may not survive and reunite when the war finally ends. This is an unbearable thought. I spoke earlier about the difficulty parents had in handing over their children. Here we encounter another fundamental difficulty – the fact that parents who are being separated from their children cannot assure them that they will return. The promise of “I am leaving you here, but don’t worry, I’ll be back,” helps both sides part with some level of confidence, with some certainty. Such a promise helps reduce the feeling of abandonment for both parents and children. During the Holocaust, parents hand no choice but to hand their children over without being able to promise them that they will return... and the vast majority did not return. In the letter that Sarah wrote to Dita, one can feel her fear that she will not return and her realization that Dita may be unable to accept the fact that her parents gave her up and did not return.

In this letter Sarah is sharing her final words with Dita. What does she choose to write? We could spend months analyzing this letter; every sentence carries deep significance. I would like to note three things that stand out. First, her love for Dita, which appears repeatedly in countless words and ways. That Dita should always remember that she was given away to be hidden out of love and concern: “My beloved and most precious child,” “I am taking with me your beloved image,” “the taste of your sweet kisses,” and more. We gave you away, but you are beloved and you are always with us, in our hearts. Second, always remember that you are part of a family tradition... that you have roots... Sarah mentions the community repeatedly and asks Dita to remember her ancestors, her heritage, and that she hopes Dita will be as kind-hearted as they were. The third thing is the deep feeling of guilt, and the fear that Dita will never forgive them for having abandoned her. We, of course, understand what forced them to do it, but Dita was a six-and-a-half-year-old child when she was handed over to strangers.

“When I gave birth to you, my love, I did not imagine that six and a half years later I would have to write you this letter” – that is, I did not imagine that I would be forced to hand you over to strangers. “If God wills it and we survive, there are many things I will explain to you…that you do not understand, and, I assume, you couldn’t possibly understand if you grow up in a different environment and in an atmosphere of freedom... I hope and pray that you will not condemn us... that you will cherish our memory…”

It is important to understand that the Gerlitz family story is the story of many families who stood at this very crossroads and were forced to decide whether to hand over one’s child to a stranger, for an unknown time, to an unknown fate, or to hold’s one’s child close even as the threat of death becomes more and more tangible. This was a decision reserved only for Holocaust-era Jews, because, as Sarah writes in the letter, people who live in a different setting and in an atmosphere of freedom cannot understand, or even pretend to understand, such a reality.

At this point I would also like to refer to the three lines added to the letter by Yehiel.

**What can I possibly write to my only daughter who is more precious than anything in the world? You would have to open my heart and examine it, because no pen can describe what is there right now, at this moment. I believe with complete faith, despite everything, that we will prevail and return our hearts to one another.**

Effectively, Yehiel is writing to Dita that he is unable to articulate his feelings to her in writing. The inability to describe the situation to those who are not actually in it, and the lack of words to describe the reality or their feelings related to it, is something that recurs frequently in final diaries and letters, as well as in testimonies given after the Holocaust.

Along with this letter, Sarah and Yehiel give Roeder the address of Yehiel’s brother, Zev, who lived in the United States. They asked him to let Zev know that Dita would be staying with the Florczak family along with their address, in the event Sarah and Yehiel do not survive.

Three days after the letter was sent, the workshop in Będzin was closed for good, and Sarah and Yehiel were transferred to the Annaberg labor camp, a sub-camp of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. A few months later, in January 1945, they were taken on a death march to Gross-Rosen, together with the rest of the remaining Annaberg prisoners. The prisoners walked in the snow for eight days; those who fell were shot on the spot. At the end of the march they are loaded onto coal wagons and after two further days of travel they arrive at Gross-Rosen.

**From the testimony of Sara Gerlitz: While we were in Annaberg we were still human beings, or at least we felt that we succeeded in keeping our humanity. We were still people, even though we were hungry, even though we were humiliated many times. Still, it seemed to us at the time that we had reached the lowest rung of existence. But when we arrived in Gross-Rosen, when we arrived to Buchenwald, when we got to Mauthausen, when we got to Bergen-Belsen, we saw that there was no end to evil, no limit. As much as we always thought this was it, it couldn’t get worse, we later came to know that there was no bottom.**

Sarah was a prisoner in the Gross-Rosen camp for two weeks and from there she was transferred via Buchenwald to another camp, to Mauthausen.

