

**Mauritius Berner**  
**Oh, my chosen people!**  
*(Óh, kiválasztott népem!)*

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Oh, my  
chosen people!



*"There is no nightmare or depravity that man  
can dream of that has not occurred here."*

*-Dr Mauritius Berner, Dachau, 1945.*



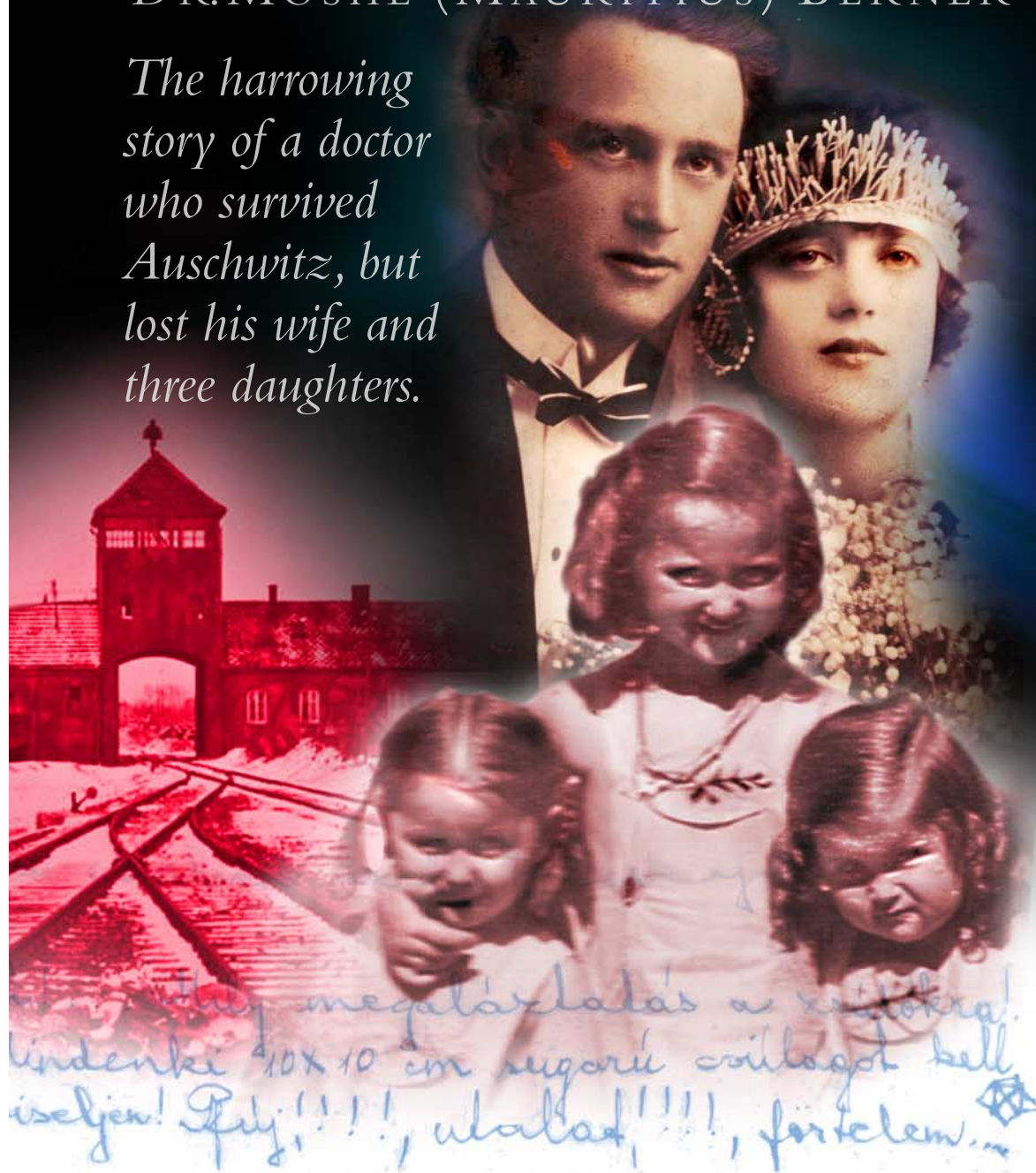
*"Then it occurred. We rounded the corner of a hut and saw a huge bonfire. Silhouetted by its flames we became aware of guards hurling what appeared to be rubbish into the fire. We grew closer and heard the screams and wails as living infants were picked and thrown into the fire[...] Our faces must have registered our disbelief at this brutality, for a guard casually muttered, 'Don't worry, they're not your kids, they were burned in the crematorium earlier!'"*

- Re-discovered 1947 book. Translated for the first time into English.
- The harrowing story of a doctor who survived Auschwitz, but lost his wife and three daughters.
- Written in the immediate weeks following liberation from Dachau.
- Shocking accounts of the daily torture endured by prisoners, including previously little known horrors.
- Historical essay by the acclaimed biographer, Eilat Negev, with transcripts of Dr. Berner's testimony at the 1964 Frankfurt War Crimes Trials.

# Oh, my chosen people!

DR. MOSHE (MAURITIUS) BERNER

*The harrowing  
story of a doctor  
who survived  
Auschwitz, but  
lost his wife and  
three daughters.*



# Oh, my chosen people!

DR. MOSHE (MAURITIUS) BERNER

*In memory of my wife Ida  
and our three little daughters, Zsuzsi, Nora and Helga.  
And of my brother Izidor Berner, his wife Rozsa  
and their son David, who all perished  
in the Auschwitz crematoria.*



Translated and edited  
by Martin Baker and Inbal Berner.  
With an historical essay by Eilat Negev.



*Dr. Moshe Berner, aged 28 in 1930.  
He wears the tunic of a Medical Lieutenant  
in the Royal Hungarian Army.*

English translation of, *Oh, kiválasztott népem!* Bolyai, 1947,  
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## Zsuzsi's diary - the last entries

*These pages from Zsuzsi's diary were discovered in Budapest. They were included in the 2025 exhibition 'Jews in Transylvania', at the Jewish Museum, Budapest.*

28.III.1944. I am so excited! We've finished school, and the report cards will be issued soon! Because the war is raging, my dear little diary, we Jews are in a particularly difficult situation.

III-28.  
Roppanó izgulok! Fejeztük az iskolát,  
és nemtörőn kérem a bizonyítványt!  
Mert tombol a háború, kicsi naplóm,  
s nekünk zsidóknak különösen nehéz  
a sorunk. És még ilyen gondok is, hogy  
3-4 város szándékából és történelméből,  
hittanból meg kellest! De lehet, hogy  
kissé szigorú vagyok önmagamhoz, és  
biztos van még egy pár egyesem, úgy,  
hogy még kellemes meglepetés is érhet.  
Máskülönben közeledik az anyuka szü-  
letésnapja! Elhatároztuk mi hárman,  
hogy saját kerestünkből fogjuk a leg-  
jobb anyát megajándékozni. En tanítónő  
ket kislányunként németül (a világ  
legszébb nyelve, azonkívül a nép. is  
nagyon kedves, tapasztaltam, mert  
most itt vannak Masovásárhelyen) e-  
zért kapok 10 Ft. Mindennap lecsodok  
az iskolától, és addigra 6 Ft. A szobá-  
sunk egy hónapra 36 Ft. Rendszer, nem?

And even with such troubles I expect 3 In arithmetic and history, and a 2 in religion. But maybe I'm a bit strict and I'm sure I've got a few more one grades, so I'm in for a pleasant surprise.

Otherwise, Mum's birthday is coming up! The three of us decided to make it on our own. We're going to give the best mother a present from our own earnings.

I'm teaching my two little sisters German (the most beautiful language in the world, and the

IV-4.  
Ma van a bizonyítvány kiosztása! Most  
reggel 1/28, 9-ne kell ott lenni! Fújaj!  
Gyors felek! — Most jöttem haza. Tis-  
ta egyes, vagyok!!!!!! Ehhez fogható or-  
mám meg az életben nem volt! Még  
az iskolán előtt, az udvaron, adajon hoz-  
tam Margit néni! (Gla néni után legked-  
vesebb tanárnőm) és azt mondta: <sup>szépen</sup>  
milyen rossz bizonyítványod van! Még  
mondjam, hogy milyen? Tiszta egyes!  
En már akkor voltam! Előzőhöz ké-  
szülve a legrosszabbra. És mikor  
kiosztják, lám, tiszta egyes! Csak 3-  
nak volt ilyen, az egész osztályból!!!  
Mondtam is anyukának, hogy ez egész  
biztos — Glóra műve, aki nem hagy-  
ta cserben az ő. <sup>szépen</sup> Kiosztóját!  
IV-5.  
Oh!... Mily megaláztatás a zsidókra!  
Mindenké 10x10 cm szigorú csillagot kell  
viseljen! Fúj!!!, utalás!!!, fértelen...

people are also nice, I've experienced it here in Marosvásárhely), so I get 10 pengő. Every day I clear the table, and for that it's 6 pengő. Our allowance for a month is 36 pengő. Great, isn't it?

4.IV.1944. Today is the report cards distribution! You have to be there by half-past eight in the morning! Oh dear! I'm scared!

I just got home. All the grades are 1!!!! I have never had such joy in my life. Before class, in the courtyard, Aunt<sup>1</sup> Margit (the nicest teacher after Aunt Lia) comes up to me and says, 'Zsuzsi, what a bad report card you have! Shall I tell you how it is? All 1 grades!' And I cried already by then! I was prepared for the worst. And when they handed it out it was all 1 grades! Only 3 of the whole class had that!!! I told my mom that it must have been Kósa who didn't let her Zsuzska down!

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<sup>1</sup> 'Aunt' is a respectful title for a female teacher.



Nira Berner, and her son Omer at the exhibiton, 'Jews in Transylvania' at the Hungarian Jewish Museum, in Budapest, 2025. A page from Zsuzsi's diary can be seen exhibited behind them.

5.IV.1944. Oh!.. How humiliating for the Jews! Everyone must wear a 10x10cm star!!!! Yuck!!! hate!!!! Abomination...



On the 29th May 1944, fifty-five days after her last entry, Zsuzsi, her twin sisters Nora and Helga, with their mother, were murdered at Auschwitz.



Ida Berner, 1937.

The text below is a passage from Ezekiel 37, describing a vision where the Prophet asks if dry bones can live, and God instructs him to prophesy that He will cause breath to enter them, bringing them to life.

## Seventy-two days

IT IS SUNDAY, March 19th, 1944. After eighteen months of forced labour, I have been allowed home, to return to my family for five days. It is a beautiful, sunny afternoon in early spring. The city's inhabitants cannot know that in a few hours they will swarm like ants, trying to make sense of the rumours, trying to extract fact from fiction.

At the cinema, the audience at the six o'clock screening is shown newsreel of a shocking event that has occurred in Hungary. The next performance, at eight o'clock, is cancelled, and the audience has their tickets refunded at the box office. They are told that a decree from the Minister of the Interior has closed all cinemas and places of entertainment.

In frustration, the audience pours out into the street, vociferously demanding the reason for the ban. They meet others who seemingly, as is always the case, know from 'reliable sources' that the Regent, Miklós Horthy, is critically ill, or possibly even dead. The police disperse the crowds, announcing that all public gatherings are forbidden.

Everyone rushes home to try to discover what has happened from their radios, although many Jews no longer possess receivers, as months before, the police confiscated them.

That evening, even those still in possession of a wireless remain ignorant, because there is no news of the incident given by Hungarian radio, which only broadcasts non-stop Gypsy music and military

marches. Foreign broadcasting stations give no information either. But there is a general fear that something momentous has happened. Christians and Jews alike spend the night without sleep. Everyone waits impatiently for the morning bulletins. Perhaps they will tell us what's happening.

Nevertheless, the following day, Monday, no explanation is broadcast either. There is feverish speculation, along with exaggerated stories that alarm everyone. It is only after three days, on Wednesday, that foreign radio stations break the news that German troops have entered Hungary and have removed the government.<sup>1</sup> The Regent himself, Admiral Horthy, has been placed under German supervision. Some workers in nearby offices manage to get a telephone connection with Budapest, and from them, news spreads like wildfire; and, as usual, in different versions of the truth.

The radio plays military music incessantly. Newspapers have not arrived for days, and it is impossible to travel to and from Budapest; however, from the few facts that we have, it is certain that something life-changing has occurred, especially for us Jews. On the fourth day, Hungarian radio announces that the government has resigned, and

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<sup>1</sup> On March 20th 1944, Adolf Eichmann arrived in Budapest, to oversee the 'final solution to the Jewish question' in Hungary. Hitler also appointed an SS Holocaust perpetrator, Edmund Veessenmayer, as Reich Commissioner for Hungary. Although sentenced in 1949 to 20 years imprisonment for war crimes, Veessenmayer was released in 1951 by the United States High Commission. According to British intelligence, he subsequently encouraged movements to restore Nazism in Germany. He died in 1977.

that Admiral Horthy has accepted its resignation. A new government is formed, headed by Döme Sztójay, a former envoy in Berlin, as Prime Minister, along with Minister of the Interior, Andor Jaross, and Secretary of State, László Endre. Their reputation as rabid anti-Semites is enough to increase our anxiety.

The new government announces that, "In order to achieve the common war goals more fully, German troops have entered the country." The Hungarian government remains silent about the size of the invading units and their aims. The very next day, Hungarian radio heightens its anti-Semitic broadcasts.

We Jews of Transylvania have long wondered how a German occupation might affect us, although we are reassured by the fact that the German troops stop at the Tisza River, many miles to the West of us in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mures,). We hope that fate will be kind to us, and that we will remain beyond the reach of the Germans. We draw encouragement from the good will of the Christians around us, and of local military units of the Ninth Division, and the Székely Guard. I had spoken with many of them, and they assured me faithfully that they will defend the Jews of Transylvania as vigorously as they would any other Hungarian, and that they were determined to prevent the entry of the Germans into our region. A sign of their goodwill towards us is that they assure us that they are counting on the participation of Jews in this fight.

I believe that they mean what they say, however,

the new government, with cynical disregard of their patriotism, hands over the combat-ready Székely Division to the Germans in one fell swoop. These soldiers are ordered to report for training, taken to the front line and incorporated into German army units.

Over the recent months, Jews had listened anxiously to the increasingly belligerent words pouring from Hungarian radio, fearing that they would inflame the barely hidden antagonism of people towards us. One after another, anti-Jewish decrees had been published by the authorities. The first order commands that from April 1st 1944, no Jewish household is allowed to hire Christian servants. The law even applies to Christians employing those of their own faith, while living in the homes of Jews. Our wives and children receive this decree with shrugs of indifference. They decide that they will do the housework themselves. Jewish girls from poorer families immediately offer to work as servants for families that could still afford them.

The decree of the yellow star, is enforced on April 5th. It is intended to distinguish Jews from others. This is more pernicious, not only for its demeaning purpose, but because it also applies to children, who are forced to wear it. Their journey to and from school now becomes hazardous, with threats and acts of intimidation by neighbouring thugs. A further decree severely affects the freedom of movement of Jews, restricting us from travelling by train or any other means of transport. Within two

weeks, Jews are effectively confined to their homes. We are forbidden to use the postal service. We cannot write letters, send telegrams, or send or receive money.

In the middle of April, on a Friday, the feared German Gestapo appears in our town, and within a few hours, the control of the traffic in the city is taken over by the German military police. The Gestapo close our places of worship. Evening prayers are no longer permitted in the two large synagogues in our city. A German military guard is placed over the house of God. The next morning, a rumour spreads that many of our Jewish dignitaries have been taken into police custody. Terror and anxiety permeates every home. We wait our turn.

The Germans summon our Jewish leaders to appear before them, and order the immediate establishment of a Jewish council. The Nazis declare that they will only communicate with the Jewish population through this assembly. They inform the Jewish leaders that they are entirely responsible, at the risk of their lives, for their community's strict observance and execution of the military authority's orders; and that the lives of the hostages held captive by the Gestapo, depended on this.

The task assigned to the Council is not easy. It is ordered to collect as much as 500,000 pengő<sup>2</sup> within twenty-four hours, and to provide the Germans with 110 fully furnished apartments, with

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<sup>2</sup> The Pengő was the currency of Hungary between 1927 and 1946. In 1941 200,000 pengő was worth about 40,000 USD.

the best furniture, carpets and pictures. They are also to collect all typewriters, fine linen, and silver cutlery.

We obey because we want to save our lives, and those of the Jewish Council, as their lives are as precious as our own. The only Jewish newspaper that the authorities permit us to publish, the *Magyarországi Zsidók Lapja* (Hungarian Jews' Newspaper), is still appearing. It dutifully publishes the government's orders, making dramatic appeals to the Jewish community to fulfill their duty of sacrifice, to bear the burdens imposed on us and to accept the fate that God had chosen for us. We no longer have synagogues. We feel that our fate is getting worse by the minute. Every Jewish home becomes a synagogue. We pray with humility that He who dwells on high will deliver us from our distress, and especially protect our children.

Passover, the holiday of freedom, begins on April 7th, and is observed in Jewish homes. With our souls yearning for redemption, we read the chapters of the Haggadah, the stories of deliverance and the miracle that God performed for His people. We feel that only divine intervention will save us. But the miracle does not occur. The Hungarian authorities and the German usurpers compete with each other to rob us of everything that we have. In addition to the "reasonable demands" of the local authorities, the government now imposes far-reaching economic measures.

By April 30th, all Jews are required to declare

their assets. The authorities confiscate all property owned by Jews, they are ordered to deposit all their gold, precious stones, and securities, as well as all cash



*Zsuzsi and friends, Târgu Mures, 1940's.*

exceeding 3,000 pengő. They close every Jewish shop, but we accept and turn the other cheek, because our lives are at stake. After already giving up so much, we also give up everything we own: it does not belong to us anymore!

At the end of April, a most appalling decree is issued; it deprives us of our homes and the basic necessities for human existence. This "Ghetto Decree," requires Jews to assemble in confined areas in cities and towns. We still hope for the best and believe and hope that the municipal council's humane feelings will prevail.

We remain optimistic, believing that even though we are being thrown out of our homes, we

will be allowed to continue living as before, even if it is in more cramped conditions. Our belief is that we will eventually be allocated permanent places, elsewhere, in cities or rural towns. But this didn't happen. On the evening of May 2nd, the Jewish Council is ordered to announce that from nine in the evening no Jew is allowed to leave his residence. Early the following morning, at three o'clock, trucks with guards and police appear at Jewish homes and announce that within twenty minutes every Jewish head of household, together with his family is to leave his apartment. We are allowed to carry luggage weighing up to nine stones in weight. Now our ordeal has begun.

We did not sleep that night, and fearfully we try to guess what the city council has in store for us. Wild, conflicting rumours have been circulating about the ghetto for days: there is talk of Jews being confined in two or three streets in the city. Others suggest that the agricultural school, which had been rebuilt but still stood without doors, windows, or plaster, was to be assigned to us. Finally, the brick factory outside the city came into consideration. This was a building that had fallen into disuse and was in danger of collapsing. We didn't believe that it would be chosen, for how could six thousand people be housed in such a ruin?

At four o'clock, at dawn, the arrival of large freight wagons shattered the silence. I looked out of the window and saw our neighbours being evicted from their apartments. I remained calm because one

of the members of the city council had assured me the previous evening that doctors and their families would be allowed to remain in their homes. I felt relief, but had intense sympathy for our neighbours. However, at six o'clock the next morning a policeman appeared at my home and ordered that I should be ready to leave in twenty minutes, together with my family.

Moments later, a military truck pulled up in front of our house, and Istvan Botak strutted in. He was a pharmacist, a former classmate of mine at school, now given the rank of infantry sergeant. He showed me a document from the city council, according to which the authorities were appropriating all my furniture and medical equipment for use in a military hospital.

The order was carried out immediately by Botak and six of his men, I didn't even have time, in the twenty minutes allotted, to help my poor wife, who was forced to pack everything with my three frightened daughters, who had been so abruptly woken from their sleep.

At half past six we were standing in the street, with our Jewish neighbours, and ordered to set off on the road from which there was no return. However, we did not know that then.

Loaded carts were already streaming down the road, and from their direction of travel we realised that the council had made the most terrible choice, they were taking us to the brick factory. From surrounding streets, crowds of people struggled past,



*Zsuzsi, standing left, in traditional Romanian costume.  
Below left, Zsuzsi reading. Below right, twins Nora and Helga.*



pushing carts loaded with suitcases and packages simply wrapped in sheets. Evicted women, men, and children, each carrying a small bag on their shoulders or in their hands for the journey, clutched each other, terrified of being being separated. They were surrounded by police officers with bayonets fixed to their rifles and aimed directly at them.

My dear little daughters carried a few pieces of clothing packed in school bags on their backs, thus reliving the fate of their wandering Jewish ancestors many centuries earlier.

The city's residents looked silently as the tearful women and men stumbled along the street; all of them with tight lips upon their ashen faces. Perhaps we imagined, or just hoped for signs of tears, or looks of compassion, on the faces of the watchers, however none of them reacted or protested.

Slowly, the lorries, with us on board, drove from our neighbourhood to the brickworks at the edge of town. There we waited for hours, until group after group of our dispossessed neighbours were marched into the courtyard surrounding the factory. Here we were assembled in the thousands. By evening, six thousand men, women and children were confined in the small area. Like sheep in a pen and terrified, we huddled together, women, men, children and our belongings.

Throughout the day, the trucks continued to bring our fellow outcasts. By evening, the sky became overcast. A cold wind blew, and six thousand people stood shivering under the open sky, tired,

cold and anxious, on the evening of their first day of homelessness. We laid our children, hungry and shivering in the cold, on the wet ground, soaked in the chill of early spring. It continuously rained throughout the night.

