

What Cannot Be Taken
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“...but what you have in your head or in your hands nobody can take away. The security lies within you.”

Not everything that survives makes noise.

Some things survive in silence, in moments before surrendering, and in the choice to retain one’s identity, despite forces that sought to strip people of dignity.

Sophie Lazar lived during a time when being human wasn’t enough to be treated as one. People were reduced to names, numbers, and lists that could be crossed out. For a while, I believed surviving something like that meant only one thing: staying alive.

Her story taught me otherwise.

Lazar once said, “What you have in your head or in your hands, nobody can take away. The security lies within you.” At first, I only heard her words. Now, I understand what they cost.

Before the camps took her, war had taken almost everything. Her father died from starvation in the Lodz ghetto. During the ghetto’s liquidation, she was separated from her mother and sisters; they were never reunited.

In August 1944, Lazar was deported to Auschwitz. She described arriving to shaved heads, striped uniforms, and the smell rising from the chimneys; a presence that filled the air.

She was distraught, not from weakness, but from the sudden loss of everything that once defined her life. Yet even there, she made a choice. She refused to believe Auschwitz would be the end of her story. When the world attempted to erase her identity, she held onto memory and imagined a future when none seemed possible.

She didn’t survive by breathing alone. She survived by choosing who she would be.

Even as a young woman, Lazar was responsible for an entire block of houses in the ghetto. She kept records, organized workers, and took responsibility for others in a place where caring could cost a life. While many fought to endure another day, she fought to remain human.

The camps took nearly everything: food, family, safety, freedom. But they also tried to take something even more profound: the idea that life had meaning. Lazar refused to accept that. She held on by remembering that her life still mattered.

While many struggled for physical survival, she fought to preserve meaning. Lazar’s testimony reshaped my perspective. Her story reveals hope does not end the pain or depend on certainty, but on finding meaning no matter how impossible the future seems.

As a Kurdish girl, I recognize this form of hope. It is not loud. It does not promise resolution. It survives through history, through loss, through generations that were never meant to suffer. My people, the Kurds, have faced efforts to erase our language and culture, yet we learned to preserve who we are. This is not the hope of a solution, but rather the refusal to be erased.

When life feels heavy, when silence feels easier, her story reminds me hope does not always announce itself. Sometimes, it lives in the smallest decision; to remain.

And if meaning could survive in a place designed to destroy it, then it could survive anywhere

*in fear,
in uncertainty,
and in me.*