Despite the search she underwent in every camp, Sarah managed to hide between her fingers a photo wrapped in cellophane with the faces of Dita, Yehiel, and her parents. Miraculously, Sarah managed to keep the picture in all the camps she was in. From Mauthausen, Sarah was sent on a death march and traveled in cattle cars for long days, in the snow, in the cold, with almost no food, ultimately arriving in Bergen-Belsen. Sarah, like many other survivors, said that Bergen-Belsen was the worst nightmare of the concentration camps where she was interned.

**From the testimony of Sara Gerlitz: I regained consciousness on April 28. Two weeks after liberation, when I was already in the hospital. I had been full of sores and was stuck to a corpse, I could not move... and suddenly I found myself in a bed, alone, everything white. By my hand was a stool with a white napkin and a beer bottle with a sycamore branch sticking out. I was sure that I was in the next world... that it couldn’t be… It was the morning and for some reason I began to cry. And I cried for hours and hours. After liberation I learned that on that day – April 28, at that time – my husband collapsed on the death march.**

After liberation, Sarah remained hospitalized for four months. While recuperating, Sarah wrote letters to the Florczak family to let them know that she was alive, but not a single letter reached its destination. When she became stronger, Sarah returned to Buchenwald together with Pula, her niece, who also survived, because she heard from a mutual friend that the last time he saw Yehiel was there. Yehiel was not in Buchenwald, and Sarah decides to go to Katowice to look for Dita, hoping that she might meet him there.

**From the testimony of Sara Gerlitz: It was the seventh of August, and it was very hot. I arrived at Mikulowska 44, the house where I knew… A total of four houses in Katowice were bombed and destroyed, and this was one of those houses. I sat down on the ruins and thought: What do I do next? People passed by and saw a skeleton sitting there in despair and they asked if they could help me. I said: The Florczak family used to live here, but the house is destroyed. I am coming back from a camp. Does anyone know what happened to the family? And they tell me that, yes, they lived here... now they live on Wanda Street. They gave me the address. And I go there on foot, they lived on the fifth floor, the elevator was broken. And I go up to the fifth floor and don’t dare ring the doorbell because now my fate is decided. And I sit on the stairs and don’t know what to do...**

Suddenly, the 14-year-old son of the Florczaks arrived. He recognized Sarah and said to her, “Sarah, are you here? Yehiel and Dita are waiting for you on the train.” Sarah says that she fainted on the spot. When she recovered, she hurried to the train station. There, on the floor in the waiting room, sat Yehiel. Yehiel didn’t recognize Sarah, but Dita, who recognized her immediately, jumped up and shouted “Mommy!”

It turns out that Yehiel had arrived in Katowice about two months before Sarah. From the moment he arrived, Dita would not let him out of her sight. Every day they went to the train station in the hope that Sarah would come. On August 7, 1945, two years after Dita was handed over to the Florczaks as a six year old, the family was reunited.

This is, without question, an exciting moment, yet it is a moment, which I say with great pain, that few Holocaust survivors enjoyed. The vast majority of survivors were left alone in the world.

In 1951, after several years in Germany, Sarah, Yehiel, and Dita immigrated to Israel. Two years later their son, Yisachar, was born. In 1956 Dita married Uri, and they had three children. Dita died in 1997, a few years after her mother’s passing, and was blessed to have six grandchildren.

You must be wondering what happened to the letter. The letter, as I said at the beginning, was never opened...

This is the testimony that Sarah gave at Yad Vashem in 1986:

**When we got our daughter back, we got this letter back, too. Our daughter never saw this letter, I didn’t give it to her. She is very sensitive and she hasn’t gotten over the experience. She can’t talk about those times, which shows that she hasn’t gotten over it. But I still want to make copies of it to leave to my children. The original will go to Yad Vashem.**