We can't hear the noise from the city, and only the footsteps of the police and guards break the silence, with the light from campfires illuminating the machine guns pointed at us on the hillside. Occasionally there is the sound of a baby crying, or a woman sobbing, occasionally a frantic cry for a doctor. There is no toilet in the courtyard; we are forced to use a hole that had been hastily dug at the edge of the fence earlier that day. And since our wives and children were not accustomed to relieving themselves in public, or in the presence of strangers, many of the women refrained from relieving themselves throughout that day. Later I frequently had to resort to using a catheter, especially for the women, but also even for men. Fortunately, in my small medical bag, which I had thrown together at the last minute with a few of the most essential medicines, I had also packed a rubber catheter.

Slowly, morning dawned. The gloomy, rainy weather continued. Our children woke up, shivering, wet and cold. This was their second day of destitution. The guards began to order the crowds from the front yard to the inside of the brick factory. But first, they searched our bags, rummaging through our belongings, and took away any valuables that had not been seized during the first

property search. They took our watches, fountain pens, cigarette cases, and the three thousand pengő's that we were allowed to keep. Robbed and plundered of all our valuables, we were taken to another area of the brick factory, where our confinement began.

Several thousand people crowded into the derelict building, with its damaged roof from which rain dripped. The water mixed with the dust on the floor, which soon turned into a reddish sludge. In the centre of the windowless hall ran a tiny railway, with hundreds of rusty brick wagons on it, which further reduced the already limited space, making it difficult to arrange conditions to live.

The bare walls of cavernous building sharpened the wind to a cutting edge. It was far colder inside than out, and yet many decided that it was better for them to stay inside under a leaking roof than to remain outside, in the pouring rain. Others occupied the dark compartments of the brick kilns, for at least these were dry. However, several thousand people remained outside in the courtyard as there wasn't enough room within the building. It was only by using force were they able to find a place for themselves.

A horrifying scene emerged inside, with many women shocked by the grim sight of hundreds of men, women, and children, eating and then relieving themselves in full view, without any privacy, crammed next to each other; their belongings and bodies lying on the wet, mud covered floor. The

deafening noise, the wailing women with their screaming babies, the multitude of stained and soiled packages, all of these presented a picture of utter desolation, and those unable to bear the clamour, chose to endure the harsh conditions outside.

With the help of younger captives, we began to remove the heavy brick wagons from the building, and in this way, we gained some space in the hall. With the strenuous work of these sixteen year olds spreading canvas sheets between two wagons, we erected a kind of tent for each family. I settled in one of these with my wife and children.

Slowly, after a few days, a kind of tented settlement emerged before our eyes, and when we viewed it from the hill surrounding the camp, it looked like a Bedouin encampment.

We set about making the most necessary arrangements for camp life. We dug cesspits and latrines for men and women, on opposite sides of the camp. We still didn't have screens to give privacy to these rudimentary toilets. For privacy, women surrounded each other when defecating.

There was no drinking water within the camp area, only a small spring, a thin artery of water that reluctantly trickled down the hill, where hundreds of people would stand in line to drink. No one had drinking vessels, because in the panic of leaving their homes, most had failed to pack useful utensils. It was impossible to even think of providing hot meals. Our most urgent task was to dig a well. We discovered a hidden spring, purer than the earlier

inadequate source, which offered a greater supply of water. The poorer people had already been starving for three or four days, as they hadn't brought food with them. And there were certainly more impoverished people among us than those well off. The camp was slowly starving. The Jewish Council, however, was unable to help. Our captors didn't help us at all.

When we arrived at the camp, and our belongings had been inspected, they drew our attention for the umpteenth time that we must hand over all the currency that we had, explaining that this money would support us all. After long negotiations, and after many refusals, they allowed us to return home and, from our provisions there, we brought a little food to the camp, for the common good.

We set up communal kitchens and cooked over coals buried in the ground, and tried to give each person at least one slice of bread and a bowl of hot soup every day. The authorities allowed us to bring wooden planks, sheets and reed mats from the warehouses of Jews in the city, to the camp, and with these we repaired our tents and adapted them to give more accommodation.

The weather made life difficult for us. It was wet and windy that May, and every night chilling gusts blew away the sheets stretched over our heads, leaving no cover beneath which we could shelter, or protect our children, who were already suffering from the cold. The first-aid stations, set up by the

doctors, in primitive conditions, were overworked. We tried to help as much as possible, with only the few medicines that we had brought with us.

Within a few days, we had our first deaths in the camp, however the authorities did not permit large funerals, only allowing the presence of one member of the deceased's family, a rabbi and a cantor. There were six cases of tuberculosis among the children, who urgently needed hospitalisation. The danger of an epidemic became a real threat. Anger grew day by day. The most critically ill patients were quarantined on the day of our departure for the camp, in a hastily established hospital within the Orthodox synagogue in the city. In the meantime, other Jewish patients lying in the city's hospital were also brought to us, after they had been refused treatment.

German guards appeared at the camp once or twice a day. They remained briefly and then handed over supervision of the camp to the Hungarian police, who diligently fulfilled this role. Each day they announced, through the Jewish Council, that anyone found with private money of his own in the forthcoming inspections would be shot. Many who still had money or valuables of any kind panicked to get rid of this hoarded treasure immediately. Many hundreds of pengö notes along with concealed precious stones, were thrown into the latrine pits.

About the middle of May, one Sunday morning – by chance the sun shone all day – we were introduced to what the Germans called “Der

Appell”, the roll call. In the morning, at 6 a.m., it was announced that the entire camp, without exception, men, women and children, whether healthy or sick, would be given one hour to line up outside in columns of five. Seven thousand of us were in place at that time. Our numbers had increased as Jews from surrounding areas had been added to us.

Two German sergeants began the count. Apparently the count did not match their numbers. They counted us repeatedly, several times. The heat of the sun increased, and by the afternoon several children, along with sick and weak women, fainted in the lines. I approached one of the sergeants and requested permission to give water to those who had been standing in line since morning. He agreed, but only to children up to six years of age and to the nursing women, but not to anyone else.

Together with Dr. Biham, a colleague from Marosvásárhely, we carried water from the spring and distributed it to the children; and stealthily, with our hearts beating wildly, we managed to give water to the older children and women who were not nursing. The entire camp stood like this until early evening. The First Sergeant finally announced the results of the count: “Six thousand, nine hundred and fifty three pieces.” We were no longer people, but pieces. This was the first German “Appell” that had taken place in our lives, the first of many in which we were to endure.

In the third week of May, we were introduced

to a new horror. A group of Hungarian police-interrogators arrived at the camp. One morning, ten or twelve of us were called, and the interrogators “invited” us, together with our families, to a special guardroom that had been set up near the entrance to the camp. The tiny building, which consisted of only one room, also housed the doctors’ first aid station.

After a few minutes, the sound of terrible screaming and violent beatings burst from the room. We, doctors on duty, watched in horror as men, women, and even young girls were dragged out, beaten and exhausted. Later we learned that these beatings were to get the victims to reveal not only where they had hidden their wealth, but also the names of their Christian accomplices with whom they had hidden money or valuables. It seemed that they were not satisfied with the booty that had been previously confiscated.

If anyone failed to reveal the information completely, and to their satisfaction, they seized his wife and tortured her brutally. Young girls were also brought in and beaten equally ferociously, as they tried to force them to reveal their parents’ financial situation.

The tyrants were never satisfied with single beatings, and many families were “invited” seven or eight times to be tortured until they bled. Whole families were summoned and repeatedly attacked with clubs, especially on their bare feet, hands, and stomachs, and in the case of men, on their genitals,

until they fainted. Then they poured a bucket of cold water over them. When they came to, they were released, only to be summoned again that afternoon or the next morning to undergo more beatings, torture, and suffering.

Terror and fear did not leave the tents. Women feared for their husbands, men feared for their wives. Even those who had fully complied with the regulations and had nothing to hide were summoned. Nevertheless, in addition to the individual torture, the police also carried out mass interrogations. The inhabitants of the camp were called out street by street, with all their family members and their belongings. No one was allowed to remain inside. In the area in front of the police station, everyone’s belongings were thrown out of their suitcases and bags, onto the bare ground, and searched piece by piece. The police took all the undocumented items, fabrics and linen for themselves. Wedding rings were also taken, and doctors had to give up even the simple wristwatches that they used for their medical work.

Living in the crowded, worst possible conditions of sanitation and nutrition, our sense of morality, and our humanity slowly eroded, which was probably the German’s intention. The less healthy began to complain and grumble. The meagre food rations provoked sharp criticism for the Jewish Council.

At great risk, we doctors, who went in and out of the Jewish hospital every day, would hide and bring food parcels, that were sent from outside by

Christians to their Jewish friends imprisoned in the camp. The poorest pounced on these shipments and stole them for themselves, not considering that their fellow inmates, for whom the food was intended, were also as hungry as they were. Severe hunger and oppression began to cloud the fading glow of our culture and corrupted our respect for each other.

In order to keep the children from being affected by the miserable conditions of the camp, from the ugliness and filth, we decided to open a school for them. Teachers and educators gathered the children, and took them up the hill, and in the morning and afternoon, and tried to divert their attention with entertaining lessons. Miraculously, the children stood the severe test of camp life, and endured the upheavals without weakening, adapting themselves to this new communal life. They were not upset by either the gloomy weather or the lack of food. The children drew and carried water from the well, each waiting patiently for their turn. The older boys and girls carried the packages of those summoned for questioning by the police.

In spite of everything, our collective misery gave rise to a special degree of solidarity. The young people, in particular, played their part, as did the medical team, which made itself available to the public day and night, with girls and women working voluntarily as nurses in the hospital and the first-aid station. In such an environment and in such harsh conditions many of the young people inevitably worried about their future, which they could not

foresee to be as terrible as it turned out to be.

And since it was spring, love did not leave their hearts. With the permission of the authorities, we were able to witness quite a few marriages, which were celebrated in the camp before the registrar and the rabbi. It is true that many girls chose loveless marriage over the fear of being deported to Nazi brothels, like Jewish girls in Slovakia, and hoped that being married would protect them from this fate.

Here I also celebrated the anniversary of our wedding, the twelfth of May, and since I was not allowed to give flowers to my wife, I broke a frail branch from the only apple tree in the camp, and brought it to the tent. I asked God that our next wedding day would be celebrated again in our home, in freedom and under better circumstances. My poor wife wept, but my dear daughters laughed and said how clever I was bringing flowers to mother, even here! And the happiness that had been a faithful companion to our love for nineteen years, bloomed again for a moment in our tent. After lunch, I took out the book that my dear Zsuzsi had bought for her mother's birthday on April 28th, and next to the title, "Others Suffer Too," she had written, "You see, Mother, others suffer too, but be strong and trust that your suffering will not last long." How long it lasted and how long you suffered with her, I dare not imagine.

The police investigators continued their violent interrogations, with beatings and tortures that continued unabated. Some of the unfortunates were



*Ida and Mauritius on their wedding day, c.1926,  
when Ida was 20 and Marci between 23 and 24.*

carried out of the police building, half-dead, and two of them did indeed die of their wounds two days later. German thugs were appearing in the camp more frequently. One day they issued an order that

by that evening, every man must have his head shaved. Moreover, if anyone was found unshaven the following morning, the women's hair would be cut as punishment. They also ordered beards to be shaved, without sparing the rabbis and the ritual butchers. We complied with this order, and a few hours later, we all stood with our heads shaved, facing the scrutiny of the Germans.

The thugs frequently photographed the camp's residents, especially those whose poverty was most noticeable, and they didn't hesitate to go behind the huts on the other side of the hill and photograph women who were relieving themselves. The Hungarian police also joined in this perverse behaviour.

On the afternoon of May 24th, the police conducted a count of all the doctors, pharmacists, engineers and their families in the camp. When we asked for the reason for this additional registration, they replied that they needed our skills, and would arrange for us to work according to our ability. That night I was acting as a doctor on duty, and at three o'clock, in the darkness before dawn, I was alerted to the sounds of the rhythmic march of several hundred people. I went out into the courtyard and saw about two hundred policemen approaching the gate. They took up their positions without a word, surrounding the entire camp. There were also two or three policemen in every alley, blocking the possibility of any escape.

At half past three, they woke the members of the

Jewish Council and ordered them to wake the entire population of the camp to report for roll call at five o'clock. People were permitted to pack their belongings and carry them, with a complete suit, a change of underwear and an overcoat, and any food that had been saved. They also announced that families with children, and doctors were allowed to carry one extra pillow and a blanket. The doctors and engineers were ordered to appear for roll that morning too. What we had suspected for days, what many just dismissed as camp gossip, but what we feared most, seemed to have come true.

By 5 a.m. the camp already resembled rush hour at our main railway station. Families were torn apart, brothers, sisters and their relatives were separated from each other. The deciding factor depended on which row of the camp, or which part of the brick factory building they had settled in, as to whether they were leaving with the first group, or were among those who remained behind. The people woken from their sleep didn't even have time to pack their belongings properly, and many didn't have time to say goodbye to their parents brothers or sisters, because the guards refused to allow them to leave their line to bid farewell to their loved ones.

It was after six o'clock before the crowd of 3,500 people was finally arranged in rows of five, babies in their mother's arms, and carrying bags in their hands. The Hungarian police commander of the camp summoned me and put me in charge of the group of doctors, pharmacists and engineers, about

one hundred and twenty people. He also told us that our situation would improve as we were being transferred to Nyíregyháza, where ready-made barracks awaited us, and where we would no longer have to endure the cold and dampness that we suffered in the brickworks. We, doctors, would be responsible for the medical care at the new camp.

The procession set off, this sad-melancholy cavalcade, of which I had never seen a more mournful sight. We left the camp where we had lived together for twenty-three days, and set out towards unknown horrors.

To our astonishment, as we left the camp grounds, we discovered, that the police escorts were not leading us along the road directly to the railway station, but were taking us in a roundabout way, away from built-up areas, across fields towards the station. Guards stood menacingly blocking escape routes leading to the city. They also ensured that we would not be seen by a single living soul throughout our journey. The courtyards of the tiny houses on the outskirts of the city looked remote and deserted, yet when a pair of curious eyes occasionally peeked through a window, our guards roughly ordered them to go inside immediately. No one from the city was allowed to witness this funeral march.

Eventually we arrived at the station, where a long freight train was waiting for us. There was another inspection immediately. A single German officer was supervising the Hungarian police, who were inspecting the luggage of this forlorn crowd,

who had left their homes, all their possessions, the fruits of their labour, and even the last remnants of their clothing and underwear at the brickworks.

Now once again, their luggage was searched, and anything that could be stolen would disappear into the hands of the police. They took our last pillows from us, and threw them into a ditch by the railway, with the rest of the looted things. They seized the last shirt that I had possessed, and only after a humiliating personal appeal, the police officer agreed to allow my three little daughters a spare blouse each.

I saw a Hungarian officer take away a doctor colleague's glasses, and when he explained that he could not see without them, he was hit in the face, even though the doctor had previously shown him his certificates, which granted him special treatment. He had also presented him with his medals of distinction from the previous war, to no avail.

Within a few moments, we were loaded onto a cattle car and, dizzy from beatings, insults, and robbery, we suddenly realised that seventy men, women, and children were being crammed into one narrow car, on the door of which "Siebzig Stück" – Seventy Pieces, had been chalked.

We had only just grasped its meaning, when the heavy iron door was slammed shut, chained and padlocked behind us; however before it was closed, they threw seventy half-loaves of bread at us. These were the inadequate provisions with which our country sent us on our way. They didn't even give

us a last drink of water, even though we had been hardworking citizens all our lives, and had fulfilled our civic duties faithfully and conscientiously. After an hour or two, when finally the loading of this multitude of 'pieces' was completed, the train began slowly moving towards an unknown destination.

It took immense effort to find places for all seventy unwilling passengers crammed one on top of each other, with their luggage. Everyone wanted a comfortable berth, and importantly, a secure one, which was almost impossible to find. We tried to arrange everyone so that they could sit in rows, as in a cinema or theatre, calculating how many people we could fit in comfortably. However, the distance between the rows was so narrow that it was impossible for any legroom. And what would happen at night, when people would be so tired that they would fall asleep, and be unable to consider their neighbours? We tried to solve the problem by having only the children and women seated, while the men stood, because that would take up less space. But sadly, the men were so weakened by the meagre conditions of camp life, by the stress of roll calls that went on forever, with carrying their luggage, that many couldn't stand on their legs, that also were swollen and injured by the police beatings.

Someone suggested hanging our bundles of possessions. We tied everything together, stretching rope between the two sides of the carriage, and hung our belongings from it. It gave more room to sit, but now there was a new problem – because the carriage

was completely sealed, those who sat under the luggage could not breathe. The only air came through a barred window, which was only about eight inches square, and in the heat of the summer's day we almost suffocated.

Then quarrels began. Irritable and selfish people began to insult each other. After a few hours, thirst set in, but there was no water, and our children, in desperate need of refreshment, were pacified by being told that they would get water at the next large station. However, the train crawled slowly on, and it was only after many long hours that we reached the town of Szászrégen (Erdély), about eighteen miles from our city. However, our train didn't stop at the station itself, but some distance away, in a railway siding. Here we remained for several hours without any water, or any kind of refreshment. They didn't even open the wagon's door for us. The sentry guarding us promised that at the next large station we would receive water and a meal. However, night fell and we received neither water or food.

The sentries only opened the door for a few minutes to check if everything was in order, or perhaps they wanted to see if we were planning to escape. In any case, these few moments of fresh air woke us from the asphyxiating torpor, and we encouraged the children and women, who had suffered the most, to move to the door and breathe a little fresh air.

The guard, who would come to check us, gave

an evasive answer every time we asked him for water. He also refused our request that the women be permitted to leave the carriage to relieve themselves. He mentioned the city of Debrecen as the destination of our journey. In the meantime, he asked for valuables, wristwatches, lighters and torches, in return he offered to get us cigarettes. After so many interrogations, searches, and thefts, after they had beaten us, our captors still believed that we still had valuables concealed in our possession and again demanded the loot. I had a flashlight that worked without batteries, and although we needed it in the dark carriage, I gave it to the sentry guarding us, in the hope that, thanks to the friendship we had made on this journey, he would give my daughters some water, but instead of something to drink, he just gave me ten Symphonia cigarettes in exchange.

The clickety-clack of the train's wheels lulled people to sleep. Somehow, I managed to arrange my children on some coats spread out on the floor of the carriage, and they slept a full night. Even so, other children would cry out in their sleep, "Oh, my leg, oh, my arm, my head," as people trod on them as they moved around, or relieved themselves, carrying the only chamberpot in the car to empty out of the window. And always, the miasma of foetid air filled our lungs.

Standing on one leg, I sought the hand of my wife, who was weeping in the darkness, and holding hands, we tried to comfort and keep each other's

spirits up. We didn't talk about where the Germans were taking us, and I didn't want her to know the depth of my fear.

During our stay at the brickworks, I had asked her whether it would have been better if we had done as many of our friends did, and taken our own lives while we were still at home. We could have died together, embraced as one, looking into each other's eyes. Nevertheless, she, who loved life and was terrified of death, emphatically said no, adding that it was possible that God will help us to remain alive. I did not tell her then that I was not afraid of death; but that my only fear was that we would be separated. I had already heard that in Germany there were separate concentration camps for men, women and children. I would have preferred to choose our dying together over the possibility of not knowing anything about my family's fate. I stroked the heads of my little daughters, and in a tearful prayer I asked fate to at least have mercy on them.

By the second day of our journey, in the afternoon, it became clear to us, from the direction of travel and the names of the houses on the way, vaguely glimpsed through the bars of the window, that we were not travelling in the direction of Debrecen. And when we saw that we were leaving Sátoraljaújhely and Miskolc behind us, our anxiety increased, and with it the fear that we were being taken out of Hungary.

We were so naive that we had not yet drawn the obvious conclusion from the fact that they were

transporting us in German carriages. We believed the police officer who told us that we were being taken towards Nyíregyháza, in Hungary; we also believed the sentry who told us that we were being taken to Debrecen, we just believed everything. But perhaps we had simply tried to deceive ourselves until the last possible moment, unwilling to believe that our country would abandon us and allow the Germans to deport us from our homeland.

The policeman had added that they had been given other instructions, to take us towards the city of Kassa (Košice) where a large camp had been set up, and where we would work. However, I no longer believed him. At Miskolc I had managed to strike up a brief conversation, through the window of the carriage, with a railway worker. I asked him what had happened to the local Jews. The man looked around him very carefully and, pretending to be busy with the railroad tracks, without looking at me directly, he replied that originally the local Jews were confined in a brick factory, but a week ago they were transported from there.

Until that moment we had thought that it was only our city council that had acted so callously, housing seven thousand people in the desolate brick works at Marosvásárhely, but apparently this derelict building was how Jews from many other places were also imprisoned. Later we learned that the brickyard was the first stop for captured Jews from the city of Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and other cities across the Danube.

The Russians were near, because at night we could hear the thunder of cannons from the direction of the Carpathian Mountains. Now, I no longer believed that we would be together in one camp. I remembered what I had heard about the fate of the Jews in Poland, and I looked with sadness at the faces of my wife and young daughters. I wanted to engrave their faces, their gaze, their voices, so dear to me, in my memory forever.

We still had not been given any water. Meanwhile, our train raced through a downpour, and we were happy that the air had cooled a little. I held a bucket out of the window and caught raindrops falling from the roof of the carriage, and gave them to my daughters to drink. Poor things, having learned their lesson from two days of suffering, they didn't dare drink all of it, just a few sips,

"Let's save some for tomorrow, Daddy," they said, "in case they don't give us any water in the morning."

"Tomorrow we'll be there", I consoled them, "We aren't far from Kassa now."

Towards evening, we arrived at the Slovakian city, where the train stopped some distance from the station. The doors were opened, and the police ordered the carriage commanders to get out of the compartments. I stepped out. They led us before a German officer. To my great joy, my younger brother, whom I had not seen among the passengers that had embarked at Marosvásárhely, was also standing there. I learned that he and his family were

with us. I asked him about the conditions in his carriage. He replied that their situation was the same as ours. They were hungry and thirsty. There were also more than seventy of them in one carriage.

