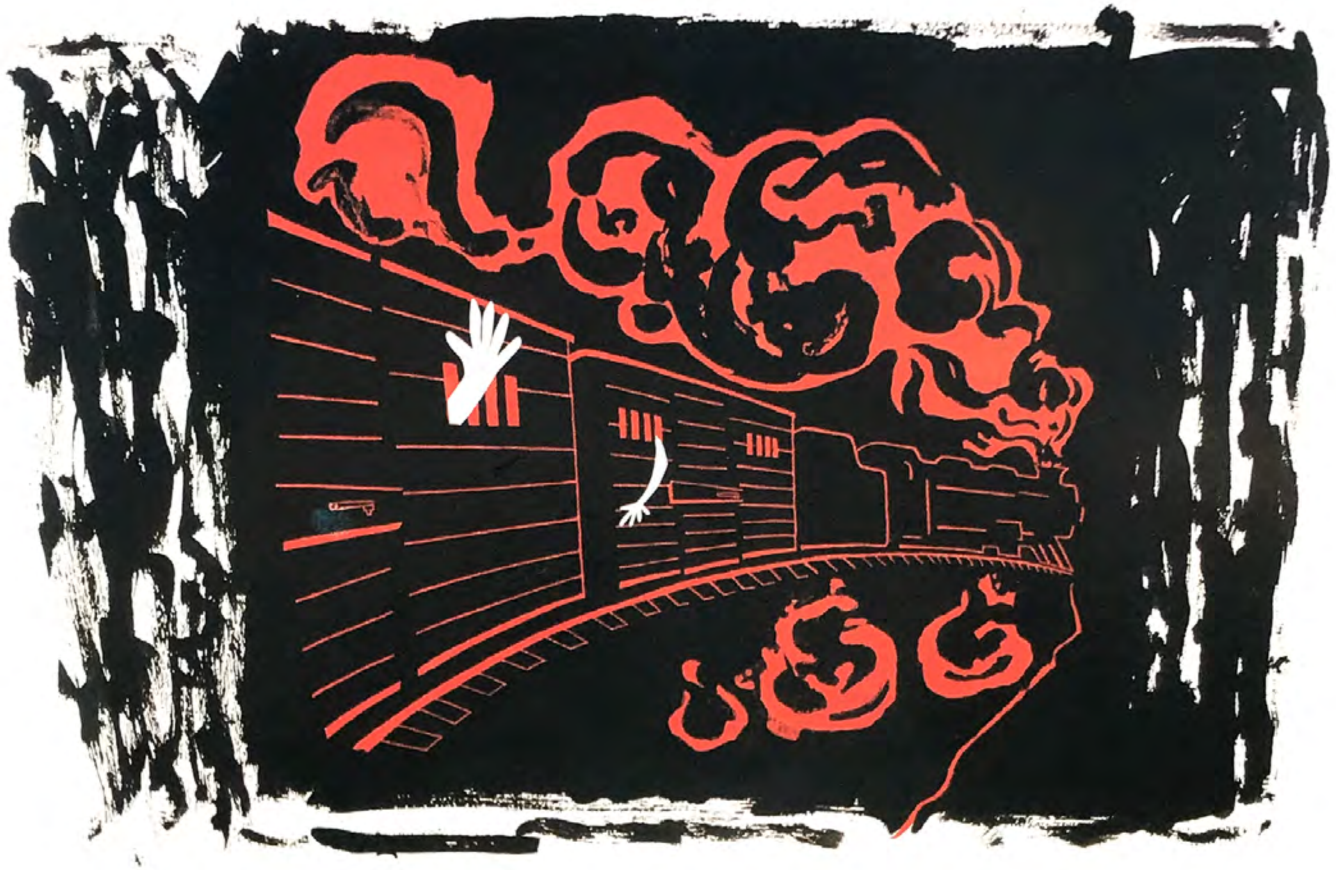
“I heard the news; I trembled and became speechless.”

On March 19, 1944, when the Germans occupied Hungary, my life and the lives of many others changed forever. Soon after the occupation, all Jews had to be identified on their clothing with a large yellow Star of David. Their property was taken away, and they were moved to the ghettos. I volunteered with an organization that served as a liaison between the Jews and the German commandant. I was working in the Country Division.

One day, a very excited man came and wanted to be seen by the top delegate. He described the first loading of Jews into boxcars: they were jammed shoulder to shoulder, squeezed together, without food or water, with only the clothes on their backs. The doors were locked from the outside, and the trains were heading toward an unknown destination. Although I knew nothing about the fate of Jews elsewhere in Europe, from that moment on, I knew that my only hope for the future lay in the American forces occupying Sicily, the imminent invasion in France, and the advancing Russians from Stalingrad. When the bombs started dropping on Budapest, I knew that survival would require sacrifice.



