

Art As Witness: The Work & Remarkable Survival Story of Esther Lurie

Dr. Shay Pilnik
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“We were put to work on fortifications, slept in tents, and shouldering shovels, were marched off to work every morning in parties of 100...It must have been pitiful to look at this procession of ours. We fully realized how we looked when we were being driven through a German town, where people gazed at us in horror, wringing their hands. By then we had become indifferent to our appearance. Hardly anyone had anything to wear, except rags. Many went barefoot, others had all sorts of incredibly queer footwear. On the left we wore a white patch bearing a prison number and the star of David.”

“When all clothing had been distributed each of us had one set of underwear, one dress, cardigan, one blanket, one pair of boots or wooden clogs: only one pair of socks between the two of us. As nearly all these items were secondhand, it was obvious that they would not last us long, considering the hard physical work we had to do each day; and before long, a considerable number of us had no clothing left. To say nothing of the awkward feeling of lacking clothes, we faced another hardship: when the cold was not too biting, we had to take off our coats while working, because, the Germans argued, they would hamper our movements...We were completely apathetic, having lost everything.”

“Our greatest hardships began when winter came, with totally insufficient clothing, we huddled together at night to keep each other warm. During the day we wrapped every rag we could find around our bodies. Our most precious possession was our blanket. We kept cutting strips off and made them into head, foot, and hand gear. It was hard to decide which part of the body felt the cold most and was in greatest need of some sort of clothing. The majority had turned their blankets into dresses and those who still owned a blanket, or part of a blanket, would call themselves rich indeed. The blankets had to serve as skirt, cape, or shawl.”

From the YIVO Archive testimony of Esther Lurie



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