The German officer gave us a speech in Hungarian, saying that we were being taken to Germany, where we would be employed; and warned us that only those who worked would receive food. We must, therefore, ensure that everyone obeyed this command. He also told us that if anyone tried to escape, the commander of the wagon would be killed on the spot, and if the commander himself tried to escape, his family would be killed along with all the people in his carriage. At the same time, he ordered us to hand over the money that we still had hidden, as well as any valuables, to the Hungarian police. Doctors were allowed to keep their watches and pens, although most of these items had been stolen during earlier searches.

We were ordered back into the cars, and barely a minute or two later, the heavy iron doors of the cars were slammed shut again, which frustrated the Hungarian guards from having another opportunity to carry out their thieving searches.

While we had been talking to the German officer, a bucket full of water had been loaded into each wagon, and like a herd of parched cattle we raced to quench our thirst, but there was only enough for about a cupful for each person. Ida and I only took a sip, and gave the rest to our

daughters; we saved some for the next day.

After I had repeated the officer's warning about escaping, the frenzied atmosphere in the wagon cooled down a little, because no one wanted to risk escaping – and where would they escape to? As to employment, few of us were afraid of working; it would be a distraction to what we imagined the harsh conditions in German industry would be. We thought that since it was the end of May, they would probably take us to work in the fields. My wife and I hoped that we would both work together, while Zsuzsi, our eldest daughter, who was twelve years old and intelligent, would look after her twin sisters.

The few sips of water cheered us up a little, and, relieved by the possibility of work, we fell asleep with a degree of peace in our minds. Seventy-one men, women and children, all woven together like a single skein of wool, exhausted and tired to death.

In the morning, as light broke, we looked out of the window and tried to determine where we were. We read unknown Slovakian names on the road signs. We couldn't decide whether we were in Germany or another country; however, that afternoon, as we left the city of Tarnów, it became clear to us that we were being taken through Poland. I remembered the horrors I had heard about Lublin, but I kept silent and didn't tell my wife about the fears that gnawed away inside me. However, I inadvertently betrayed myself when I took off my tie, threw it aside, and remarked that I would no longer need it. My wife looked at me, and understood

what I meant, and with a resigned look asked,

“Do you think so?”

As we left Tarnów, two German guards climbed into our compartment. They ordered the passengers to stand in one corner while they examined each of their belongings separately. They took our suitcases from us. They pulled the empty leather wallets from our pockets. They even took our medicines. They also stole a fair share of our food, especially the bacon, canned meat and sweets. The thugs also took the box of snacks and some sweets from us, which my little daughters had refused to eat throughout our journey, as they had said,

“Keep these, Father, for when our food runs low.”

The poor little girls seemed already mentally preparing themselves for a worse fate than anything they had endured in the last four weeks.

The next major station in our journey was at Krakow, where our train remained for many hours. They allowed us to fill a few buckets with water. It was evening when we left the city. After about two hours, suddenly, ahead of us in the distance, a huge pillar of fire opened its maw in the darkening night. We didn't know what the flames meant. We thought that we were near the front, witnessing the conflagration of a bombed city.

The two German sentries boarded our carriage again and checked our luggage. This time they took everything, including the last of the meat, claiming that in another carriage there were sixty starving

children and that they would distribute these foods to them. When we asked what our own children would eat, the guards replied that we would soon be handed over to the SS who would provide us with food when we arrived at the camp. And in reply to our question of how long the journey would take, the sentries replied that we could sleep for a few hours because we would only be unloaded the next morning.

After seventy-two days from leaving our home, we lay down to sleep in the cramped carriage, and waited for the morning, which would free us from the prison walls of the train and bring us out of darkness into light, into the fresh air.



*The distance from the brick factory at Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș) to Auschwitz was about 456 miles. The train journey took four days, from the 25th to the 29th of May 1944, with the occupants receiving no food or water.*

## Auschwitz

IT IS BARELY DAWN. The train has come to a halt. We wake up to the noise of slamming carriage doors and a cacophony of loud voices, and the beating of batons on the side of the wagons. Shouts of, “Aufmachen, aussteigen!” (“Open up, get out!”). The padlock and chain are removed from the door, and it creaks open. Everyone gets ready in haste. We dress the children, collect the few packages that are still left to us: some medicines, documents and the clothes that we wear, and get out. The guards beat those too slow in alighting. Outside, a large crowd is being forcibly pulled from the wagons of a freight train on the opposite track. Thousands of packages and suitcases are thrown in piles on the ground. We descend to a concrete ramp, confused, as we don’t know where we are, what is happening, or what this horrifying melée of chaos represents. Before us, in the distance, huge columns of smoke billow to a great height from two chimneys of a strangely shaped building.

At first, it seems as if we have stumbled upon a bombed-out station, given by the pile of suitcases and packages, thrown in total disarray, on the ramp between our two trains. The flames and clouds of smoke rising from the chimneys give the appearance of an ironworks. I am reminded of the description of the entrance to hell in Dante’s *Inferno*. It seemed that we had been brought to work in a foundry, or a blast furnace. I whispered to my wife,

“It doesn’t matter however difficult the work may be, the main thing is that the five of us are together, as long as they don’t separate us.” Trying to reassure myself as much as her.

As wind flurries reach us, there is an oppressive, sickly sweet odour. Suddenly, ghostly figures, dressed in blue and white striped clothes, and looking like zebras, are rushing forward, waving clubs and tearing our bags from our hands. We argue, resisting them, but they order us to leave our bags where we stand, grunting that these will be delivered to us later. We still cling to the last remnants of our luggage, still not giving willingly.

A few steps away, a German soldier stands in our path and orders us to put our belongings with the other piled suitcases, in front of the wagons. We lay everything down, and I comfort my terrified wife,

“It’s okay, it’s okay. The main thing is that the five of us are together.”

However, at that moment another German soldier blocks our way.

“Men to the right, women to the left!” he shouts, and from that moment my wife and daughters are torn from me. We walk in lines parallel to each other, but separated by an unknown destiny. The crowd pushes us along. Suddenly I realise that I am holding a bottle in my hand containing half of yesterday’s drinking water. I force myself through the wall of sentries and try to hand the water to my daughters, but the guards push me back to my place. Ida calls out to me,

“Marcika, come and kiss us!”

I rush back and kiss them, my throat tight with stress, and as I look at my wife, I see her beautiful eyes, full of tears from her fear of death. My children cling to their mother silently, bewildered by the tumult and unable to grasp what is happening, as they are swept away by the crowd that is surging behind them.

Once again, we are separated, a soldier pushes me to the other side of the cordon, without my being able to say a word of comfort, or give them an encouraging look. Another minute and I lose sight of them. In that moment, they are gone.

I become lost in the jostling crowd, when suddenly we emerge into a wide area between the two tracks. Soldiers and the men in striped clothes are lining us up and beating us to keep in line. Through the din of screaming voices, I hear the command,

“Doctors, line up!” and I take my place among the rest of my colleagues who, like me, wear a red cross on their sleeves. The crowd surges forward, being beaten by the guards to separate the men on one side and women on the other. Meanwhile, everyone shuffles past the scrutiny of a tall German SS officer. He looks incongruously elegant in his immaculate black uniform. Fastidiously he wears gloves, and, after a cursory examination of each person, casually indicates a left or a right with his index finger, sending them in different directions, and breaking family members apart. It is clear that

he is sending the elderly and those who appear weaker, as well as the mothers and their children, to one side, and the younger, stronger women and men, to the other.

In the mayhem, some of the younger family members try to resist, not wanting to leave their elderly parents or weaker siblings. They are reassured that the separation is necessary because the weak, the elderly and the children still have over six miles to walk, and will be transported there in comfort by a vehicle; but we will all be reunited soon. Red Cross cars are also parked nearby, their presence giving us some assurance that the sick and the weak will actually be driven securely and in comfort. There is also a line of military trucks. Occasionally the German doctor indicates that a few of the most infirm should be transported to a nearby hospital. Reassured, those too incapacitated to walk climb into the vehicles. And of the rest, one group goes to the right and the other to the left, anxious to see each other again.

During a break, the German doctor, who is conducting the selection process, approaches us, and politely asks where we had finished our university studies. We respond to this good-natured enquiry with our qualifications. The German continues with a generous offer, suggesting that if any of us were tired, or needed medical attention, we could cross to the other line, where cars wait to carry the infirm for medical attention, avoiding the six miles walk that lay ahead. From our group, the pharmacist

Kovari, who is blind in one eye, immediately accepts this convenience.

“Oh, please cross to the other side.” the doctor invites him.

And so he left us, but we only learned later where he went. In the meantime, we told the medical officer that among the packages that were thrown out of the wagons were our medicines and medical equipment, as well as our doctor’s diplomas and other certificates. Could we at least take our diplomas from there? Certainly, he replies, and after some thought he adds, that these will be useful. We immediately rush back to our luggage. I find ours, and retrieve my diploma, other certificates and equipment.

As I return to our group I notice my wife and daughters in a group of women who are being examined, and then directed, either to a right or a left column of people. I hurriedly approach a guard and ask him to allow my wife and daughters stay with me. I emphasise the fact that I am a doctor, and that I have three daughters, two of whom are twins, who need extra care. At this the guard becomes attentive,

“Twins? Call them back!”

I run after them happily calling out my wife and daughter’s names. They turn. I go towards them and bring them back. The guard leads them by the hand before the selection doctor and informs him that they are twins.

However, the German does not even look at

them, he simply signals dismissively with his hand, waving the girls away, saying,

“Later, later I’m busy.”

They are sent back to their group, the one selected to go left. The guard reassures me in Hungarian,

“Don’t worry, they are only going to the showers. In an hour you will see them again.”

I shout this to my wife, who is leading our three daughters away by the hand, her eyes wide open, her face frozen in terror.

I return to the group of doctors, and a few minutes later, we are lined up in rows of five by the ghosts in striped uniforms. We still don’t know who they are or what they do, we only hear them shouting loudly at us, and see that they all carry heavy clubs, and also that the German soldiers are watching almost indifferently as they line us up. We eventually form into groups of a hundred, and led by one of these striped-clothed figures and accompanied by an armed German guard, we are forced to walk towards the camp buildings. The air is acrid with smoke from the chimneys.

As we leave the train siding, we are able to look around. We cross to the side of the square between the railway tracks and march along the edge of a barbed wire fence that is stretched between concrete pillars. Behind it, we notice symmetrical rows of wooden barracks painted a monotonous green. Between these huts, we see other men wearing striped clothing.

On the other side of the rail tracks, there are similar huts with women clothed in poor quality dresses. None of them wear stockings and they are all bald. We cannot imagine who these people are. Suddenly we turn into a tree-lined path, and are directed through an open gate, to a square surrounded by more green huts. We are led towards one. If anyone lags, a striped clothed guard beats them with his club. On the way, several men wearing striped uniforms call out to us in Yiddish, and ask us for cigarettes and canned goods. They imagine that we still have such things. When we ask them: “Who are you?” they answer: “Jews, from Poland.” However, they refuse to answer any further questions. They are only interested in cigarettes and canned goods. When we ask them where we are, they answer with surprise and irritation,

“Idiots, you still don’t even know that? You are in Auschwitz. You are in a concentration camp.”

The name means nothing to us. It is just an unfamiliar place, without any special significance for us. We are surprised that there are still Polish Jews alive, as we had thought that they had all perished during the Polish-Russian War.<sup>3</sup> These Jews in their striped garb, lead us to the barracks, and push us inside where we see a huge pile of men’s suits and coats, maybe several thousand garments. We are ordered to undress completely, and to keep only our shoes, our belts and suspenders; we are not allowed

<sup>3</sup> *The Polish-Russian War (1919-1921) was a border dispute between Bolshevik and Polish forces.*

socks. We tell them that we have our doctor's certificates and our papers with us. One of the orderlies in stripes shouts at us mockingly,

"Schmuck!" This expression is often used by our Jewish friends from Poland in relation to us,

"What do you need diplomas for?" Then he adds grimly,

"You're no longer doctors, you're Häftlings." (prisoners).

We quickly undress, and remain standing in our trousers and shoes, but in my underwear I hide my doctor's diploma, and I have tucked the photographs of my wife and daughters in my shoes. Then they lead us outside, to an open area between two huts. There, barbers, also dressed in striped clothing, are waiting for us. They cut the hair from our heads, and shave our bodies. We try to talk to them. The question we ask repeatedly is, where is our family? Will we be living with them? Or will we at least be able to see them from time to time? Only one of the barbers answers, he says that once a week we can visit them. Another would not answer any questions, but only looked at us sadly, then quickly looked away. Another screamed at us,

"Stupid idiots, you have no children, you have no family! You saw the flames and the rising smoke, that's where your families are, they're being burned alive!"

We couldn't believe this bizarre outburst, although this nightmare, this terrible possibility had been rumoured, and perhaps it was true after all. We

tried to reassure each other that these are nothing but Polish oafs with sick natures, or madmen who had become insane by their work in the concentration camp, and are now trying to frighten us with horror stories.

Then it occurred. We rounded the corner of a hut and saw a huge bonfire. Silhouetted by its flames we became aware of guards hurling what appeared to be rubbish into the fire. We grew closer and heard the screams and wails as living infants were picked up and thrown into the fire. This scene of debauched inhumanity, of absolute Hell, stopped us in our tracks. Our faces must have registered our disbelief at this brutality, for a guard casually muttered,

"Don't worry, they're not your kids, they were burned in the crematorium earlier!"

We are still weak from the hardships of the journey. The shock of the scene that we had just seen runs continuously in our minds, although it is impossible to contemplate the horror as anything but a nightmarish delirium. Among the barbers, there had been some who had not lost their humanity. They tried to reassure us that we would see our families again. We needed to believe them, because we so desperately wanted to be reunited with those we cherished.

Meanwhile, the striped wraiths line up those of us that the barbers had finished with, clubbing those who didn't jump to their command. But we are still reeling in shock and disbelief at the things that we

had just seen, and almost grateful of the pain from being punched that distracts us from thinking about the horror.

Later, I felt some relief at being reunited with my younger brother Izidor, as we stood naked and cold, next to each other in line hoping that we would not be split up again. We are marched back through the open gate and ordered to line up in a wide square, in front of a building. This was the bathhouse, or as they called it, the “Sauna.”

We remain standing for over an hour, because inside the building a group of women are bathing. Through a window we can see what is going on inside. There are naked women, all totally bald. Female SS guards are whipping them. We watch in horror at this new scene of depravity. Will this be the fate of our captive women from now on? Our guards push us back, hitting us with their clubs. Suddenly I recognise a woman from our town standing by the window. I call out to her and asked if my wife is among them.

“No,” the woman replies, “she was sent with the girls in a different direction.”

The women left the bathhouse, wrapped in tattered rags, all without stockings and with their heads shaved. Their appearance was pitiful. Husbands didn’t even recognise their wives, who called out to their husbands. Apparently, we men were still recognisable, even with our shaven heads. However, we were forbidden to approach the women, as our striped guards watched us, just as the women were

by the SS women. They were lined up and led away, and then we were ordered into the bathhouse building.

In a long corridor, we were told to take off our underwear and shoes, and then we had to pass through a narrow passageway under the gaze of the striped ones. They screamed abuse at us, and manhandled us to check whether we were properly shaved. Those that did not pass muster underwent the razors again.

Before entering the large hall, which held about one hundred and fifty people, and was equipped with shower taps, they also checked our shoes and seized everything hidden in them. When I tried to cling on to my folded diploma and the precious photographs of my wife and daughters, they punched me in the face, telling me that I no longer needed either my diploma or my family photographs,

“Your family is now being burned in the incinerator, you idiot!” one sneered, “And you want to keep their photographs?”

I don’t know how many times I heard that during the day. My God, maybe it’s true. I continually ask why am I still alive? What else awaits us here? If the nightmare is true, why didn’t they kill us all on arrival, and then our suffering wouldn’t have been so horrific. However, I have no time to think, because they push us under the showers, and after dousing our feet and shoes in a scalding solution, they wash our heads and genitals in a

pungent boiling liquid in order to prevent infection.

We are forced outside into a large cold hall with a concrete floor, and one by one, we pass before a prisoner dressed in stripes. He gives each of us a dirty shirt, a pair of equally filthy striped pants covered in hundreds of patches, a striped coat, and a kind of strange, torn hat is thrust into our hands. We are not given underwear, or a handkerchief. We have to hurriedly dress in these rags, our bodies still wet from bathing. There is no attempt to match the clothes to our physical measurements. Tall people are given clothes the size of a child, fat people are given the tightest clothes that they could not possibly fit into, and thin people were given clothes that flapped and fell off them. If anyone tries to swap their clothes, they receive blows to their faces, or lashes from a whip on their backs. We realise that there is no room for complaints, because the answer is always a clubbing, or a punch in the face. We look at each other in shock, at our faces that have become so careworn as to be unrecognisable. And despite our bedraggled appearance, some burst into laughter. We look so ridiculous.

We didn't have time to finish dressing before we were ordered out for a roll call. We were lined up in rows of five, in groups of a hundred. The sun was scorching. I stood in one line with my brother, and we tried not to be separated from each other. It was only when we looked at each other that we realised that we belonged to the same striped wraiths that had aroused our disgust and fear on our arrival. At

that moment, the process of our expulsion from every normality of civilian life was complete and our papers that identified us as human beings, and the certificates that celebrated our achievements, were confiscated. We had become nothings, devoid of individual personalities, who from now on would be governed with beatings and insults rather than with any rule of law.

The horror of that terrible day weighed heavily on both my brother and myself, however we didn't think of ourselves, but only of our wives and children. Where were they and where had they been taken? What had happened to them? Is the horror that the Poles told us really true? If it is, then there is no point in living anymore and, at the first opportunity, we resolved to commit suicide. A sign was attached to the concrete posts of the barbed wire fences with a drawing of a skull and the inscription: "Caution, high voltage, danger of death!" We resolved to break through the wire and embrace it, to end our lives the moment we found that our families had been killed.

We still didn't believe that our families had been murdered, because we were incapable of imagining such cruelty. We couldn't believe that the SS would kill women and children and leave us alive. We were unable to understand the Nazi mentality, their purpose, or to know what they were capable of doing. In this bewildered state, we worried less about our own fate, but were stupefied with worry about that of our families.

At a never-ending roll call, on May 29th, the second day of the Shavuot holiday, many fellow prisoners collapsed in the heat of the scorching sun, as it beat down upon our bare heads. As the hours passed, we lost track of time. In my state of mental collapse, I didn't feel hungry, even though I hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours, however thirst tormented us.

We continued to stand in line as the day progressed. Groups of freshly laundered prisoners, a hundred a time, continually left the bathhouse to join us. We could hardly stand on our feet anymore, and when our guards weren't nearby, we collapsed to the bare ground. At short intervals, they lined us up again, forcing us to stand, and then left us again for many hours. Fatigue, hunger, and thirst consumed our strength, but above all, we were consumed by terrible anguish.

While we were still outside, a group of women, completely bald and dressed in grey stripes, appeared and walked toward the bathhouse building. Suddenly one of the women motioned to someone in our group to approach her cautiously. The man recognised her as an old acquaintance. After a few minutes of conversation, he returned with a frown on his face and holding a handkerchief and a slice of bread in his hand. It turned out that the woman, a fellow Jew from Munkács, had been in Auschwitz for two weeks, working in a laundry. She claimed that mothers are exterminated here together with their children, as well as the elderly and the weak. The

extermination is carried out in gas chambers<sup>4</sup> followed by cremation. She warned us never to report any illness, and even if we did get sick – to hide it.

My brother and I supported each other, as we stood throughout that parade. Our minds were spinning, trying to extract truth from the nightmares. Our faces were burning in the heat. I felt that everything was over. Weakness enveloped me, my throat was sore, and my tongue stuck to my cheek. Izidor and I look at each other, unable to speak. At that moment, I knew instinctively that everything that we had been told is true. Everything that those cruel Poles said, everything that the girl from Munkács said, is all true. My wife, Ida, my daughters, Zsuzsa, Nora and Helga, what happened to you while they washed me, as they cut my hair, as they lined me up for all those hours, until I collapsed on the ground when my strength failed?

What happened to you after they separated you from me? My dears, how much did you suffer! Did you realise what a terrible trap they had lured you into? What a coward I was for bringing you here and handing you over to the executioners without any resistance. I totally believed that you were only being taken for a bath, and that we would see each

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<sup>4</sup> Following experiments using sulphuric acid, Rudolph Höss, the Commandant at Auschwitz, chose Zyklon B - Hydrogen cyanide. This was used in extermination camps from early 1942. It was produced as blue-coloured pellets that changes into an extremely poisonous gas, when exposed to air. Ironically, it was invented in 1909 for use as a fertilizer by a Jewish chemist, Fritz Haber (1868-1934).

other afterwards. Where will I find you, my dears? Where will I meet you? What can I do? I look at the two large chimneys emitting smoke. No, I cannot believe the terrors that you endured, or that you are no longer alive. The thought of it will send me mad. My brother, the eternal optimist, does not believe the truth of this nightmare. Even now he trusts in God, that He will not abandon His innocent ones.

Finally, late in the afternoon, when we numbered about twelve hundred men, two or three civilians with an armed SS man came to inspect us. On their arms, they wore bands with inscriptions on them. On the first were the letters LÄ, on the second Bl 15, and on the third was the word “Kapo”<sup>5</sup>. They hastily reorganised our ranks, and ordered us to move.

Our way led between the two buildings with flat chimneys, next to the bathhouse. We wanted to look inside, we sought answers to our fears, but we could see nothing. Our view was blocked by a thicket of branches, and the guards forced us on with their clubs. We walked about a hundred yards, and then we turned off the road into an enormous camp, where, in a long row on both sides of the path, stood large green huts of the type we had seen earlier.