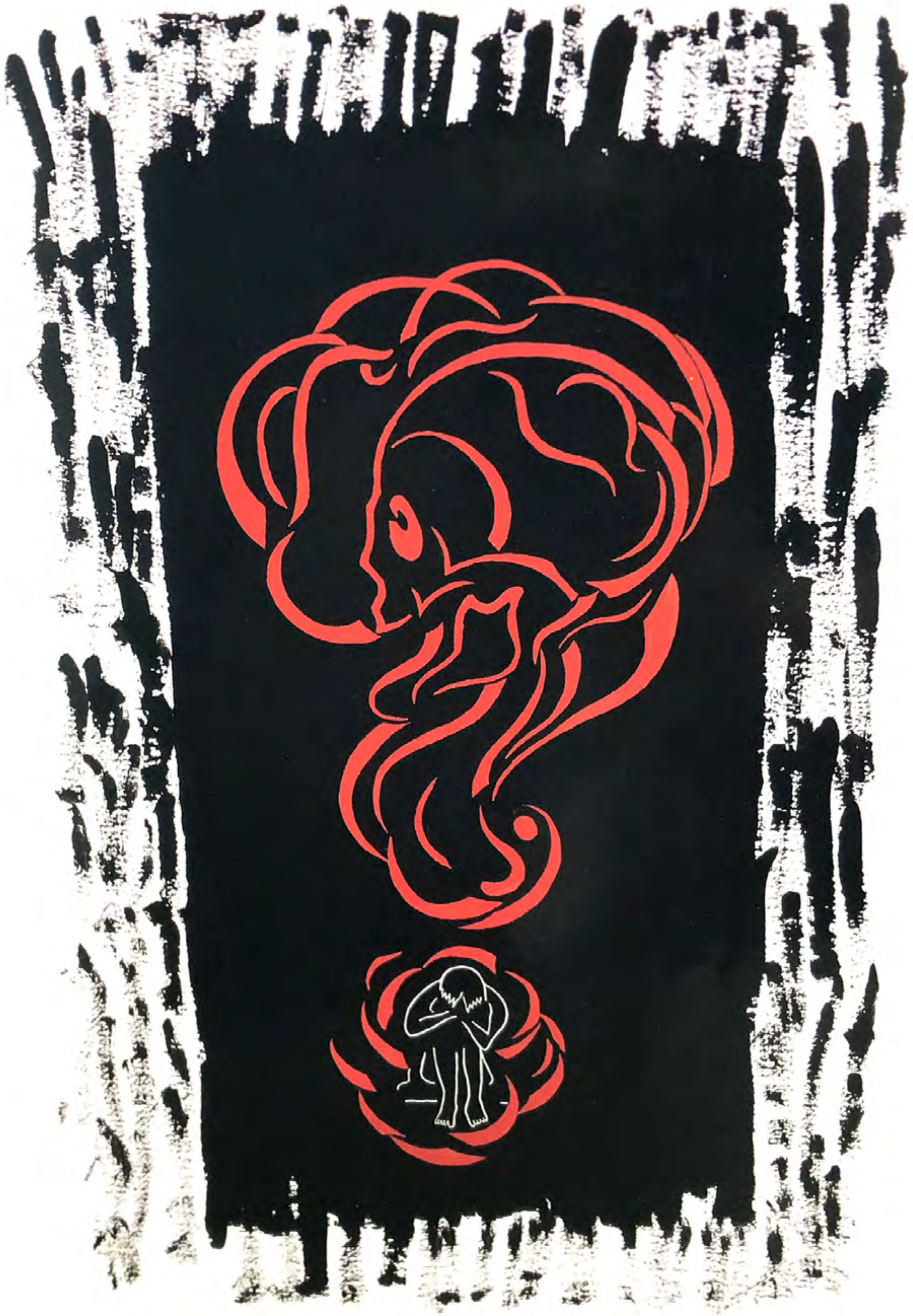
"I cried out against the brutality, but no one listened."

I can still see my father as he waved to me for the last time. After that I was taken to a work camp with 280 men aged 18 to 48. We worked very hard, and although I had not previously done any physical labor, I was young, and I quickly got used to it. We were used for the hardest, most dangerous tasks, such as digging out unexploded bombs. During air raids, we had to stay nearest the military storage for explosives because, as they said, if we were hit, "At least the ammunition would not be wasted."

They fed us well at the camp, but their cruelty can be best expressed this way: When they confiscated things and searched us, they ripped to shreds all photographs of family members we had in our possession. Fathers watched as their precious pictures—maybe their last glimpses of loved ones—were destroyed before their eyes. As the military snatched them away, they would exclaim, "You don't need these pictures any more, because you will never see your family again!"

“Outside, we were destroyed by weapons; inside, by terror.”

January 1945: We were now with many others near the Austrian border. Imagine the oval brick burner building with its small opening filled with crawling skeletons. For two nights, we were forced to stay in the furnace room. The smell of decomposing bodies and incineration containers full of human excrement was indescribable. In the darkness, we had no way to distinguish the dead from the dying. Millions of lice had invaded us. What a hopeless fight—fingers exhausted from endless scratching and nails broken by futile smashing. This point marked the beginning of an epidemic. My suspicions about our destiny were confirmed.



“Death rushed through our windows.”

An epidemic of typhus, a disease transmitted by lice, broke out two weeks later. I was the first one to have a high fever; then many prisoners started to collapse, one after another, unable to walk. The Germans reacted by kicking them, but soon realized there was an epidemic and set up a room for the sick. The doctor sent for me and said, “You have to stay in there.”

“Not me,” I said; “I would rather work, even with the fever.” The food was wonderful for the sick ones, since it included chocolate, an unimaginable luxury item. Oh, how tempting it was!

Twenty-nine people were confined to the sick room. One day, two trucks came to pick them up. The driver said, “Come on, there’s room for 30 in the hospital where I’m taking these people.”

“Fisch,” the doctor said, “you’re the sickest; come.” But I did not go. I did not trust them. The doctor told me I was crazy not to go and said that he never wanted to see me or hear my complaints again. Many who were well volunteered to go to the “hospital,” but only one “lucky” one was chosen to be number 30.

All were shot at the edge of the village.