

# Esther and Elias

**ESTHER:** On a Saturday morning, 1944, early in the morning around 7 o'clock, somebody knocked on the door very hard. We didn't know what was happening. The Germans were outside. They gave us exactly two hours to get ready. Two of my brothers were begging my mother for permission to let them go up in the attic and hide. My mother was screaming like anything. She said she was not going to leave anybody behind. Everybody — the whole family was going. We were very close. The whole family was going to go together. So my two brothers didn't have any choice. We all got ready.

We took a couple of loaves of bread and a quilt or a blanket. They took us to a big place and gathered everybody together. The Germans were organized. They had a schedule. Everybody's name was written down. They knew how many people were there. And that afternoon they sent trucks like they carry horses in. Everybody got in the trucks. It was March 25 and it was snowing. They called our names out and checked a list before they put us in the truck. I was completely lost. I was twenty-two years old. I said, "What are they going to do to us? Where are they going to take us?"

**ELIAS:** They put us in a big truck without food or anything and we went to a little town. There we were put in one big building that used to be a warehouse. Over 2000 people in one building without food, not a thing. After eight days, a train came. Seventy-five people — children, old people, families — were put in each car of the train. The train traveled through Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, through Czechoslovakia, and stopped at Auschwitz, Poland. Eight days and nights. A lot of people died in the train cars by the time the train reached Auschwitz.

**ESTHER:** When we arrived at Auschwitz, everybody was asking, "What are they going to do?" Two German men came and took us out of the train. You know if you sit ten days in a train and you don't stretch your feet, it's very hard to walk. They separated us when we came out of the train. They put the young people on the right, the old people on the left. Of all my family, only one of my brothers and me came out of Auschwitz. Everybody else went that same night to the gas chambers. I told the German officer, "I want to go with my mother," and he said, "You cannot go with your mother because she cannot walk. You're going to walk. And you're going to meet them tonight." And we walked. And we never saw them again.

[Both Esther and Elias survived, they said, because of a combination of determination to live, religious faith, and luck. Esther remembers eating rotten potato peelings. Elias used to eat grass when no other food was available. Once Elias and his brother rubbed their faces with snow and ice to redden them. Their idea was to look healthy enough to be selected for a forced labor program — one way to delay extermination.

While Esther and Elias survived their stay in the camps, other members of their families did not. Esther's sisters and brothers, her first husband, her mother and many relatives died at Auschwitz. Elias never saw his first wife and child again after the night the trains unloaded. After the war both returned to their village hoping to find their

families again. It was at this time that Esther and Elias became friends and eventually married. In 1951 they moved to North Carolina.]

1. How did Esther's family first learn that the Nazis were coming?
2. How long were they given to get ready to leave their home?
3. Why didn't Esther's brothers try to escape by hiding in the attic of their house?
4. What was the first thing that happened to the family after they left their home?
5. How long did the train trip take? Where was the train going? What do you think would be worst part of the train trip?
6. What happened to the people on the train after it got to Auschwitz?
7. What were three things that Esther and Elias say helped them to survive?