They made us stand in a huge square in front of the entrance and counted us. Each of us was pushed

<sup>5</sup> *Kapo* - from Italian *Capo*, meaning: head. An inmate (male or female) in a position of authority in Nazi concentration camps. Kapos were in charge of groups of inmates and carried out the instructions of SS supervisors. They made sure that prisoners performed their tasks and met the quotas.

forward one row with the blows from their clubs. Then the procession moved again. One thousand two hundred people wearing striped clothes, outcasts, and tortured in body and soul, who had lost all semblance of humanity, weaved their way between the green buildings, those blocks marked with numbers.

We reached block number 15. A count was taken again, and through the narrow entrance, they herded us in, like animals. On either side of the door stood two Gypsies<sup>6</sup> with clubs in their hands, and they beat us as we entered. Those standing behind tried to avoid the blows and ran inside, trampling over each other in panic, which only increased the turmoil and gave the Gypsies even more opportunities to indulge their sadistic tendencies by splitting the heads of as many Jews as possible. By the time the twelve hundred of us had squeezed into the hall, many were already bleeding, with wounds on their faces or heads.

It was a large hall, with wooden bunks installed in two tiers placed on both sides. A partition, built of red brick, six feet high, divided the hall in two. Pandemonium broke out again, as everyone rushed to grab a place on the bunks, which collapsed one after another, under the weight of bodies. Those on the upper bunks fell on those lying below them, and the number of wounded increased immeasurably.

Amidst the commotion and shouting, three

<sup>6</sup> Up to one and a half million Gypsies/Roma perished in the camps. To survive, many became trusted prisoners, tasked with enforcing Nazi control.

Gypsies entered, who, we learned, were the block commanders, the absolute masters of our lives and deaths. The three of them climbed the partition, made their way through the surging crowd, and using their clubs with great brutality, managed to impose silence. One of them, wearing a banner on his arm, declared that he was the “Blockältester” (“Block elder”), the manager of our block. He announced that he was a good man, but he demanded unconditional obedience, order and discipline, and if we obeyed him no harm would befall us, but if not he wouldn’t hesitate to beat us to death. He added that it was his right, and that our lives were not worth much here.

When he realised that there was not enough space for us to sleep, the block elder ordered us to dismantle and take out the broken bunks. We set about removing the wreckage, taking it outside, helped by blows from the Gypsy and his two companions. Then we were ordered back inside the barracks, whereupon the block elder appeared again and announced that he had managed to “organise” two barrels of black coffee for us. We didn’t understand the true meaning of the word “organise”. Later we came to understand that this was a very useful activity in camp life.

The coffee was brought in, and again chaos broke out. Most of us hadn’t eaten anything for two days, nor had we drunk a drop of water. Now, with cries of relief, everyone rushed to the barrels of coffee; they shoved and pushed each other, punching

with their fists, each trying to be the first to get a thirst-quenching drink.

The Gypsies were once again given the opportunity to break a few clubs over our heads, but they failed to establish order. The block elder appointed three doctors among us to distribute the coffee. He included me. However, the crowd rushed us, and we had nothing with us to speed up the distribution, except for two or three empty cans, into which we poured the hot black liquid. Each person’s portion was little more than half a cup, and the cans were passed from mouth to mouth. However, greed triumphed and the selfish ones snatched the can from each other’s hands, without letting those holding them to swallow a few precious drops. The older and stronger ones punched the weaker ones and young boys. The noise was unbearable. This wild outburst of animal brutality in these men had a horrendous effect on me. I remembered my little daughters and my wife, for if they were still alive, and encountered this bestiality among the women, then they would never get food and drink, as they would have been unable to stand up for themselves.

I shouted loudly, demanding that the children should be allowed to drink first, but no one listened. They continued to fight, hitting each other, until they managed to overturn one coffee barrel. I gave in, and from that day, for the rest of my stay in the camp, I never tried to establish order like that again. Only blows from the Gypsies managed to quell the

thirsty rioting crowd. They ordered us to sleep. Everyone lay down where they stood, as there were no beds. There was little enough space on the concrete floor for twelve hundred men. Pressed against each other, we tried to doze off, but no one could sleep after the bleak experiences of the morning. The noise did not subside either, and our thoughts continually returned to our families, who had been lost to us earlier that day.

The barracks fell silent, as our tired, tormented bodies eventually sank into sleep. Dreams without peace, of continual nightmares. Occasionally a quarrel broke out as someone going to relieve himself could not avoid stepping on others. A toilet? In one corner of the hall, there were three or four wooden crates, and these were used for such needs.

The stench increased, as it mixed with the sweat of one thousand two hundred people. One person went completely haywire, and in his frenzy, he screamed for much of the night, alternately begging or making threats, and hallucinating about being threatened by a guard's revolver. He was overcome by a typical persecution complex<sup>7</sup>, but we were unable to calm him down. As a result of the noise, the block commander came in several times from his room at the front of the block, and tried to silence the wretch by beating him. We could hardly explain to him that the man was suffering a state of mental collapse, but we assured him that he would

<sup>7</sup> Here Dr. Berner reveals his knowledge of psychology. He was a student of Sigmund Freud in Vienna, as part of his medical studies.

calm down, and asked him to be patient. However, despite our efforts, we were unable to pacify him for many hours.

At four in the morning, the deputy block elder burst in with a loud piercing whistle, waking us up with shouts of, "Aufstehen, Aufstehen!" And although we hadn't slept, we left the hall, and lined up in columns of five, between the blocks 13 and 15. We already knew the "Der Appell" routine from the brickworks in our city.

It was cold. In the darkness, we shivered uncontrollably in our thin, striped clothing. The only light came from electric lamps on the posts of the barbed wire fences. The three Gypsy Kapos counted us, repeatedly cursing when they lost the count, and having to go back to the beginning to start anew. It was clear that simple addition was a complicated task for them. The hours dragged on slowly, and dawn had not even broken. We looked at the horizon, longing for the sun to rise, to give us some warmth.

Time passed in our frozen paralysis, as they counted us again, again and again. Suddenly an SS officer appeared and shouted, "Mützen ab!" ("Hats off!"). He walked down our ranks counting us. The obsessive counting eventually ceased as the German officer became satisfied that his numbers tallied up. He left with the three Kapos, as we stood, practicing the commands "Stand still!" and "Hats off!" The movements helping to keep us warm.

Eventually the sun rose and illuminated our surroundings. We saw that we were in a square,

between two identical blocks. The Kapos forbade us to move. They had told us that we would be given food during the day, after which we would be assigned work. In the meantime, twenty men were chosen and ordered to clean the living quarters, take out the night's excrement and sweep the barracks. We were starving, as we had not eaten for three days.

The sun's heat increased and we were given permission to lie down on the ground. Wherever we looked, we saw only green barracks and the spaces between them. We spoke with others in our block, and the residents of the neighbouring barracks. They were also Jews from Hungary. The questions we asked were the same. Where are you from? What do you know about our families? What happened to the women and the children? The same worries, the same sorrows, occupied us all. Only those without children seemed calmer. We knew about the women without children, because they were in a camp like ours, and most importantly, they were alive! In the meantime, we noticed that on the other side of the road, in the barracks opposite us, there were families of Gypsies living. We saw women and children, and even infants in arms. We learned from some long-serving prisoners that the camp was called the "Gypsy Camp," and that Roma were controlled the Jewish barracks.

We learned that Gypsies had also been transported from their homes, just as we had been, and that they were also prisoners. The fact that they were alive with their families and children, gave us

some hope that our own loved ones still lived. It seemed strange that the camp commanders would destroy Jewish children and let the Gypsy children live. It occurred to me that Hitler was repeating history, and just as our ancestors had been slaves in Egypt, it seemed that we were now again entrusted to the care of Pharaoh's guards.

Before midday, we doctors had the opportunity to talk to the block commander. He told us that he was an Austrian Gypsy, who had been a teacher in a public school, and that he'd been in the camp for years. He was a married man, but he and his wife had been separated on their arrival. When we asked him what had happened to our own families, to our children, whether they had been killed, the Gypsy reassured us by saying that it wasn't true. It was his belief that our wives and children had been taken to family camps, and that in six months, if we worked diligently, we would be reunited with them. In six months? Oh, if only I knew that they were still alive! Feelings of hope and fear alternately pounded in my heart. Watch over them, my God, take care of them, protect them!

As the days progress we discover, beyond the barbed wire fence, a second camp, identical to ours, with men in striped and civilian clothing, and further beyond that, another camp, with a multitude of women listlessly standing around. Who knows who they are? Are they with their children? These were the only questions that concern us at that moment. We notice a shorter figure, perhaps a child,

wearing women's clothing. We try to guess whether she is a young girl. The entire scene of uniform huts, arranged in parallel rows, where apparitions in striped clothes appear, has a theatrical character, and I was reminded of Madách's play, *The Tragedy of Man*<sup>8</sup>, which deals with the Creation and Fall of Man, and the Devil's role in it. We tried to get closer to the electrified wires, but a Kapo hit us with his club, warning us not to move. We looked for other children, no matter who they were, in that distant camp, just to reassure us that our own, the children of Israel, were still living.

Our hunger and thirst was becoming intolerable. In a neighbouring hut, they had already distributed a kind of thick porridge before noon, but none of it for us. We waited in vain. It was noon, the sun was already high, but there was no sign that anyone had noticed our hunger or our thirst. Some residents of neighbouring huts had already managed to scare us, telling us that we would not receive food or water. They told us that they had not received any nourishment during the first two days of their arrival. We approached the block elder, begging for refreshment. He told us that it was possible that we'd receive something in the evening, however our numbers had not been included in the camp records, and that it was only when they were that we would be officially included in the camp's meal requirements. He could only order food for the next

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<sup>8</sup> *The Tragedy of Man* is a play by the Hungarian author Imre Madách, first performed in 1863.

day. However, he would still try to "organise" something for us. Late that afternoon we each were given a handful of congealed canned meat, which had already gone rancid.

That evening, we doctors were ordered to report. There were sixteen of us. We stepped out of the ranks. The deputy block elder lined us up, five in a row, and led us to barracks number 11. I was separated from my younger brother, leaving without being able to say anything to him. The new huts that we were taken to were identical to barracks number 15. Here too, one thousand two hundred people were squashed inside together. Kapo Gypsies were in charge. The only difference was that with our presence, there were two hundred and six doctors, gathered from all the barracks. We saw this as a good sign, because it indicated that they would use our medical skills to treat the ill and injured. We were to be greatly disappointed!

The night passed bitterly for us. On the hard, bare floor, there was no room to lie comfortably. We huddled together for warmth, as our limbs were frozen, trying to sleep. We had to fight for every inch of floor space. We placed our shoes by our heads, so that during the night they would not be lost or stolen. Our footwear was the only clothing from home that we still possessed, of all the precious belongings that we had not lost.

The following day, in the afternoon, another "Appell" was held. Again we stood in lines for about two hours. This roll call was more rigorously

conducted than the previous ones. We glanced towards the neighbouring camps and saw that its residents were also standing in the same formation as us. In the distance, far, far away, women stood in their thousands. Was it possible that among their number was my family?

After this roll call they distributed bread and two slivers of margarine to our fellow prisoners, their dinner. The daily ration was about seven ounces of bread, a portion of margarine and, at noon, a small bowl of porridge. However we didn't receive anything, because we hadn't been included in the day's barrack's count. We looked at the meagre portion of German war bread, which the others were chewing with great appetite and our eyes blurred with hunger. We became dizzy and couldn't stand on our feet. Then came the struggle for a place to lie down. We, the two hundred and six doctors, who had been kept apart during the roll call, were only allowed to enter the hut at after everyone else. The deputy had reserved a special place for us in one of the corners of the hall, however, this had only enough room for us to sit or kneel; we could not lie down. There was not enough room, and in the fight for space, the noise in the hall did not stop. The deputy Kapo appeared in the hall every half hour and, at the cost of a few broken skulls, would enforce silence, however this only lasted a few minutes.

At four o'clock in the morning, we were woken for the morning roll call. We ran outside to the cold, gloomy square. After the count, I slipped away to

barracks number 15, to look for my younger brother. From him, and from others I learned that late at night the Gypsies had beaten our comrade-in-arms S. to death, because of his madness and whining. His body was placed in front of the barracks, so that he would be present during the roll call. They would announce: "So many Jews, plus so many dead". The death of our fellow inmate shocked us. This was the first time anyone had seen someone beaten to death. How many more were to follow?

At about nine in the morning, the first distribution for a midday meal began, which thankfully also included us. They put six barrels of food on both sides of the square, between the huts, and every fifth person received a pot containing about four pints of gruel. Five people had to eat from this. There were no spoons, of course, the pot was simply passed from mouth to mouth. In their hunger, people watched each other like hawks waiting to pounce should anyone swallow a larger portion of the appallingly bland food. Each person was allowed five mouthfuls and then made to pass the food to his neighbour. As hungry as I was, I could not control a feeling of nausea.

The food was an unappetising mixture of animal carcasses and weeds, mostly unsuitable for human consumption. Yet, even over this porridge, quarrels and fights broke out, as there was not enough to feed twelve hundred people. I realised that starvation, in addition to torture, was the Nazi's device to break our spirits, to degrade us, to destroy all human

dignity, all civil and moral sense that we possessed.

When we were totally subjugated, they could do with us as they pleased. I was distressed at seeing how quickly they succeeded in their ploy. It was shocking to see, in just a few days, how this famous surgeon, or that renowned dentist, would behave like a cannibal, gorging himself from food barrels, and fighting over the last little morsel of unappetising gruel, just like that boy, in the folk tale from Maramures,<sup>9</sup> who had never eaten enough.

On the third day in this hell hole, a second transport arrived from Vásárhely, of those who had remained at the brickworks after we had been transported. They settled these new prisoners next door, in hut 13. Among them was my brother-in-law. We embraced each other in tears. He told me that a few hours after we left, our confiscated belongings from the train station were returned to the brick factory in trucks. These were given to local Christian merchants, who sold everything at auction. Among things that were recognised were items of clothing that belonged to my wife and daughters, and from this he suspected the horrific destination to which my family had travelled. A great panic had broken out among the new transportees, and they tried to use up their food during the two days of travel, thinking that the same fate awaited everyone. Their journey was terrible, just like ours. In their group, they also brought patients from the

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<sup>9</sup> *Maramures in northern Romania is famous as a crucible of traditional fairy tales.*

local Jewish hospital, including the disabled, and also children with scarlet fever. A few doctors were assigned to care for these patients, and also the residents of the old age home. It was clear that these had not been brought to Auschwitz to work.

That is what my brother-in-law told me, but what could I tell him, where was his sister, my wife, where were my daughters, whom he loved so much? They also heard the shocking truth from the Polish Jews that we were all to be exterminated. Their mood matched ours. We had nothing with which to comfort each other. We looked at each other through tearful eyes, crying over our lives that had been crushed, mourning the lives that of those that had already been destroyed. The next morning I looked in vain for him in his barracks. But there were new faces there. I learned that they had been sent away during the night, without any selection process. I have not heard from him since.

The days passed, each one with the same routine, wake up at dawn, for the four o'clock, "Appell". Wandering between the two barracks all day long. We were forbidden to take shelter inside, which was very unpleasant, as it rained almost all day long that whole month of June. We became wet and caught cold in our thin clothing, which even at night did not dry, and clung to our bodies. We could not take our clothes off, and frequently inside the barracks we slipped on the cold wet concrete floor.

In the meantime, new people arrived. Each day an SS man would appear and select men for work.

“Taken out for transport” was the expression used for these shipments. The selection of people was done according to varying standards. Sometimes young men between sixteen and eighteen years of age were taken as manual labourers. There were watchmakers among us, who were assigned delicate work. They were called “the mechanics”; then there were woodcutters, fit men under the age of forty, all of them were taken and led away, to who knows where? In their place, groups of newcomers were brought to our barracks, so our numbers didn’t grow less, and often even increased.

In the limited space inside our barracks, we were forced to spend many nights standing. Only we, the doctors, remained in place, waiting in vain for them to give us work. As our numbers grew, our strength diminished, we all hoped that if we were sent to work, a more humane existence and better food would be some reward. Once, our Gypsy block deputy threatened: “Everyone is going, but you doctors will remain my slaves.”

We were dirty and unkempt. Our basic needs were neglected. The Gypsy guards would not let us go to the bathhouse. We were only allowed to go to the latrine twice or three times a day, in groups, and under the supervision of a block elder. The bathhouse and the toilet were both in the same hut as the other living quarters, where a long perforated tin pipe was fixed to the ceiling, from which water flowed through holes into the baths. The entire camp came here to bathe, about twenty-five

thousand people; so many that we could only wash ourselves every two or three days. The latrines were installed in another building, in three long rows, with three hundred openings, for that number of people to use them simultaneously. The Kapo would lead us in groups of a hundred, and his special pleasure was to appear behind us and whip us, forcing us to leave before we could finish emptying our bowels. In the absence of paper, we had to tear small pieces of our shirts and to use instead. Slowly, the shirts on our bodies were reduced to shreds, and eventually we had no underwear, no handkerchiefs, or anything to cover ourselves.

Diseases began to spread among us. We all had colds, runny noses, and coughs. Sore throats and tonsillitis spread throughout the camp. There were no medicines, and no treatment was available. However, nature helped us, and over time we became immune to the diseases. Even with a temperature of thirty-nine degrees, we would stand all day in the rain and wind. Nevertheless, there were about three or four deaths in our hut every day. First, the diabetic patients died, who at home were kept alive by insulin treatment and diet foods. They collapsed within a few days, and a few hours later they died. During the roll calls, they always displayed two or three corpses alongside us, as they had to be included in the audit. It was a gruesome sight. There were nearly three hundred doctors in our barrack without being able to treat anyone in their care. We asked the block elder to at least allow the patients

with high fevers to lie down in the barracks. He allowed this, but on the condition that they had to report outside for roll calls. This was a little triumph, however, after three hours, and at times in the driving rain, those patients were certain to die.

A sixteen-year-old boy fell ill with meningitis, and it was horrifying to hear his screams. Since it was a contagious disease, we separated him from the others, and placed him in one of the corners of the block. His suffering lasted four days until death released him from his torments. I shed tears for this boy, and in those moments, I anxiously thought of my daughters, for if they were alive, they might also be prey to afflictions and disease, typhus, meningitis, scarlet fever, with no one to help them. But, at least they would be alive. We are forced to watch helplessly as patients die before our eyes, patients who could have been helped. I could only ask God to protect my loved ones.

On the ninth day of our stay there, my brother from hut number 15 suddenly burst in and told me that he had been selected as a labourer and that his convoy was leaving immediately. He had only managed to slip out of line to say a brief goodbye to me. We hugged each other, choking back tears, and then he had to run and catch up with his group. The poor man had risked being beaten to say goodbye to his only brother. As he suffers from diabetes, I am very afraid of the hard physical work assigned to him. But he can't admit to having this condition, for then his fate would be sealed. He

chose to go with the men who were selected for hard labour. So now my brother has also left me. Please, please, be with him and keep him safe!

A few days after we arrived at hut number 11, we discovered signs of scarlet fever in a young boy. We decided not to announce the diagnosis, because we knew that the child would be taken straight to the gas chambers. But a few days later another similarly infected patient appeared, followed by others. We continued to conceal the cases, which were discovered in boys who had been brought from the ghetto in Nagyvárad. We tried to isolate them by putting them next to each other in the hall, away from the other one thousand two hundred people in the block. Even so, we could not hide the infection for long, because these were serious cases and incapable of attending the roll calls. We were forced to reveal the outbreak to the block elder. The next day an SS doctor appeared, although he refused to enter the barracks, and simply left treatment of the epidemic to one of the doctors. No medicine was made available to him, and our hut was quarantined. It was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, and we could not even go to the bathhouse or the toilet. We were unable to leave, and no new people were brought to us.

We were completely isolated from the outside world, and thoroughly depressed, as we had pinned our hopes on our situation improving by being sent to work, and as we were starving, improving our food ration. Our most optimistic calculation was that

we would survive on the rations we were being given for only another three months.

Of course, standing for fifteen hours a day, in the rainy, always chilling weather, turned our calculations upside down. Day by day we grew weaker and weaker. We did not work, but remained in line, moving with difficulty, hardly being able to stand on our feet anymore. We had no mirrors to show us our appearance, but we could tell the extent of our physical deterioration by simply looking at each other. The appearance of boys and fifty-year-old men was especially horrifying. We could not shave, and with our newly grown white beards, and in our striped clothing, we did look like criminals.

The physical pain of hunger was indescribable. The food, which we fought over twice each day, was brought to us around nine o'clock in the morning, and again at four or five o'clock in the afternoon. Frequently there was nothing for two or three days, so we starved until we received portions of the disgusting gruel.

After three weeks, I could eat no more than six spoonfuls of this unappetising food each day; however, I became so weak that I forced myself to consume a cupful daily. The main struggle was over bread. We tried to save some from the daily ration, but as we frequently had no breakfast, there was hardly anyone among us with the strength of will capable of resisting eating the bread. In our great hunger, we ate the entire slice of bread in the evening, and then had to endure a twenty-four hour fast.

We tried to protect ourselves from the cold and the rain by huddling together, maybe two hundred people, warming ourselves against each other's bodies. And this inactivity, of course, occurred even when there was no "Appell". Moreover, as those at the edges of our group got wet, we had to take turns at being the "outer wall" in shifts. A few of us had debated politics, and spoke of the progress of the war, and moaned about our imprisonment. We complained about the weather. By turns we were optimistic or pessimistic, according to the rumours that flourished and spread like wildfire.

The transports continued from Hungary, and many times each day we witnessed the new intake stumbling through the camp square, led by club-wielding Gypsies. It was evident that they had just come from bathing and stared at us with their eyes wide with terror, just as we had looked when we arrived.

"Where are you from?" we asked them through the barbed wire fences, and from their answers it became clear that Jews were being sent here from all parts of Hungary, from the borders to the capital, with the noose tightening on all sides around Budapest, which apparently had been left for last. This was proof that the Arrow Cross regime<sup>10</sup> remained in power in Hungary, and that the deportations would continue. Encouragingly, for a brief period of four or five days no new transports

<sup>10</sup> *The Arrow Cross Party (1939-1945) was a far-right Hungarian ultranationalist party led by Ferenc Szálasi (1897-1946).*

arrived, but afterwards the freight trains again spewed out further cargoes of transported humans, and all hope vanished.

