THERE WAS A WOMAN among us, a certain Mrs. Schächter. She was in her fifties and her ten-year-old son was with her, crouched in a corner. Her husband and two older sons had been deported with the first transport, by mistake. The separation had totally shattered her. I knew her well. A quiet, tense woman with piercing eyes, she had been a frequent guest in our house. Her husband was a pious man who spent most of his days and nights in the house of study. It was she who supported the family. Mrs. Schächter had lost her mind. On the first day of the jour- ney, she had already begun to moan. She kept asking why she had been separated from her family. Later, her sobs and screams be- came hysterical. On the third night, as we were sleeping, some of us sitting, huddled against each other, some of us standing, a piercing cry broke the silence: ”Fire! I see a fire! I see a fire!" 24There was a moment of panic. Who had screamed? It was Mrs. Schächter. Standing in the middle of the car, in the faint light fil- tering through the windows, she looked like a withered tree in a field of wheat. She was howling, pointing through the window: “Look! Look at this fire! This terrible fire! Have mercy on me!” Some pressed against the bars to see. There was nothing. Only the darkness of night. It took us a long time to recover from this harsh awakening. We were still trembling, and with every screech of the wheels, we felt the abyss opening beneath us. Unable to still our anguish, we tried to reassure each other: “She is mad, poor woman…” Someone had placed a damp rag on her forehead. But she nev- ertheless continued to scream: “Fire! I see a fire!” Her little boy was crying, clinging to her skirt, trying to hold her hand: “It's nothing, Mother! There's nothing there…Please sit down…” He pained me even more than did his mother's cries. Some of the women tried to calm her: “You'll see, you'll find your husband and sons again…In a few days…” She continued to scream and sob fitfully. “Jews, listen to me,” she cried. “I see a fire! I see flames, huge flames!” It was as though she were possessed by some evil spirit. We tried to reason with her, more to calm ourselves, to catch our breath, than to soothe her: “She is hallucinating because she is thirsty, poor woman… That's why she speaks of flames devouring her…” But it was all in vain. Our terror could no longer be contained. 25Our nerves had reached a breaking point. Our very skin was aching. It was as though madness had infected all of us. We gave up. A few young men forced her to sit down, then bound and gagged her. Silence fell again. The small boy sat next to his mother, crying. I started to breathe normally again as I listened to the rhythmic pounding of the wheels on the tracks as the train raced through the night. We could begin to doze again, to rest, to dream… And so an hour or two passed. Another scream jolted us. The woman had broken free of her bonds and was shouting louder than before: “Look at the fire! Look at the flames! Flames everywhere…” Once again, the young men bound and gagged her. When they actually struck her, people shouted their approval: “Keep her quiet! Make that madwoman shut up. She's not the only one here…” She received several blows to the head, blows that could have been lethal. Her son was clinging desperately to her, not uttering a word. He was no longer crying. The night seemed endless. By daybreak, Mrs. Schächter had settled down. Crouching in her corner, her blank gaze fixed on some faraway place, she no longer saw us. She remained like that all day, mute, absent, alone in the midst of us. Toward evening she began to shout again: “The fire, over there!” She was pointing somewhere in the distance, always the same place. No one felt like beating her anymore. The heat, the thirst, the stench, the lack of air, were suffocating us. Yet all that was nothing compared to her screams, which tore us apart. A few more days and all of us would have started to scream. 26But we were pulling into a station. Someone near a window read to us: “Auschwitz.” Nobody had ever heard that name.