On June 7th, a rumour reached us – we never knew by what means – that the Allied armies had invaded France. It is possible that Gypsies, who worked outside the camp, were the ones who brought the news. The most optimistic among us believed that the war would end within three or four weeks. Place names now became important topics during our freezing morning roll calls, and there were those among us, claiming exceptional knowledge of Europe, who knew the answer to every question – at least they seemed to be more knowledgeable about the distances between the various French places than even the French National Geographic Institute!

We were all in a state of apprehension, for our only hope of escaping Hitler's inferno alive was by the rapid end of the war. The fantasists among us waited for paratroopers floating from the sky, that they believed Roosevelt would send, especially to save us!

In this mood, our nightmares diminished, and we were willing to believe that the constantly smoking chimneys, spewing smoke high into the night sky and filling the air with a pungent, heavy smell, were just the chimneys of a bakery, and that the other ones were burning the remains of packages that had just arrived.

These faint glimmers of hope gave us the

strength to continue bearing our terrible existence. Everyone was filled with hope; the more progressive-minded believed that military action by Allied forces would bring our freedom, while the religious amongst us put their faith in the Supreme Power, God, to whom they devoted their prayers at the beginning and end of each day. It had become customary in the camp for large groups to form in the morning and evening and recite "Avinu Malkeinu" ("Our Father, Our King.") the prayer of the Ten Days of Repentance, and also of Yom Kippur, sobbing in their extreme despair. And indeed, there were many doctors, lawyers, and intellectuals who had previously renounced their faith who now joined in praying with those who had always remained faithful.

In our misery, we recited Psalm 118, "*Min Ha-meitzar karati Yah.*" ("We cry out from the depths, Lord"), as we sank deeper into the abyss of our enslavement. The Germans acted according to tried and tested psychological methods. It was rare for a German soldier to raise his hand against us – it was Jews from Poland who persecuted us; they took our papers in the bathhouse; they beat us, repeatedly telling us that our families were no longer alive. Then they handed us over to the Gypsies, who punished us almost to death – in order to teach us what discipline was! The Germans entrusted the guarding of the camp inmates to trusted prisoners, the "Kapos". Prisoners guarded prisoners. The administrative apparatus of the camp consisted of

convicted criminals, who the SS appointed to positions of controlling power in the concentration camps.

The Germans were astute in their methodology. Long serving prisoners, along with the veteran Jewish and Roma camp inmates, went above and beyond the call of duty to ingratiate themselves with the SS, to ensure themselves a few more days of life. They took out their sadistic tendencies on us, stealing even what little bread and margarine that the Germans allowed us. We could not complain to anyone that instead of a quarter of a loaf of bread, which was our official daily ration, we received only a seventh or an eighth of a loaf. Although it distressed me very much at the time, even today I cannot understand how moral decay insinuates and knows no bounds.

The “trusties” would steal the last slice of bread from us, and even from each other, with violence; and if anyone was given a task by our Gypsy guards, they would carry it out in the most servile way to gain advantages for themselves at the expense of their fellow sufferers. And if someone was awarded a supervisory position, and given a club, he was immediately prepared to raise it against his fellow Jews, consequently after less than two weeks of camp life, there were already many Jewish cudgel owners.

As our physical appearance degenerated, our mental state also deteriorated, and with the decline of the body, came the decline of the spirit. The Germans knew that it would be easy for them to do

as they pleased with a mass of people, reduced to bestial instincts, who were also morally degraded by hunger and beatings. And although there were a hundred thousand of us, the entire camp was run by only a few hundred SS men. They had no need to fear rebellion or uprising. Such a population of debased humanity does not weep for its lost freedom; it does not fight to gain its liberty, but thinks only of the quarter of a loaf of bread that has been stolen from them. They do not think of escape or rebellion, but simply of how they can safely join those who are sent to work, in the hope that by doing so they will get a larger slice of bread.

I often asked my fellow Hungarian prisoners how they imagined their future would be after liberation. Sadly, I realised that few had learned anything from our tragedy, or imagined how it would affect their future. They believed that if we survived we would all return home as if nothing had happened, to continue where we had left off. Some spoke of revenge, however their fury quickly disappeared, to be replaced by a more venal demand for compensation for their lost property. Only a few thought about true freedom, the right of all people. These people had not yet learned from their suffering, and they still had a long way to go on their road to Calvary before they could begin to imagine a future in which they would live, and how they would deal with the terrors that Auschwitz had bequeathed them.

And so passed the entire month of June. One

month, an eternity. We ate the bitter and, above all, very meagre bread of slavery. Our daily lives continued with seeming monotony, and yet there was variety in them, as changes in the camp never ceased. Transports from Hungary came and went, and others left the camp for unknown destinations.

Our major concern was for our families and the lack of food, which weakened us to the point that we were unable to even walk. To move about we had to crawl. We still hoped that the SS would give us employment, not only because as workers we would also be entitled to more food, but also so that we would get away from the ever smoking crematoria; however we thought that it would be better to stay where we were, because it was possible that the war would end quickly, and we would be liberated. We feared that if the SS retreated to Germany, and took us with them, we would be taken far from our families, who we desperately wanted to believe were alive nearby. We decided that from now on, if possible, we would evade the transports and stay in the camp as long as we were allowed.

Towards the end of June, when we had no more scarlet fever patients, our block was released from quarantine. The next day an SS officer appeared, and we were ordered to parade before him naked. He examined us doctors, but only of course to assess our physical condition – he did not pay any attention to our psychological state. We lined up anxiously. He chose some of us for transportation. So we were

leaving too. We were leaving the place where, for five weeks, we had suffered so much, where our bodies had wasted so terribly, and now we are going to face a new, unknown terror. Would we remember these weeks of great suffering, as we remembered the previous times of torment? At the brickworks, we had longed for our abandoned homes, and for our former civilian lives; in our journey to Auschwitz we had yearned for the brickworks, because there at least we had air and water. I longed for that train carriage, crowded to suffocation, where, despite all our suffering, I was still with my wife and my little daughters, and could look into their beautiful sad eyes, and hear their voices. Will there be days of greater suffering than our ordeal of the five weeks in the Gypsy camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau? How much more pain can we bear?

We march to the large square in front of the camp entrance, the place of the roll call on the day that we had arrived. They count us again, a thousand people. Then something happens that kindles our hopes. The Kapos write down our personal details, our names and occupations, on a clipboard. Somehow we become human beings again and not just pieces. It seems possible that anyone who is assigned work receives better treatment, the promise of a more comfortable existence. In the meantime, they also distribute lunch portions, after which we are given the day's ration of margarine and bread. The sky darkens, there is a strong wind and torrential rain, unlike anything that had fallen before,

which soaks us to the bone. And, despite the terrible weather, they march us out. At the gate, the SD<sup>11</sup> men count our ranks, arrange us in groups of five, and we leave the Gypsy camp. We pass by two or three similar sites, and after walking for about half a mile, they lead us into a new camp, on the gate of which we could read the inscription: “Quarantine Lager.”

We arrive at hut number 10 totally drenched. It looks exactly like the ones at the Gypsy camp. The same huts, the same picture. We will never forget the welcome we receive. The rain continues for about half an hour, soaking us to the bone as we stand outside in front of the hut. Our clothes, made of thin synthetic material, get wet in a few minutes, and our feet are submerged in water up to the ankles. When the rain stops, we take off our garments and wring the water out of them. It is a very damp and chilly afternoon. Even the slices of bread and margarine in our hands get wet. Finally, after standing in line for over an hour, the block elder from the hut emerges, and lectures us. He speaks in German, but from his accent, we can tell that he is Polish, an “Aryan” Pole. The gist of his speech is that he will teach us, “Pig Jews” (Saujuden), that if he has his way none of us will leave his block alive. He orders us to take off our shoes, as we can only enter the barracks barefoot. He also tells us that there are very few

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<sup>11</sup> SD - *Sicherheitsdienst*, the intelligence agency of the SS and Nazi Party. They were involved in intelligence gathering, sabotage, espionage, and counterintelligence.

places to sleep in the hut, as it can only accommodate a thousand people, therefore only those over the age of thirty-five can have a place on the bunks, while the younger people will have to sleep on the floor.

One by one, we enter the hut to be greeted by two Polish thugs. They check our pockets, looking for valuables, and since they find nothing, they take our glasses and throw them on the floor, even if this petty sadism makes life even more difficult for us. Those with better shoes immediately lose them.

We no longer had good footwear, as the Gypsies had stolen our shoes at our previous camp. In exchange, we had been given wooden clogs, or shoes previously worn by others. In the Gypsy camp, the smarter ones, seeing that a search was underway for good footwear, improved their lot by swapping boots between two of them and, by walking in mismatched shoes, they avoided having them seized by a Gypsy. Nevertheless, there were some of us who were more fortunate, or perhaps stronger, who still wore shoes that were in good condition. Now, even these were taken. However, there were many who willingly exchanged their shoes for a slice of bread, or a few cigarettes, and there were also some who pulled the gold crowns or bridges from their teeth, in order to receive food or cigarettes in exchange.

The Poles in charge of our hut were not satisfied with the loot they’d seized, and expressed their disappointment by beating thirteen of our group. For protection we crowded together. Further chaos

erupted with the arrangement of sleeping places. In the bunks intended for four, twelve of us were forced to huddle together to keep each other warm, because we were shivering in our wet clothes. Even so, there was not enough room for everyone, and those who could not find a place for themselves were constantly disturbing the others. The three Poles chased them attacking them mercilessly, compared to which the blows of the Gypsies seemed like caresses.

We didn't sleep that night because the screams of the injured kept us awake. The young men under the age of thirty-five were pushed under the bunks. I don't know how they were able to squeeze into those narrow spaces without suffocating.

At four o'clock in the morning, they ordered us out of the barracks. Our clothes had not yet dried and our teeth chattered in the cold dawn. This roll call was more terrifying than the previous one. The block elder, paced up and down between our rows like an angry lion, constantly shouting anti-Semitic abuse, and calling us the vilest names. He punched those in the front rows in the face or stomach, so that virtually every second man bled. Many fainted from the blows.

At the next roll call, no one dared standing in the front row. We agreed that every fifth person would take turns standing in front, risking their lives.

We couldn't go to the bathhouse or to the toilet, because we were not allowed to leave our position. We were forced, at some risk to relieve ourselves

behind the rows. The next day, the block commander noticed this and ordered the doctors to remove the excrement with their own hands.

Behind the barracks there was a large, deep ditch, which had filled with water from the heavy rain of the previous day. The next morning the block elder ordered a lawyer from Nagyvárád and also a doctor from our ranks, stripped them half naked, and made them stand in the trench, and ordered them to shovel the water out. A whole day passed before the two unfortunates had finished their work, and then they were allowed to climb up and out of the trench, shivering and blue with cold.

Mealtimes were the same as in our previous camp. There was a lack of eating utensils, and our food was liable to be stolen even more. One thing raised our spirits, and hope shone again in our eyes. Next to the quarantine camp, officially called "Lager A," there was another, called "Lager B," and only an electrified wire fence separated us. We saw that there were men and women mixed together, and - what happiness - children, even newborn babies! There were also old people, infirm men and women, walking with difficulty.

In front of some of the huts there were women knitting, sitting outside on wooden benches. We wanted to know where they were from, and if they were Jews? We called out, "Where are you from?" They didn't understand the question - they were not Hungarian. We asked again, this time in German. "Tschechische Juden" was the answer. Thank God,

Jews then, from Slovakia<sup>12</sup>, and again we reassured ourselves that it was impossible that the SS had left the Czech Jews, women and children, alive, and burned ours, that made no sense. Is everything we have heard so far a lie? Is it possible to go crazy from these lies?

The next day, I risked getting closer to the barbed wire fence. I approached one woman and asked her how did they get here and what their conditions were like? She cautiously replied, explaining that they had been in the camp for eight months, and that their food was as inadequate as ours, but she encouraged me, whispering,

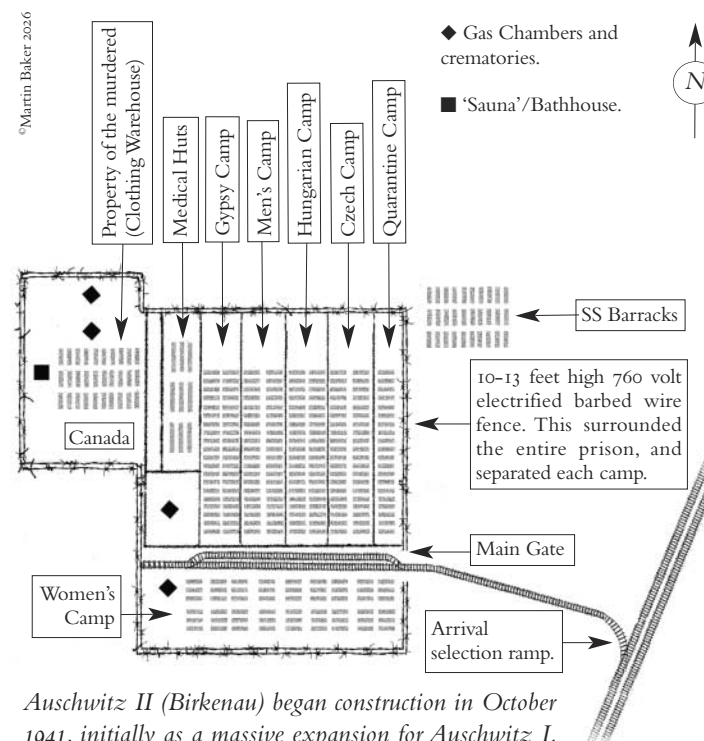
“Patience! We can bear and put up with all this.”

Again I needed to hope that my family was still alive somewhere. Perhaps my own children were running around like this, playing as they did back home. It was the second of July.

From the quarantine camp, about a hundred meters away, there was a narrow path, and morning and evening at fixed times, groups of women dressed in grey, with a red or white headscarf on their heads, passed along it. Many thousands walked at that time in both directions, while SS thugs holding trained dogs accompanied them, each group of a hundred accompanied by five guards. We looked to see if there were any familiar faces among them? We focused our ears in case we heard a snippet of conversation, from which we could determine if

<sup>12</sup> The German occupation of Czechoslovakia divided its territory into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and the Slovak State.

they were speaking Hungarian. However, they walked silently. No sound reached our ears, and we did not recognise a familiar face. The grey clothing and the headscarves evoked images from “The Tragedy of Man” again in my memory.



*Auschwitz II (Birkenau) began construction in October 1941, initially as a massive expansion for Auschwitz I. It became the main extermination camp with gas chambers and crematoria. From May 1944, the area to the North was developed as a transit camp ('Mexico') for thousands of Hungarian and Polish women.*

## A.16058

ON THE AFTERNOON of July 3rd, an SS doctor appeared and lined us up, after stripping us naked, and selected five hundred men out of the thousand. Any sick person, with an injury, or suffering from a skin disease was excluded. A colleague, a good friend, lined up with us, despite suffering from a fracture. He hoped that somehow he would manage to pass the examination. The SS doctor noticed the man's injury and beat him terribly. This was the first case I saw of a German officer beating a person. Usually, these gentlemen were gentle with their gloved hands. They did not soil themselves with the likes of us. They had others who would inflict punishment for them with boundless devotion.

We were always worried that these selections indicated being taken into Germany, and we would leave our families, who we still wanted to believe were alive, somewhere nearby. We decided, now that it seemed possible, to avoid the transports and stay where we were. Five hundred men from among us were chosen. They quickly distributed our lunch and lined us up in alphabetical order. They wrote down our personal details on a clipboard again, and a number was tattooed on each of our left arms. A.16058' was tattooed on my left arm<sup>13</sup>. From that

<sup>13</sup> It was only at Auschwitz that numbers were tattooed on the forearms of prisoners. The numbers were preceded by a letter, A and B for Jews. P for political prisoners, R for Soviet, and Z (Zigueruner/Gypsy) for Sinti/Roma.

moment, we became marked prisoners, carrying the shameful number that Hitler's executioners had tattooed, that would remain with us indelibly for the rest of our lives. We knew that it was intended to make any escape more difficult, and yet somehow we were glad of it, because we had heard that those who were tattooed, and had been registered on the clip board would not be taken to the ovens. Our arms ached from the needle, and it was strange to look at our numbered arms, a stigma that would never be erased. Late in the afternoon, the tattooing operation was completed.

Towards evening, they formed us into columns and led us back along the road to Camp A. We also passed the Gypsy camp, and approached the crematorium. For a moment, fear rose in our minds that they might be bringing us to the gas chamber despite all the tattoos. The Germans had so often deceived us with their tricks, for they were masters of guile, and we wouldn't have been surprised if they had ordered us to turn into the crematorium's gate. However, they continued to lead us along the path leading to the "Sauna", where we were ordered to bathe.

We took off our striped clothes, our hair was carefully combed, and every hair on our bodies was shaved, then they led us under the showers. We bathed, and were disinfected again. Afterwards they clothed us again. This time we were handed civilian clothes, mostly tattered remnants, which even the poorest of beggars would have refused. We were

given shirts, but no underpants. With our wild beards and wearing these rags, we resembled characters from Gorky's "Lower Depths". We looked worse than we had before in the striped garb; that at least was a uniform. We had grown used to it. It was some time before we recognised each other again, wearing civilian clothes. We had become strangers to each other. When everyone had been washed and disinfected, we returned to the barracks.

We walked by the light of the electric lamps and searchlights at the camp's barbed wire perimeter, that were aimed at us. We thought we were being led to the train station, where we would be loaded into wagons and "transported", but, to our great surprise, we remained in barracks next to the Gypsy camp, the famous "Lager D"<sup>14</sup>. Here we were ushered through the gate in groups of five. The SS sentries who had been escorting us left, locking the camp gate behind us. We continued walking in single file, crossing the camp square, along "Lagerstrasse", to its end, where we stopped at the barbed wire fence. We couldn't go any further. It was then that we realised that there were no guards with us. Neither our SS escort, nor the block elders. There was a deathly silence in the camp. No one watched us. We stood in the darkness, confused. We wondered where we would spend the night?

Someone had noticed that at the entrance to the

<sup>14</sup> "Lager D" refers to a specific camp within the larger Auschwitz concentration camp complex. It designated the "main camp" of Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the central barracks, administration, and other facilities were located.

camp, on one of the barracks, he had seen the inscription "Schreibstube" (Office). Two of us approached and knocked on the door. We woke someone up and told him that there were five hundred of us outside, and that no one had taken charge of us. He grudgingly snarled that he would take care of us. Minutes later, a Russian Kapo appeared and opened a barracks used for latrines, and ordered us all inside. We spent our first night in Camp D, in a toilet block intended for just three hundred people. Somehow we arranged ourselves on the benches of the latrines, but many had to rest on the ground. Sleeping was out of the question, especially as the smell was sickening. But we had already become used to squalid living conditions, and bore every hardship with something like complete apathy. Somehow the night passed.

At dawn, we were ordered out of our temporary overnight accommodation and led to the square on the edge of the camp, where we were told to sit on the ground. In the meantime, the camp came to life. At 5 a.m. other prisoners were ejected from their barracks. Creatures dressed in striped uniforms and some wearing civilian clothes like ours emerged from their huts and walked in groups to the camp gate. Each one was led by a man with a band on his arm, with the word "Kapo" on it. In the distance, we could hear military music. The sun had risen and its rays warmed our frozen limbs. Of course, there was no point thinking about breakfast, for after six weeks of being in the camp, we had never received

any food in the morning. It must have been towards noon when a man appeared in front of us, wearing the inscription "Bl. 13" on his arm. Based on our previous experiences, we knew that we were now being taken to that hut.

We formed into rows of five at lightning speed, and followed the orderly, marching through the camp and reading the inscriptions on the huts. In addition to numbers there were words we hadn't encountered before. On one hut it said, "Häftlings-Krankenbau" (Clinic for Prisoners), on another, "Schneiderei" (Tailoring), was written, and then "Schusterei" (Shoemaker); there was also: "Kleidungskammer" (Clothing warehouse). Will we work here?

We arrived outside hut number 13, and in its courtyard, the only one enclosed by a fence, they made us sit on the ground before distributing two yellow triangles and a strip of white cloth, which we were ordered to sew on our coats and trousers. We had to write the numbers tattooed on our arms with an indelible marker pen on the white band. Sewing threads were also handed out, although only three needles were supplied, and five hundred men were expected to sew the stripes on their clothing. Of course, we could not get it done in an hour, even though the tailors among us did their best with the three needles.

An hour later, the block elder came and beat anyone who hadn't sewn the identifying band to their clothes. We were no longer surprised by this

brutality. We had become used to violence from the orderlies of every new block: "They beat you first, to soften you up, just to show you who is in charge", someone commented.

At noon, they distribute a very meagre meal, and we also receive our daily portion of margarine and bread. Now we are all decorated with our distinguishing marks - our arms are tattooed, our coats and trousers have a white band with our number, and a yellow triangle indicates our Jewishness. In addition, on the back of our jackets, on both sides of our trousers, there is a thick red stripe painted with oil colour, running along the seam. These are intended to make us easier to spot if we try to escape.

In the afternoon, the block commander came again and led us back to an area at the edge of the camp. We had only spent the morning in hut number 13, and we left there marked with blue bruises and swollen faces.

We couldn't understand why the veteran prisoners treated us with such indescribable hatred and violence. The Jewish persecutors were no exception. Only much later, when I had spent several months forming friendships in the workplaces, I came to understand the devious psychological devices the Nazis used for running the camps. But now this violence made me very bitter, for the beatings we received from the Jewish trustees hurt more than the abuse we suffered from the Poles, Germans or Russians. The latter only hurt our

bodies; the blows from our fellow Jews broke and humiliated our souls.

Evening has already fallen, and we are still sitting on the ground, at the very edge of the vast camp. Suddenly, a man in striped clothes, neatly ironed, and with a very commanding expression on his face, approaches our ranks. He looks very impressive, and on his arm is a yellow stripe with the inscription, "Oberkapo" (Chief Kapo).

Another Kapo accompanies him. He examines our ranks, and then addresses us, asking us about our former professions, and about our knowledge of German. He writes down the numbers of some of those questioned. I notice that if someone indicates his profession as a doctor, he is ignored with a dismissive gesture of his hand. Obviously, he does not need doctors. But he records the numbers of anyone who says that his profession was a teacher. He turned to me. Impulsively, I deny being a doctor, and said that I had been an elementary school teacher. I didn't lie, as I had qualified as one before I began to study medicine. He writes down my number, which makes me happy, because I hope that if my children are in a nearby camp, there is a possibility that I might be taken to them as a teacher. Oh God! If only I could meet my daughters!

After recording our numbers, they took twenty of us to block 22. Half of the other four hundred and eighty inmates were also taken to the hut. The other two hundred and forty were taken to other blocks. Our new barracks looked the same as all

other the huts in which we had been quartered before. However, the interior was completely different. Either side of a brick stove that divided the hut in two, there were bunks, but not as dilapidated as those in our previous barracks, and the biggest surprise was that each one only had to accommodate six people. In addition, on each bunk there was a straw mattress and a blanket for each of us!

The block's commander did not beat us either. His deputy led us to the bunks, and for the first time in six weeks, we were able to undress and lie down properly. We almost had the feeling that we had risen socially, and when I climbed up onto the platform of the second tier, and was able to cover myself with my own blanket. I felt as if I had taken a small step towards recovering some human dignity. There was also quite a bit of noise in the room, a mixture of Poles, Russians, Jews and Christians, and now Hungarian voices. As I fell asleep, I thought of my brother-in-law, the doctor, from whom I had been separated, even though we had managed to remain together until then. Only four of us remained of the seven thousand people who had been transported from the brickyard six weeks ago. I comforted myself with the hope that they would register me as a teacher, and that I would be with the camp's children, and to learn what happened to them, my own three girls in particular. I fell into a more peaceful sleep than I had known in weeks, and that night I dreamed of my children.

At four o'clock in the morning we are woken by the usual calls and shouts: "Aufstehen, Aufstehen!" Instantly everyone is on their feet. We only just manage to dress, when I hear my number being called, "A 16058". I jump up immediately to avoid being beaten. The numbers of twenty of my friends who were registered the previous night were also called. We all line up and a barrack supervisor, known as a "Stubendienst" (Duty officer), leads us outside to the "Häftlings Bekleidungskammer Auschwitz 2" (Prisoner's Clothing Room Auschwitz 2). We are taken inside the barracks and handed over to a Kapo. He gives a short speech, telling us that we don't know what a huge stroke of luck has fallen on us by being assigned to work in the clothing store, and that we must be hard workers, because if we slack we'll be thrown out, and then we would appreciate the ease of this employment, compared to the harsher work we'll be given in other Kommandos<sup>15</sup>.

We didn't know what a "Kommando" was, but we guessed that it was what work groups were called. After this short speech, we were handed over to a barber, who quickly shaved us. After shaving our badger beards, which had grown wild over the weeks, we didn't recognise each other; our facial appearance had changed so much.

After being ordered to take off our worn-out rags, to our astonishment we were given perfectly clean shirts, underwear, and decent suits. The red

<sup>15</sup> *Kommando - Work Squad. Trusted prisoners who were given privileges.*

stripe shone on these jackets and trousers, as did the white ribbon and yellow triangle, but apart from that we looked almost elegant to each other, and also to ourselves. Things are not starting too badly, we agreed. And while we were whispering, the Oberkapo to whom we had to be indebted for our new clean clothes, and who had written down our numbers the night before, appeared. He looked at us, approvingly,

"Now you look completely different."

He then handed us over to the Kapo in charge of work details. Then we were able to see where we actually were. Block 22, unlike the others, differed in that instead of bunks there were rows of shelves, like those in large textile or haberdashery stores. They were filled to the ceiling with a variety of clothes. Men's suits and overcoats, a lot of shoes, with underwear, shirts, and trousers by the hundreds of thousands. How did these things get here? We soon found out. The foreman put me in the cotton department.

My job was to stamp the inscription "K. L. Reich" ("Republic Collection Warehouse") on the shirts after they had been disinfected in the laundry. Then I had to neatly fold the laundry, tie the garments in bundles of twenty, and place them on the shelves. A foreman, the manager of the shirt department, showed me how to do this work. When I tried to speak to him during the day, he shushed me, whispering that it was forbidden to talk while we worked, but during the lunch break or later that

evening he would gladly answer my questions.

I worked silently and very conscientiously, because I finally felt safe, being under a roof where the work was clean, and that my foreman, a prisoner like me, appeared to be a very good man. I did not want to push my luck. I folded many shirts, and since I could not talk to the foreman, I spoke to the shirts that could tell me so much.

The garments that I took into my hands told me eloquently of the last five years of European Jewry; about the greatest Jewish tragedy in world history. The clothes replied quietly, because speaking loudly was forbidden, but I understood every word that they said: “Printemps Paris”, or “Galerie Lafayette Paris”. They spoke about the doomed French Jews, those who had felt so equal in the land of “Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité” but who had been sent to Auschwitz years ago. I wondered how many of their wearers were still alive?

Another stamp, inside the collar this time, identified a shirt made by an Amsterdam firm. It told of the tragedy of the wealthy Dutch Jews. There was also discarded clothing made by firms from Łódź, which spoke of the masses of Polish Jews who were exterminated, of whom only a few young people survived; innocents who, after five years of confinement at Auschwitz had abandoned all semblance of humanity and had become ferociously wild.

I came across shirts from Hungary, whose labels tell of our fate. The inscription “Made by Sandor

Barta, Nagykanizsa”, reflected the tragedy of the Jews from that city west of the Danube. I see the Jew transported from the Kanizsa ghetto, bringing his best shirts with him, packing them carefully to remain pristine, so that he will retain his dignity as a man for as long as possible. Who knows whether it was a young man or an elderly one who wore that shirt, and whether Dr. Mengele, the selecting doctor, sent him to the right or to the left when he got off the train. Did he live here, work, and suffer among us, or, was he an old or sick person, and sent straight to the gas chamber?

Here, in my hands, are the customers of the Corvin department store, in Budapest, and the other stores supplying the middle classes of Hungary, “Bánát, Shirt Salon, Budapest”, the most elegant and expensive shirt manufacturer in the country. There are still a few Budapesters in the camp, but even if the wearers were not from the capital, I wondered where in the country they had come from to order the shirts? And, if they are still alive, how do they feel now wearing coarse prison clothes? Will the shirt that I wore at my arrival fall into my hands once again, or is it being worn by one of my fellow prisoners?

In my reveries I returned to my homeland, my hands folding the clothing carefully all the while, the neat bundles of shirts piling up in front of me. A truck arrived with piles of new merchandise. I worked in a store that never ran out of products. All of European Jewry supplied the goods, free of

charge; and it arrived not only with the smell of sweat, which even the laundry could not clean, but also the smell and stain of the blood spilled by European Jewry, which no detergent or disinfectant would ever remove. And in Germany, these laundered clothes, stained with the blood of innocents were sent to be worn by millions. Will a day of reparations ever come, and will any of us live to see that dawn?

At twelve o'clock, the bell rang for the lunch break. We moved to Barrack No 15, and ate together, all the workers from Barracks 15 and 17. There were about forty of us. Here we had a new surprise: we were served our portion with a degree of civility, each of us had his own little blue bowl, which contained over a pint, and we were also given spoons. Amazingly, five people did not have to eat from one filthy bowl. Instead of half a pint of the camp gruel that we had received until then, we were given well over a pint, and it tasted better, but not much. Perhaps the food was more appetising because it was served in more humane conditions. Apparently, luck really did shine on me when the Oberkapo chose me and arranged for me to work at the clothing store!

Half the workers in the warehouse were Polish-Aryans, the other half were Polish-Jews. I and my fellow prisoners were the first of the Hungarian immigrants. We ate in silence, the non-Jewish Poles would not talk to us, and the Polish Jews were simply reluctant to speak. We Hungarians, without

realising it, became united, although we didn't dare to speak except by whispering. The treatment we had received until then had totally intimidated us, and we still couldn't adjust or relax in this new environment of civility.

The lunch break lasted an hour, and after we had finished eating there were still a few minutes left to rest. At one o'clock, the bell rang again, and we immediately returned to our places to continue working. At six in the evening, our labours finished, and then we, the new intake, were ordered to wash the floor, after which we were given portions of bread and margarine for our dinner. Here the Kapos didn't steal any of the food that we were given, and we were told that two or three times a week we would receive a double portion, a so-called worker's supplement. Excellent prospects!

Meanwhile, the work groups, the Kommandos, who had left in the morning, were returning to Lagerstrasse, and all of them lined up in groups of five in front of the barracks for the afternoon roll call. We also assembled in front of the clothing store, and marched in columns to the area opposite barrack number 20. Those who worked in our store lived in this hut, and we were transferred there. The roll call was held, with perhaps one slight difference - they lined us up in columns far quicker, and with regimented discipline. It was apparent that there were long-serving prisoners in the hut who automatically lined up in the same place, and in the same line.

The roll call itself took on an almost ceremonial character. It began with the shrill call of the block elder, and then an SS thug, in charge of our barracks, counted us. At the command “Mützen ab!” (Hats off!) we had to stand in deathly silence with our caps in our hands, until the order “Mützen auf!” (Hats on!) came from the supervising SS command post at the entrance to the camp, which was transmitted from block to block. Then the exhausted workers flocked to their barracks, and the camp resembled that familiar swarm of ants, slowly moving along Lagerstrasse. At such times, after roll call, we had the opportunity to meet and talk with the other inhabitants of the camp. Until 9 p.m., when the bell signalled bedtime, we were “free” and could walk up and down within the electric wire fence surrounding the camp. We could search the other blocks to see if we had any relatives or acquaintances living there.

These brief hours were an opportunity to meet other camp residents for a chat. To my great joy, several more people from our group were transferred here, including my brother-in-law. We gave each other an account of our first day at work. Everyone envied me for my assignment in the clothing warehouse. They also told me about their labour, which was not as easy as mine. From them I learned the concept of the various “Kommandos.”

As we lay down, my fellow prisoners continued to tell me about their first day of work. Some of them had to dig trenches after walking for three

hours. Those who were taken to break stones suffered harsher conditions, although perhaps the worst was the backbreaking work of those sent to the fields. They had to carry potatoes from wagons at a running pace, and take them to pits located half a mile away. Loaded with 11 stone bags, under the punishing blows of the Kapos, foremen and the SS with their clubs and rifles, they had to make this journey hundreds of times a day. Many of them arrived back at the camp after their first day already mortally tired and in a terribly beaten and tortured state. It is no wonder that the number of these Kommandos dwindled day by day.

Every morning others were forcibly ordered to replace the injured or dead labourers. As replacements, the SS mainly chose from the newly arrived Hungarian Jews, called “Greens,” who were ignorant of the perils of this particular work, and didn’t know how to evade the sadistic Kommandos. They were given the hardest work and therefore killed in greater numbers. The Polish Jews, who remained alive, along with the Aryan Poles and Russians, had all been prisoners for three or even four years and knew how to evade the hardest work details.

As new people arrived at Auschwitz, the longer serving prisoners rose in rank and became foremen and Kapos, so, we, the new Hungarian Jews became their scapegoats. But we still didn’t understand the reason for the violence from Polish Jews. It was only after a few months of working together and sharing

our common suffering that we managed to get them to tell us about themselves, their past, their ordeals, and their terrible degradation. But first, we too had to suffer, as they had, in order to understand them.

The second heavy Kommando was the one known in camp parlance as “Königsgraben” (King’s Grave). Outside the camp, at some distance, the workers had been ordered to dig a large, deep ditch. No one knew the purpose for this excavation, although, in reality, all work here was purposeless; its only goal was to kill us with hard labour, bad and insufficient food, and malicious, cruel treatment; in fact, the name given by Auschwitz camp veterans to the camp was not “Arbeitslager”, as it was officially called, but “Vernichtungslager”, not a labour camp but an extermination camp. Even if the road to the gas chamber is sometimes long, each person travelling upon it will inevitably meet death, the final destination for us all.

I discovered what the music that I heard the previous morning and last night was for. I had thought that it was from a radio. At six in the morning, in the barely dawning light, an orchestra of musicians from the camp played marches, to the sound of which tens of thousands of emaciated workers would file out to work, and return home each evening. Only a German mind could have produced this perverted pantomime, that prisoners who were uprooted from their homes and families would be forced to go to and from work to the sound of music, returning with the weak, and

carrying the workers who had died during the day.

That morning as I worked I tried to ease my anxiety. I waited impatiently for the shift to end, because I had decided to take advantage of the afternoon break to find out who the women were, living a few yards away. The morning passed slowly, the work the same as yesterday, as no matter how hard we worked it never finished. SS trucks appeared many times each day in front of the clothing warehouse and unloaded the goods. They brought thousands of shirts to us, the clothes, shoes, and the belongings of the deceased went to other huts. At the same time, mass human transports arrived again from Hungary. Their luggage preceded them, and while many of their owners collapsed before they arrived, not a single shirt was lost, as they were brought to us directly from the showers and the crematoriums.

At midday, I quickly ate something and hurried out behind the block, from where, a few yards away, there was an electrified barbed wire fence. Beyond that there was a narrow path leading from our blocks to the women’s camp, known as “C Lager”. It too was surrounded by a barbed wire fence and behind it, between the barracks, there were thousands of women. I risked death by approaching the wire, or shouting to them because there were SS guards, male and female, Kapos and military vehicles on the road between our two camps. The distance was quite large, about fifty or sixty yards, and the gap between the two camps was under constant

surveillance by the SS and Kapos in military vehicles.

I found that I was not the only one at the fence looking towards the other camp, other men stood there, sharing the same hope as me, that somewhere amongst the thousands, a familiar face would appear. However, the women stood in lines for “Appell”, with their backs to us and in total silence. Some standing nearest the fence, occasionally turned and covertly gestured with their hands, probably to men that they knew. I approached one man, and asked him if he was from Hungary, and if so, why was he waiting here? He replied that he was looking for his wife or his daughter who were Hungarian Jews. I asked how we could speak with them. He replied that there were moments, when the guards were out of sight, that we could call out, or throw notes tied to stones towards them. One man found out that his wife was alive, and also the barracks in which she lived; they even managed to exchange letters. However, mostly our searches were unrewarded, as the women were constantly transported elsewhere.

The bell rang for one o'clock. I hurriedly returned to my workplace, and as my anxiety didn't subside I lost myself in packing shirts. I waited impatiently until evening to discover more. That afternoon passed with great difficulty. In the evening we were ordered by the older workers to sweep the floor of the clothing room again, so by the time we had finished cleaning, the others had already eaten their evening meal.

We noticed that they were not given the same

food as us, many of them enjoyed meat, canned goods and even sardines. We could not understand how they obtained these foods. Our mouths watered at the sight of those wonderful dishes, which for the previous two months we hadn't tasted, let alone even seen.

One day our “Appell” continued endlessly. For many hours, we stood rigidly to attention, with our hats off, waiting for the cry of “Hats on!” From long-serving prisoners we learned that several inmates had escaped that day, which is why the sirens had been heard before the parade. It was a common practice that when someone disappeared from a work Kommando, or was not found before everyone returned to the camp, that a siren's piercing alarm would sound, to alert both the outer and inner guards, and then the hunt for the escapees would begin. The SS sentries would release their hounds, which would follow the scent and discover the unfortunates, either hiding in thorn bushes or among the reeds of the river banks. In most cases, they would return the escapees to the camp covered in blood, torn to pieces.

They were then placed at the entrance to the camp, leaning against the fence, so that returning workers could see them clearly. A sign was also placed next to them with the inscription: “Hora! Wer zind wieder da!” (Hooray! We're back!), and the next day the re-captured escapees, at least those that were still alive, received their punishment, by being forced to pass through the camp square,

between our lines, and then given twenty-five lashes.

But often it was only the corpses of the runaways that were returned to the camp. These brutalised bodies were also placed at the entrance, tied to chairs, and sitting with unseeing glazed eyes, as they greeted their comrades returning from work.

One day, in spite of the threat of death, several of my fellow inmates escaped, and even before the guards set off after them with their hounds, we had to stand in line, as a collective punishment. Veteran prisoners told us that these punishment parades often lasted through the night, until dawn, from which they were sent straight to work, without food or water.

Many fainted and some of the weaker died. In winter, many froze to death. It was already late at night when this particular roll call ended. My comrades fell on their beds, completely exhausted, and were too tired to even eat their meagre ration of bread. The snoring of a crowd of five hundred men marked the end of a terrible day.

My day had also ended badly. I didn't discover anything about my family from the women, as they had been rushed into their barracks even before our "Appell". I only saw the silent empty spaces where they had been standing; but I hoped it was possible that, two hundred yards from me, my wife was also lying on her bed, as tired as I was. Oh God! If only she were alive in one of the barracks, a hundred yards from me, and lying on her bunk as tired as I

am. Oh God! If only she were alive, if only I knew that she too is suffering somewhere, like me, because even suffering is better than death, than annihilation. Well, tomorrow I will continue to look.

The following days I continued with the same work in the clothing warehouse. I enjoyed the privileges of this, living in a more comfortable block, and we received food at our work places, not having to stand in line for lunch or dinner. Forty people, adequately fed, and not crowded with the hustle and bustle of the other hungry five hundred. All of us regular workers in the clothing warehouse, were given our own beds, and had secure jobs, while the rest of the prisoners suffered constant change, never knowing who they would be sleeping alongside from one night to another.

## Organising

THERE WAS A CHANGE for me when I was transferred from the shirt warehouse to the clothing store. Here we worked in groups of eight to ten people, instead of in pairs. When the Oberkapos and supervisors were out of earshot, we could talk quietly to each other. However, the Poles spoke only Polish, and this language barrier excluded us Hungarians from conversation with them. We could only talk among ourselves, which was better than the silence.

We were upset by the way the Poles spoke to us. They always asked: “*Were* you married?” “*Did* you have children?” “How old *were* they?” Always “*Were!*” Always in the past tense.

It was clear what they implied, but when I demanded to know why they referred to our loved ones as being no longer alive, they simply replied that we, Hungarian Jews, were so stupid and naive that we still didn’t believe what had happened to them, but that we would soon discover the actual truth. I only found one among them who, seeing that I occasionally stopped working when my eyes filled with tears, would warn me in a whisper that, in spite of my distress, my hands must be seen to work, because if they didn’t, I would be beaten. I might even be taken out of this warehouse to other, far more punishing work, where I would quickly die.

This gentle warning brought me to my senses,

and I was touched by it. I felt that my confidant was also a sad, quiet person. He didn’t participate in the callous behaviour of the other Poles, Christian or Jew alike. I asked him where he was from, how long he had been here, and if he had a family?

He quietly told me that he was from Sosnowiec, nineteen miles from Auschwitz, and that he had only been in the camp since February. Until then, he had managed to hide with his wife and his little six year old son. Then informants gave them away and they were arrested and brought to Auschwitz. His wife and little son were immediately gassed and burned in the crematorium.

“How do you know this, how did you find this out?” I asked, “How are you so sure?”

“When you’ve been here as long as me, you’ll discover the truth”, he replied cryptically, and then continued, “there is only one difference between the Jews of Poland and the Jews of Hungary: we immediately understood what was happening to us, while you, like the blind or lunatics, could not see.”

“Then,” I asked him, “how can you continue to live? You’re clearly sensitive. You haven’t become hardened, like the others here. You shed tears when you talk about your wife and your little son. How can you still live? What’s your reason to continue living?”

I also added apprehensively,

“If I haven’t already committed suicide, it’s only because I can’t believe that my wife and children are dead; or what you have told me is true. Surely you

were misled? You didn't see their murders with your own eyes!"

After some thought, he explained,

"True, I didn't witness it at first hand, but friends and acquaintances saw what happened. You will find out from the Sonderkommando<sup>16</sup> in hut 13."

The Pole remained silent for several minutes, then, almost as if talking to himself, he whispered,

"I don't know why I am still alive, and believe me, I see no point in living any more."

Then he continued with this ominous prediction,

"We won't live long anyhow, because we will all die in later selections. But if somehow we do survive, it will only be worth living to avenge the lives of those who were murdered."

Now we were crying together, weeping, while our hands continued to work like mindless machines. 'Gas', 'Crematorium', 'Sonderkommando', 'Selections'. I have become familiar with these words, because they are the engines of our destruction, but I don't understand how the gas chambers and crematories function, and I am determined to find the answers.

I don't want to remain alive if I have no one to live for, however the Pole's reason to continue, solely for revenge, is not an option for me, because the oath I made when I became a doctor means that I could not kill those who gassed my family. Even if they

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<sup>16</sup> The Sonderkommand (Special kommando) were largely composed of Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau. They were forced to operate the gas chambers and crematoria.

were arrested, tried and sentenced to death, there would not be any peace, or compensation for my murdered wife and daughters.

Meanwhile, at noon and evening, I continue to walk around the barbed wire fences enclosing the women. I get as close as possible, and although at times I also received a few blows in the face from the guards, I have not yet managed to discover anything about my family, or even found anyone that I knew. I managed to talk to some of the women, and had given them the names of my wife and children on a note tied to a stone. In return, I went round our barracks calling the names of men that the women sought. Unfortunately, I only found a few. Nevertheless, it was a moving experience when I did manage to reunite someone with their loved ones in this way.

I speak frequently with my new friend. He tells me that he was an engineer, and that he had completed his studies in Brünn (Brno, Czech Republic), which is why he speaks German so well. In the evening, before we fall asleep, we tell each other about our lives. With great emotion he speaks of his wife and child, and I tell him about Ida and my three daughters. He hasn't become brutalised by life in the camp, nor have I, so we frequently weep together. He has only been here for six months, not four or five years like the others. The betrayal and the murder of his wife and child still grieves him, but the morals of the camp have not corrupted him – the fear, and the relentless struggle for life that

brings out the worst in people. Yet, he lives with more hope than I do, because he has acquaintances that support him, and he already knows how to make life easier for himself by “organising”, while I am completely alone and still don’t understand the meaning of this activity. Once, when I saw that he was eating pork knuckles, or sardines, I asked him,

“How did you get that?”

“You have to organise.” he replied.

But when I asked how that was done, he replied that I’d have to find out how to do that for myself.

Occasionally the Pole shares his food with me and, sometimes, he even offers me a cigarette. For this I am even more grateful than for the food, although after six months my addiction to nicotine has almost disappeared.

“Tell me, exactly, what happened here?” and then, not really wanting to know the truth, I hesitantly asked,

“How did our families die? All that I’ve heard is that they were gassed, then burned in ovens. You spoke of enormous numbers, the death of three and a half million Polish Jews, and four or five hundred thousand Hungarian Jews. You’re an engineer, calculate whether this is possible, how can they burn fifteen thousand people in the crematories every day. Can you imagine how many ovens would be needed for that?”

As he attempted a rough estimate, I continued,

“I have seen the crematory in Vienna, where it takes fifteen minutes to cremate one person. It

operates at two thousand degrees Celsius, and is powered by electricity.<sup>17</sup> Here the amount of smoke from chimneys means they must be heated with wood or coal, which cannot create the temperature needed to incinerate a body. Do you believe that the ovens here are capable of burning fifteen thousand people a day? And what do they do with the bones? You can’t tell me that such a mass of bones can be cremated with wood or coal. What you’ve been told just cannot be practical!”

“Okay, listen,” he insisted, “This is what I’ve seen and heard. However incredible it may seem, however crazy it may be, it is all true. Normal minds can’t take in what’s happening here but normal minds didn’t organise this, and those who carry out the killing aren’t be normal either.”

“Do you remember,” my friend continued, “that when you arrived here, you had to pass before an SS officer, a doctor? That was the notorious Dr. Mengele, who, with a flick of his thumb, sent people to the right or to the left, either to the camp or straight to the gas chambers. You were sent to the right. You were taken to the bathhouse and came here to the camp, to work. But the sick, the old people, the children with their mothers, were all sent to the other column, from where no one ever returned. They all disappeared without a trace...”

His voice faded to silence and a look of astonishment transformed his face as he continued,

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Berner had studied medicine in Vienna, where cremation by electricity was introduced at the Central Cemetery, Simmering in the early 1920s.

“Three and a half million Jews of Poland and Lithuania, thousands of Jews of France, Greece, and Holland. And now, for about two months, since they began transporting the Jews from Hungary, hundreds of thousands of your nation’s Jews as well. They probably also told you, what they told everyone at the time on the selection ramp, that your loved ones were only going for a shower, for disinfection, and as they had to walk six miles, the sick and children with their mothers, would be transported by vehicles.”

His voice shook as he described the process of mass murder,

“They resort to lies and deceptions so that hundreds of thousands of people go to their deaths quietly and without much resistance. They are not taken for a bath, but to be gassed, then their bodies are burned in ovens. Five crematories are operating in Auschwitz, but since the transports from Hungary have been arriving with fifteen to twenty thousand people a day, they are being burned not only in the ovens, but also in large pits dug around the crematoria, in the open air.”

“When I arrived,” added my friend, “I heard from the Canadians<sup>18</sup> what awaited my family. I wanted to die with them. I was a young man. I

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<sup>18</sup> At Auschwitz, prisoners were assigned to collect and sift through the possessions confiscated from prisoners. Valuables were separated and sorted in large warehouses and then transported back to Germany. These warehouses were nicknamed ‘Kanada’, the German spelling of Canada. This was because, to the prisoners, Canada was a country that represented wealth, and the warehouses were full of people’s valuables.

married for love, and I adored my wife and my little son. I couldn’t imagine living after they took them away, and killed them. But Mengele wouldn’t let me go with them. I was sentenced to life by that sick-minded devil.” He paused, maybe remembering the moment of separation,

“That doctor’s conscience must be burdened by the extermination of millions of people...”

I interrupted his fury,

“You were warned by ‘Canadians’? Who are they? No one warned me. I couldn’t even choose to die with my family, and by God, I would have been so happy to have gone with them! I would have comforted them until the last moment, I could have protected them.”

I paused, trying to imagine the terror that my my wife and children must have experienced in their final moments of life, then asked tentatively,

“How did they die? Would they have suffered much? Tell me everything, absolutely everything!”

My Polish friend described the hierarchy of extermination, and how prisoners were forced to kill their fellow inmates,

“Prisoners work outside on the railway tracks, where the transports arrive. They’re the ones in striped clothing who take the people off the wagons and collect the luggage and papers of the arrivals. They’re trusted and have been here a long time. It’s the best work, especially now when so many transports, like yours from Hungary are arriving. They are given the first opportunity to rummage

through their suitcases, and seize food, bacon, sausages, bread, canned goods and cigarettes. They're ordered to hand everything over to the SS, however they "organise" a lot of it for themselves."

Now I am beginning to understand the meaning of the word "organise", it is to steal.

He continued,

"There's always a lot of jewellery, because despite all the searches, many still arrive with precious stones and money. They risk the most severe punishment if they are caught, and yet those Canadians at the selection ramps "organise" this money and jewellery for themselves. There are some extremely rich people among them here."

His voice lowered,

"These Canadians also persuade some of the young women carrying infants into abandoning their children." Quite often, they snatch babies from their mothers' arms and disappear with them in the crowd. And this brutal kidnapping probably saves the lives of the desperate mothers, because, with a child, Mengele would have sent them straight to the gas chambers, but as a single, fit young woman, he will have directed her to the other queue, the one going to the women's labour camp."

I was confused,

"So, among those thugs in stripes, who beat us and screamed abuse at us the moment we arrived, there are some who saved women's lives?"

"Many," He replied, "and you can't imagine how much suffering is concealed beneath their brutality."

Nervously, I ask how my family would have died?

"Did they suffer a lot, at least did they die quickly? Do you think they knew what was happening? Did they struggle in the moments before death?"

The Pole hesitates, then gently explains,

"They would have died in agony."

Heavy tears are welling up in his eyes, and he is unable to speak for several minutes. I feel sorry that I have brought back memories that he may have managed to repress; but I urge him to tell me everything that he knows, so that I may know about the moments before the death of my own loved ones.

"They would have endured terrible agony," he says, "I was like you, I also wanted to know everything. That is why I have been warning workers in the Sonderkommando that I will never forget, and that when freedom comes I'll know who to take revenge upon. I'm telling you this so that if I don't survive it will be your duty to take revenge, so that our people won't continue with the illusion that the smoke coming from the chimneys is from baking, or that the blazing fires are from burning rubbish. They should know that half of their people, their brothers, their parents, and their children were incinerated there. Day and night, night and day, without pause, and realise that the smell is not of burning woollen rags, but of burning people, of roasting flesh."

He was in a state of extreme agitation as he spoke, describing the horrors, and I knew that he was telling the truth, that his own memories were whipping his nerves into frenzy. He wanted me to know everything, so that in future others would never have a moment's peace. And that was exactly what I wanted, I wanted him to tell me everything, I wanted to know it all.

"Go on, I urged, "Tell me, what happened to them?"

"After Mengele sent them to the left," the Pole explained, "they lined them up just as you were, in rows of fives, because the Germans love order and precision. They record the numbers, the statistics, and the clerks audit the victims every day, 'This many went to the right, this many to the left'. There are signs on the trees lining the road, with arrows pointing the way to the 'disinfection camp'. Since the transports from Hungary have been arriving in such large numbers, this falsehood is also written in Hungarian so that the new arrivals will go quietly, without suspecting that it is their last journey. After two hundred yards, and certainly not the six miles that Mengele and his thugs told them during the selections, they are herded into the crematorium yard. This is totally enclosed, and no one except the victims, the SS and the Sonderkommando can enter it. These Sonderkommando are Poles, Greeks, French, Aryans and Jews, but the majority, I regret to say, are Jews."

He shakily took a deep breath, as if suddenly

understanding the cynical perversion of German autocracy,

"Jews are forced to murder their own families, their brothers, their parents and their children. They are brought from the railway tracks into the crematorium yard, usually two and a half thousand to three thousand people at a time: women, men and children, elderly or infirm, as they stumble into the 'showers'.

They are ordered to take off their clothes. The women are shocked at having to undress in front of men, but they are threatened with clubs. Maybe this is the moment when everyone realises that their worst fears are correct. Many burst into hysterics, crying, wailing and screaming, especially the infants crying for their daddies and their mummies. They wake the whole camp, workers passing a hundred yards away hear the desperate screams of those about to die. But the commotion doesn't last long, because the SS men and the Sonderkommandos are beating the crowd into the gas chamber with their clubs, forcing them into the large windowless interior. It was built to hold about five hundred people, but they force up to three thousand inside."

The Pole took several deep breaths in order to continue,

"There are sprinklers fixed to the ceiling, so with the towels and soap that were distributed earlier, they try to convince the victims that they really are going for a shower. This deception reduces their resistance. But most of them already guess that something

terrible is about to happen. The first two or three hundred may still believe that this is a bathhouse, as they stand under the sprinklers, but when they see that three thousand people are also being violently crammed in, they panic in terror. When there seems no more room for adults, children are literally thrown through the air into the gas chamber to fall upon them.”

Again, his voice broke, perhaps imagining the final moments of his wife and child. Then, almost choking with emotion, he continued,

“It’s mayhem, screaming breaks out again, shrieks of those fearing death, and heartbreaking cries of the children. The religious ones call upon God, chanting “Viddui”<sup>19</sup>, yet they still force more in. When no more can be squeezed in, the heavy iron door is slammed shut and locked behind them...”

Another pause before he could reveal the full horror of the victim’s final moments,

“If they’d thrown in the gas pellets immediately, their agony would have ended quickly, but they endured an unimaginable time suffering. Most die from suffocation – three thousand people quickly use up the oxygen that would only be enough for five hundred. They have no air, they scream, they tear at each other in their agony, clawing their nails into each other’s naked flesh, fighting their way upwards to breathe the last pockets of air. Often, it’s a good half an hour before the gas canister is thrown in through a special opening in the roof. Those little

<sup>19</sup> The prayer for confessing of sins for those nearing death.

vans, disguised as from the Red Cross, carry the gas needed for the murders. But the bastards don’t even throw in enough of that, and it takes long, agonising minutes until every scream, every death rattle slowly fades away; then the Sonderkommando, who wait outside, get the signal that it’s their turn to do their job.”<sup>20</sup>

My whole body trembles as I listen to my friend’s depiction of this horror. Multitudes of those condemned to death pass before my eyes, but I see only four faces, four faces so dear to me, four crying voices I that hear plaintively emerging from the dying gasps of that great crowd.



My darling Ida, my Zsuzsi, my Nuri, my little Helga, what happened to you, how could you die

<sup>20</sup> In the final year of the war at Auschwitz and at other extermination camps, Zyklon B was in short supply and even bullets were rationed. Instructions were given to economise on the methods of killing. Improvised methods included children being swung by the legs and having their heads smashed against concrete walls, or being thrown alive into burning pits.

without me, how could I not have been with you? Why wasn't I with you? But I cut my regrets short and demand,

"Go on, go on. Tell me everything. Let me know it all."

The Pole continues reluctantly,

"When there's no more sound and movement, the heavy airtight iron door is opened, and the mass of corpses fall out. Iron hooks on long poles are stuck into their bodies and they are dragged away by the Sonderkommando across the wet, bloody, cement floor to an elevator. This takes them up to the ground floor of the building where dentists begin their work. They examine the mouths of every corpse and remove the gold teeth and bridges, which are handed over to the SS. Barbers cut off the women's hair, because it's supposedly a valuable raw material for German industry, and so the glory of our murdered wives and daughters is stuffed into bags and sent to German factories. And after the corpses have been violated, they're burned. Some of them are incinerated in the crematory ovens, however as the "work" has increased lately with the arrival of the Hungarian transports, the dead are simply thrown into large, deep pits near the ovens and burned there."

We both take deep breaths, before my friend explains how the process ends,

"They place a row of corpses, a layer of wood, and one of charcoal, and then the pile is doused with petrol. That's how they get rid of the dead. The

bones are then crushed to dust with heavy hammers by another squad of Sonderkommandos, and this is put into sacks, transported away on carts, and poured into the Vistula River."

In our distress, cold sweat beads our foreheads. Now I know how my family has been killed. I saw how their precious, blossoming lives were extinguished in those few hours after our arrival at Auschwitz, and then their ashes were callously thrown into the Vistula, to float and dissolve in the water.

"How can you live?" I shouted, "How can you live with these horrible visions in your mind?"

"We have to live", he replied vehemently, "We must all remain alive as long as we can, and however we can. I would have gladly have died with my family, but now it is too late. Now we must somehow go on living."

"I won't go on", I vowed, "because the horrors that you've put in my mind will send me insane, and I would rather die while I am still of sound mind, at least so that I can choose the how and when to die."

Now, once again, my world has collapsed, my mind is completely numb, my willpower is gone, my soul is burned out, my head aches with intense pain, for the images that the Pole projected into it can never be forgotten. They burn deeper and deeper into me, consuming me, gnawing at me, and will until I die. And while I still have the strength, I still need to understand the nightmare that we have all experienced.

When I was able to speak again, I asked about

the Jewish Sonderkommando trusties,

“How can it be possible that Jews assist the Germans in the extermination of their own people? Killing fellow Jews? Aren’t you ashamed of being a Jew? At this moment, I feel that I must deny my faith, that I was crazy to devote my whole life in the service of this religion.”

“But what could those Jews have done?” asks my friend. “They were selected and forced to kill, just as you were selected for the clothes warehouse. They worked at the gas chambers and the crematories just as you work sorting the clothes recovered from those they murdered. There were two hundred of those trusties at first, now there are only eighty left, there are even Jews from Hungary among them. So, don’t judge the Greek or Polish Jews, because in the same circumstances, even you, with your upbringing, would do the same. What could they have done?”

He paused, almost as if he were asking himself that question,

“What? They should have resisted with a heroic gesture?”

He laughed,

“They would all have been shot, and so would all those who followed them.”

Reluctantly, I agreed,

“If the entire eight hundred had rebelled, it would only have been a heroic gesture for history. But, at least posterity would have honoured them for it!”

“It would have been meaningless. No point in it at all,” argued my friend, “they would have died, and their macabre work would have been continued by others, Russians, Poles, or you Hungarians, because, just as there are heroes in the world, there are also weaker people who cling to life, at all costs.”

“But it’s still different,” I continued to quibble, “when it’s people of our own faith who are killing their own. It’s grotesque that we even give the Germans the satisfaction of having Jews destroying each other. And I don’t understand how can these trusties endure it, how can they continue killing their own people, why don’t they jump into the fire themselves?”

The Pole recalled,

“This has already happened. A Jewish Kapo jumped into the flames alive. You have to understand their situation. They receive food and drink generously. They steal jewellery and gold teeth. They barter, do business, they “organise,” so perhaps they resolve that as they will not live long, they might as well live comfortably whilst they are alive. Especially as they know that on average, they only live for three or four months, and then they too are executed. These Kapos were ordered to kill the previous Sonderkommando, and then take their place. Perhaps that is precisely why they are heroes, because the greatest human tragedy is unfolding before their eyes, and they know that they are also condemned to death. So, they eat and drink and grab whatever passes for luxury here. The last wish of most death

row inmates is usually a good dinner, a cigarette and a glass of wine.”

He continued emphatically,

“You, Hungarian Jews, should not talk about heroism, you came here with your families without any resistance. You didn’t even try to escape, even though you must have known about our tragedy. You must have suspected the same fate awaited you. We Poles can at least be proud of one bold act of heroism, the uprising of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, when we stood face to face with the Nazi army, defending ourselves for weeks until the Germans, with their bombers, managed to overpower us.”

“I heard that,” I reassure him, as he went on,

“There are still some here who fought in the battles of Warsaw, they’ll tell you their stories. But that’s enough.”

Enough? Much more than I can bear. My dear wife, my sweet daughters, nothing will ever be able to erase the horror that you endured. I lay down, but I couldn’t fall asleep. I kept seeing them before my eyes, I saw my wife, in the line opposite me, walking away, her eyes wide open, leading her daughters by the hand, to whom she had devoted her life, and with whom she was about to die.

I remembered how one of the officers had called my daughters back to present my twins to the examining doctor. Suddenly, great anxiety rose in me. I couldn’t wait until morning, so I woke my friend up and asked him,

“I told you that I had two twin daughters. I believe that they are still alive. Is it possible?”

The Pole wasn’t angry for my waking him. He was, like me, a father in mourning. Another prisoner would have vented his anger on me for disturbing him from a night’s sleep,

“Perhaps your twin girls are still alive,” he replied, “because Mengele is in the habit of selecting twins and keeping them alive for medical experiments.”

“Experiments?” I asked.

“Yes. Experiments and measurements with twins. There are others who can tell you more than I know. You might hope that your twin girls are still alive, as it’s Mengele’s custom to select twins as soon as they arrive here, sending them to a separate camp for twins. Weren’t yours taken away by him?”

“No.” I remembered, “Mine went together with their mother and their older sister.” And I tell him about how I called them back, but Mengele didn’t even look at them, curtly saying that he was busy and would see them later.”

“Perhaps he chose them later, at the crematorium,” my friend tried to reassure me, “but try to sleep now, because tomorrow you have to work.”

Yes, tomorrow I have to work, but now I am gnawed by doubt. What happened to you, my daughters, down there in the courtyard of horrors, before the crematoriums! Did they really notice that you were twins? My Helga, my Nora, could your

lives have been saved because you came into the world together? But what happened to you, Zsuzsi, and your dear mother? A nightmare! If they had allowed you to live and experimented on you, and just murdered your sister and your mother, how will I bear it?

But how can I kill myself, when there's still a glimmer of hope that you are alive, my little darlings? I cannot abandon you. Who will take care of you if by some miracle we three survive when this madness ends? But what experiments does that mad man want to use you for? Wasn't it better to die with Mother than to live in the hands of Mengele?



*Zsuzsi, Nora and Helga, with a relative, possibly an aunt from the Salomon family. Târgu Mures, 1940s*

These worries and doubts torment me through the night.

Lord give me strength, give me advice. What am I to do! I no longer fear death. I yearn to die in the same way as you.

No, it's not death that I fear anymore, but of going mad, and perhaps the time has come for me to go to the wire.

## Across the electrified fence

EVERY MORNING, when I hear the bell and the insistent shouts of "Aufstehen, Aufstehen!" I jump from my bed, and the daily treadmill of processing the clothes of the dead sweeps me once again into the assembly line of the Auschwitz killing system. The grey weekdays enshroud me, increasing my depression and anxiety. There is no escape, no matter how hard I look. I try to create reasons to continue living, attempting to organise my thoughts rationally as I was taught in medical school.

Stubbornly, I still cannot accept that my wife and children are dead, because it's impossible to believe this, even when the reality of mass extermination surrounds me. Perhaps everyone here is insane, including my Polish friend who claims to believe in this cruel finality. But maybe I am the crazy one, who cannot accept the truth? Or could it be that some inherent survival instinct is at work, and my refusal to believe that my wife and children are dead gives me just enough false hope to prevent me from committing suicide.

Two new reasons to live appear, which give me encouragement. I have seen children in the Gypsy camp, and also in the Czech Camp next to ours. I see families of Czech Jews and their elderly relations, for whom I feel especially sorry, although why should Hungarian Jews have to die and not those from Czechoslovakia? Are Czech Jews more valuable to the Germans, or even to God, than

Hungarian Jews? Give me an answer, God, or Fate, or whatever you call yourself, give me some insight into this insane system, or put an end to my torture as soon as possible.

I am now searching for information from the women with increased energy, because I am convinced that only from these skeletal creatures will I learn about the fate of my family. I don't waste time in my lunch break by eating, so I barely consume anything. Instead, I run behind our huts to the wire fences that separate us looking for people that I might know, obsessively searching amongst these vestigial women for anyone from my home town. And again, in the evening, after roll call I return rushing back to the fence, never finding a familiar face.

My searches so far have been in vain. In the adjacent blocks opposite the clothing warehouse there are only people from Munkács, Szigetians and Felvidékians, or from the Haros-sziget island<sup>21</sup>, and when I ask if there are any people from Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mures) among them, they respond with frantic questions of their own: do I know anyone from Munkács?

I decide on a new method of searching. I try to check every block systematically. Every evening, after the roll call, I stand at the barbed wire opposite a different women's barracks. However it is difficult to keep up with the Germans, as the women often disappear. If I hear that there are some from

<sup>21</sup> These are districts south of Budapest.

Marosvásárhely in Block 26, I'm often frustrated by the time I race there by being told that they have been moved to another block or even away from Auschwitz and moved to another camp, however I often learn that they too are looking for people from their home towns.

Unexpectedly, one rare happy morning I discovered two nieces,<sup>22</sup> daughters of my wife's brother, Aharon Salomon and his wife. They were with were some other women from home. We had been to the Sauna to collect clothes recovered from the dead, in a large sided six-axled cart, that we somehow pushed through the mud.

I hurriedly asked them which block they were living in, but even these few words were enough for a Polish Kapo, about nineteen years old, to beat and kick me. The poor girls watched in horror as I was being punished, simply for speaking to them. After the Kapo had gone, I reassured them that the beatings meant nothing. I also signalled to them that I would write. They silently gestured that they understood, wiping tears from their eyes.

<sup>22</sup> The two nieces were Olga and Shari, daughters of Aharon Salomon, who was Ida Berner's brother. Olga, born in 1918, was married to Ernest-Yehuda Hirschhorn, who was for several years in a forced labour camp. In the absence of their brother, his three sisters were living at Olga's home in Târgu Mures. And so the three Hirschhorn girls, Irma, born 1909, Amalia, born 1913, and Judith-Kornelia, born 1919, arrived together at Auschwitz, with Olga and Shari, the youngest of them born in 1922. They were all close friends, joined by blood or marriage, and were inseparable. Alex and Roza Hirschhorn, aged 73 and 63 were also in the cattle car to Auschwitz. On the festival of Shavuot, May 1944, the parents were exterminated on arrival, while the girls, being fit for work, were spared being gassed.

That same evening I went out to scout along the edge of the barbed wire, clutching a note tied to a stone, with my ration of bread for that day. I looked for my nieces, who were already outside and waiting. With them were other women from our town. We were overjoyed to be reunited, and called out to each other, but the distance that separated us made it hard to hear what each of us was saying.

As time went on, others gathered, shouting to their relatives, even though it was risky. The camp's firefighters were in charge, keeping the prisoners away from the wire. They were the roughest men in the camp, huge brutes, and anyone they caught was beaten up, and their number was recorded for further punishment, which was to do "sports" in the evening after the blackout.

Under the command of the head Kapo, those to be punished had to report to the parade ground and perform the most severe, tedious and arduous military exercises such as push ups, crawling on their stomachs, and then for an hour or two, having to roll up barbed wire with their bare hands. After a hard day's labour, this was certainly severe punishment, and yet a few hundred of us risked this ordeal every night, just to exchange a few words with our relatives, our flesh and blood, or even just acquaintances.

There was a brutal SS orderly, who would chase those found near the barbed wire fence on his bicycle. He was a German Block Leader, called

Baretzki,<sup>23</sup>. The unfortunates would immediately scatter in the direction of their barracks when he spotted them. But every day he caught one or two. Then he would force them back to the barbed wire, in order that the women would witness their humiliation.

"Bück dich," (Bend over!), he would order, forcing the man to obey, then he would be given as many as twenty-five lashes. Sometimes he would fire his pistol after the escapees. Once he shot at a girl from our town called Wilma Blum, because she had strayed too close to the barbed wire. The bullet pierced her eye. After that, silence reigned at the wire for several days. Then the obsession to continue searching for our relatives returned, and we gathered to our side of the barbed wire, with the women on the other.

My poor nieces were in a terrible state. Their suffering was perhaps more than my own in the Gypsy camp. They appeared almost naked, the flimsy shoes that they had brought with them from home quickly wore out in the mud-filled camp squares, and their hair had been cut off. They were not even given headscarves, and even if they found one to wear to hide their shame, it was quickly taken from them. They had to stand with their heads bare in the rain and sunshine alike. They told me that they slept

<sup>23</sup> Stefan Baretzki (1919-1988) was an Auschwitz guard of Romanian/German origin. He was conscripted into the Waffen-SS and stationed at the Auschwitz concentration camp from 1942 until 1945. Of limited intelligence, he was sentenced to life imprisonment at the 1960s Frankfurt Auschwitz trials. He committed suicide in 1988.

twelve to fourteen to a bed, with no straw mattresses or blankets. When I asked them if they had been beaten or raped<sup>24</sup>, they said no. But I had seen SS women guards savagely beat a woman, who had been forced to her knees.

I told my nieces about my work, and that my life was bearable compared to the others, but that the separation from my wife and children was consuming me. They asked why I was so thin – by then I had already lost more than three stone. They tried to console me by telling me to disregard the malice of the Polish Jews, saying that they were sure that my wife and children were living in a women and children's camp nearby. However their Polish and Polish Jewish block elders were also scaring them with similar horror stories, even though they didn't believe them. They just dismissed the Poles as the sort of evil people that enjoyed spreading such news. In general, the women were more optimistic than us men. They had heard little of the horrors; and, despite their grim living conditions, they tried to keep their spirits up, expecting imminent liberation.

During roll calls, we often saw the entire inhabitants of a block, over one thousand women, kneeling for hours as punishment; and even if we hadn't actually witnessed this appalling discipline, it was enough to see the frightened look on the

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<sup>24</sup> *Sexual abuse was widespread throughout concentration camps, however the intense shame and stigma suffered by the victims, meant that this was seldom reported, even in the post-war trials.*

women's faces as they approached the wire, and to see their panic as they scattered to hide when a female guard or a block elder appeared.

When I threw the food that I had brought with me over the fence to them, they asked me not to risk punishment, and yet the way in which they pounced on a slice of bread, and especially the ferocious way in which the girls protected their portions from being snatched with their nails, revealed their hunger. I promised that from then on I would bring something every day and throw it to them over the fence. They protested again begging me not to save any of my portions, which were meagre enough in any case. But every day they would appear at the usual place, to wait with expectant appetites like the pigeons in St. Mark's Square in Venice, for the few crumbs that I threw to them.

My routine changed from then on. My daytime hours were spent worrying about my nieces, having to hoard bread and margarine, which they needed so much. Every evening I went to the barbed wire, where the five of them waited for that little amount of food. Then a sixth, a young woman from Budapest that I recognised, joined them, so there were six hungry mouths waiting for me to take care of.

I began to appreciate the advantages of "organising." I noticed that my friends from the clothing store occasionally concealed a shirt, some underwear, or even entire suits and shoes. I also became aware that they had plenty of bread,

margarine, sausage, and even cigarettes to smoke. It didn't need much imagination to discover the means by which this largesse was acquired; however, I didn't know exactly where to barter for these items, the food and cigarettes. I eventually discovered that too.

Initially, I organised easily concealed things, in small quantities. I hid one shirt a day, perhaps some underwear, or a towel, which I exchanged with others from my hut for half a ration of bread, or a whole daily ration of margarine. I received little in return, as there wasn't much to spare of our food. I would throw what I collected from my own daily ration to the women on the other side of the fence.

But this was not enough for six hungry women. Over time, my "business" began to flourish, and some of my more camp-savvy friends, working in foreign commandos, who met Polish and German civilian workers, began to bring me "orders."

"Come tomorrow evening, for two shirts", or, "for a sweater!" And these items I delivered by stealing them from the store. I became more daring, even though it was a very dangerous game. If they had caught me, I would have been severely punished, even to the extent of being thrown out of the comfortable barracks, and sent to hard labour, digging holes, breaking stones, or carrying potatoes. But I did it for the sake of the six souls who were waiting every day to benefit from my care. I added notes to these food parcels every day, and my nieces replied. It was the highlight of our lives, to talk every day, to comfort each other, to see each other. And it

wasn't only relatives and neighbours who stood at the wire waiting for us, but also distant acquaintances, Poles and Russians; and not only Jews, but also Aryans.

A romance of the wire developed. Love blossomed, and men who had lived for four or even five years, isolated from women, found female company for themselves, with whom they corresponded, to whom they threw food parcels, and although they had little hope of survival, they courted, declared their love, and even became jealous if their women spoke to, or accepted packages from another prisoner.

Something like a zest for life arose in them, and an instinctive need to provide. It was spiritual masturbation on their part, and they began to feel like men once again. However, we hardly felt our manhood anymore, especially those who had been in the camps for years. Even those, who had been only in the camp for a few months, freely admitted to each other that sexual desire had completely died in them.

We didn't believe that this was because of our incarceration, because even in spite of our hard labour and poor nutrition, we felt sure that these privations had not caused our impotence. Long-serving prisoners claimed that Dr. Mengele mixed a special drug into the food, and its effect was to reduce libido in men. This assumption might have been correct, as we heard from women that menstruation had ceased for all forty thousand

women in Camp C, which caused great distress in them.

It was widely known that Mengele sterilised many young people by X-rays, and he also castrated males surgically. Some had one testicle removed, and others both. After the operations, various experiments were conducted on them. Women also endured excruciating procedures.

Some of my fellow prisoners showed the physical results to me. If I had not examined these unfortunates, who desperately sought my medical advice, I would not have believed what they said. I had to face the fact that there is no nightmarish depravity that man can invent that has not occurred here. Experiments conducted on humans that could barely be justified on animals, and even then the animal protection leagues would have protested against them. I trembled, imagining my poor little twin daughters enduring Mengele's experiments.

My purpose now became to provide clothing and footwear for my nieces and their friends. It was heartbreaking to see them standing half-naked in all weathers from dawn until late at night, wearing only worn-out tattered shirts that exposed their breasts and buttocks. They had only a few hours of sleep each night, and even that minimal rest was only achieved after fighting for a place to lie down.

I had the clothing stores at my disposal; my only problem was getting the garments that I stole to them. I had already learned how to throw bread over the two fences, but how could I throw a woman's

dress, a sweater, a scarf, or a pair of shoes? I solved that by folding each dress, or shirt, as small as possible, and tying them to a heavy stone, which could be easily thrown. However, I could not throw it on my own, and I had to enlist the help of Russians or Poles, in exchange for cigarettes. Now I had a rewarding occupation each day. It became an obsession.

During the day, I "organised" clothing that I thought would fit my nieces, or their friends. I hid the garments in a secure place, and then judged the safest moment when neither the Kapos or SS guards would disturb me, in order to surreptitiously take the package out of the clothing store and hide it in a place near the wire. Then I waited for my nieces to appear. When the SS and Kapos were out of sight, I would throw the package over to them.

There was excitement on both sides. Would the throw be successful? It often happened that the parcel fell on the path between two fences, and then I had to wait nervously until a friendly Kapo or passing trusty appeared to pick up the package and throw it to the waiting women.

Sometimes clothing became entangled in the barbed wire, which was impossible to abandon because the first guard who passed would know that it had been stolen from the clothing store. The girls had to use a long wooden pole to extract the clothing from the electrified wire. When they succeeded, they were overjoyed.

Like an exciting sports match, this bizarre

throwing game at the fence attracted a large crowd of cheering onlookers.

Even after I had clothed my nieces and their friends, I did not stop. I continued to throw clothing over the fence, and managed to dress many other women. Of course, unfriendly Polish Kapos caught me many times and beat me severely, but this did not prevent me from continuing, and I continued this activity during all the days of my stay in Auschwitz. To my regret, it was a task that I could never complete, because I could not supply clothing for the entire population of women, about four thousand of them, throwing only three or four items each time.

Another problem was that if we managed to provide the women with clothing that gave them warmth, it would be quickly taken from them by a Kapo or a block elder, who would punish them by stripping them naked. I then had to start all over again to replace what had been stolen. The Polish Jews working in the shoemaking shop did the same thing. Each day, they selflessly threw many pairs of shoes over the wire fence to the Hungarian Jewish women, who were overjoyed by this.

The nationalistic and religious prejudices that had separated us diminished day by day. Our shared life of abject slavery brought us closer together. Our natures were revealed, and out of the survival shell that the camp had forced on each of us, humanity began to shine through, and a Jewish heart emerged.

One Sunday afternoon, while we were eating, I

casually blurted out a literary quote in conversation with a journalist friend who had a wide literary education. A Polish-Jewish worker, a sullen, morose, taciturn man, who managed the shoe department at the storage room, overheard us talking, and although he did not understand Hungarian, he recognised the name of the writer that I had quoted, and he joined us. We translated our conversation into German so that he too could participate in the subject. And this man, who hadn't exchanged a single word with us until then, who, as foreman, had behaved in as hostile manner as any of the other Kapos in the camp, who had a reputation as an expert "organiser", and who had become rich from the confiscated shoes, jewellery, dollars or gold that came into his hands, this man now revealed a knowledge of literature that completely astonished us. Moreover, our discussion of the author elevated the three of us to a level of culture that we had enjoyed before our transportation.

That afternoon, we improvised a small literary meeting in the back room of the clothing store, each of us sitting on piles of clothes. There, I witnessed a literary gathering as scholarly as any. Even the difference in languages did not spoil our enjoyment. One after another, the inmates of the clothing store stood up and made their cultural contribution to the success of the party.

We learned that the man that we only knew as a "film colourist" had previously been the literary editor of a serious newspaper with a large

circulation. We found that the person whom we had erroneously called “the Warsaw man” had previously been a very important actor. The cobbler was also an actor in his former life at the Habima Theatre in Moscow; then there was Frosch, who was a famous writer, director, and actor all rolled into one. He performed *The Dybbuk*<sup>25</sup> for us, playing all the leading roles – the eighty-year-old Rabbi with his quavering voice, Leah the innocent virgin, Szender, the greedy father who forgets his words, the mysterious messenger, and Hannán, Leah’s fiancé who is involved in Kabbalah and forbidden teachings. He linked the scenes with such skill that even those of us who had never seen or read the play completely understood the story. So, one of the most unpleasant men in the clothing store gave us an unforgettable artistic experience on that Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1944 in Auschwitz.

From that moment on, it was as if the ice had that had existed between the Jews of Poland and Hungary in the camp had melted. We immersed ourselves each day in political and literary discussions, and although in many matters we didn’t agree, we drew closer together, and learned to know and respect each other in fellowship.

The question that we continually asked each other, for which we never discovered a satisfactory answer, was, how was it possible that Hungary, our

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<sup>25</sup> *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds* (1916) is a play by S. An-sky. It was originally written in Russian and later translated into Yiddish by An-sky himself.

nation and its people had betrayed us in such a shameful way by handing us over to the Germans, especially as there were few countries in Europe where the Jews had assimilated to the same extent as they had in Hungary.

There were some among us who were unable to accept the accusations of willing capitulation to Nazi rule which the Hungarian government was charged; and even here, in Auschwitz, that terrible cemetery of Hungarian Jews, some tried to defend our country’s betrayal. They maintained that it was not Hungary and its people that had abandoned us, but the government that had been imposed by the Germans, and that their willingness to exile us represented only a tiny minority of the Hungarian people.

I told them that many of my neighbours cried openly in the streets when we were taken to the ghettos, and many gave us food secretly. However, none of this could diminish the guilt of the Hungarians in the eyes of our Jewish friends from Poland. They asked, with some justification, if any opposition had taken place among the Hungarian people to prevent this horrific crime, unparalleled in the history of the world. And then with sarcasm they demanded,

“Wasn’t there at least one person from your nation that calls itself a Nation of Knights, a soldier, a priest, a writer, someone with influence, to openly protest or resist? No, no one did, no one was willing to oppose the fate of those martyred!”

During these exchanges, I also learned why the Jews of Poland hated the Hungarian Jews. They said that we were like ostriches, with our heads in the sand, by not foreseeing our fate when we were taken into German captivity; and that surely, after five years of war, we should have seen the many signs and warnings.

They said that they had seen Jewish battalions, with yellow ribbons, marching out to fight the Russians with the Hungarian army. We explained that these men were not there to fight, but were prisoners sentenced to hard labour, which was just another method of exterminating Jews. Our Polish accusers were not aware that ninety percent of these conscripts were killed. Their extermination was the goal of the Hungarian army and the Nazi imposed Hungarian government. Those young men were victims simply by being Jewish, just like the rest of us who had been taken to Auschwitz.

I also attempted to justify our failure to defend ourselves by saying that we were so few and that the Germans had deceived us with their sophisticated guile, so that even at the moment of arrival, we couldn't imagine the horror that was going to happen to us.

But on the whole, their condemnation was true: we only knew about Auschwitz, and had only heard vague rumours about Dachau; but Treblinka and Majdanek were unknown to us, even though three and a half million Polish Jews had been killed there. We knew nothing about the Łódź ghetto, with its

hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, which even had its own Jewish currency, with the photograph and signature of Rumkowski, the president of the Jewish council. We saw Hungarian coins similar to the pengő, made from aluminium, for the first time in Auschwitz, as well as Czech Jewish coins from the Theresienstadt camp, depicting Moses with two stone tablets. It seems that we Hungarians had really slept through the last few years, ignorant of what was happening to the Jews around us.

The crematoria and gas chambers of Treblinka and Majdanek were built before those at Auschwitz. The Jews of Ukraine and Poland marched before us on the path on which we, Hungarians now carry the heavy burden of being Jews. And hardly anyone of the Ukrainian and Polish Jews survives. It is now our turn to be sacrificed in the ovens of Auschwitz.

Each day, more convoys of Jews from Hungary arrive. We see them walk in the direction of the gas chambers, and the chimneys that smoked by day and emit flames by night, proclaim the tragedy of a people that have been around for thousands of years.

My Jewish friends from Poland, now my compatriots, tell us about Treblinka and Majdanek and sing the ballads that were composed there. They tell us how each day twenty thousand people, with small children, and babies clinging to their mothers' breasts, were taken from their homes and sent to the gas chambers in Treblinka, Auschwitz and Majdanek.

At this camp, the ever resourceful Nazis engineered a vault with a steel floor, and on the ceiling, again to

deceive those about to die, there were sprinklers, however here, as the naked captives watched the water falling from above, a button was pushed that sent an electric current through the steel floor, killing fifteen-thousand living souls in seconds. Then hinged plates in the floor opened up beneath them and the victims fell into the incinerator's mouth.<sup>26</sup>

I can hardly bear to hear what they are saying. I only think about my loved ones, always only of mine. I wonder which is easier, to die by electricity or by gas? At the right moment, I ask,

"You have all suffered so much, you are the last remnants of the great Jewish community in Poland, and you knew that the same fate awaited us, your Hungarian Jewish brothers, why did you treat us so cruelly? You should have seen us as fellows in suffering, and treated us with kindness, at least helped us so that at as many of our own would remain alive as long as possible. Surely, that would be your revenge on the Germans. Instead, you beat us, insulted us and cursed us. We were hungry when you stole the food from our families, from the hands of our children, why did you do this?"

Their reply was brutally honest,

"Because while you slept peacefully at home and

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<sup>26</sup> This method of mass killing was employed at Belzec extermination camp, near Majdanek. Electrocution proved inefficient, requiring immense loads of power. A 1942 report from the Polish government-in-exile described an "electrocution station" at the Belzec extermination camp. It stated that Jewish deportees were forced into sheds with metal-plated floors, and an electric current was passed through the plates, causing instantaneous death. There is no evidence that this method was employed at Majdanek.

ate well every day, we were being burned, and tens of thousands more of us were starving to death. And remember this: in Hitler's camps, the only ones who can stay alive, even if only for a while, are those who can steal a few extra rations from their fellow prisoners, otherwise we would have starved within three months. Or become a Muselmann<sup>27</sup>, unable to work, and be gassed. So, since we can't get help from anywhere else, we have to take it by any means necessary – from other prisoners. That's why so few of us are left. Look at the numbers on our arms, few from the thousands tattooed are still alive, the rest are dead, and the clerks throw their cards into the trash as useless junk. Your turn will come soon, too, if you don't do as we do. You will become a Muslim and be selected."

I still didn't understand,

"How do I become a Muslim?"

Laughing at my naivety, the Pole explained,

"It's one of the methods they use to exterminate us. No one can survive such starvation for more than three months. Don't judge by our situation in the clothing stores. Look at your comrades who work outside, in the rain, in the sun, and then in the cold, in winter when it freezes. Look at their feet, their shoes are worn out and they stagger about in wooden clogs."

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<sup>27</sup> The term "Muselmann - Muslim" was used to describe individuals who were severely weakened and emaciated, due to starvation and exhaustion. It had nothing to do with the actual religious affiliation of the individuals and was considered derogatory.

He gestured at our comfortable footwear, before continuing,

“Look at the people who have some kind of injury, or ulcerated skin, infected from working in filthy conditions, and the diet of rotten food. Wounds don’t heal here, and diarrhoea is common. As many people collapse and die here from injuries and disease, as are killed in the gas chambers. Hundreds of thousands of have already died of typhus. You’ve not been here long but you’ll see what they’ve done to us. So, don’t be surprised if the remaining few of us cling so much to life, even if it is at the cost of the lives of others. It’s a competition – who can last longest. Whoever survives will perhaps win freedom. Don’t forget that!”

I won’t forget. And there’s much more I must not forget. From then on, we talk frequently. During lunch breaks, we discuss the events of the war and the military and political progress with our fellow workers in the clothing store. In the evenings, if there is enough time following the “Appell”, and after I had spoken with my nieces at the barbed wire, I meet Jews from other barracks, transported from France, Poland, Lithuania, Greece, and other occupied countries. I become aware of those who have interests beyond the monotonous hell of our daily work, the inadequate food rations, and our illicit “organising”. I find a few worthy of trust, who can be relied on in times of need. I also discover that they also want to talk with me, because they believe that I can help with their

plans, by encouraging the cooperation of Hungarian Jews.

Good news is coming from the front. The Germans are retreating everywhere. The invasion of France is forging ahead both in scope and success. The Russians have already reached Warsaw. On quiet summer evenings, we can hear the music of the cannons from the direction of Krakow. Prisoners, who have been in the camp for five years, are anxiously discussing the progress of the war, the news of which reaches the camp every day, although we don’t know how it is brought to us. Hope is growing. But we don’t believe that the Russians will save us, because the Nazi murderers will be sure to kill us before they arrive. Our only hope is of a coup within Germany itself that will overthrow the Nazi regime.

But even then our lives will be in great danger; for now, in addition to us Hungarian Jews, others from the camps around Warsaw are arriving. The Łódź ghetto, which contained seventy thousand Jews, is also being cleared. They are being transported as we had been. The women, mothers with children, the elderly and the sick are immediately thrown into the gas chambers, and only a small number of able-bodied men survive the selections and reach the worker’s camp. They told us that there was often only a few hours difference between the time of their deportation and the Russians’ invasion. Often they saw vanguard units of the Russian army on the road. Many tried to escape,

but the SS sentries shot them. Some however did reach freedom.

The idea of liberty preoccupies most of the camp. Especially by those who want to fight, or at least to be prepared for insurrection, so that we are not caught off-guard when the time comes for action. No one dares speak openly, we can only whisper to those we trust, for we all fear betrayal by the Poles, and especially of repercussions by the Germans.

In the camp, unfortunately, only the basest types of humanity survived. Even among the gentile Poles and Ukrainians, those able to save their own lives did so at the cost of others – first and foremost at the cost of Jewish lives. Being Aryan, they were not sent to the gas chambers, and this gave them security. They showed no understanding or sympathy towards us, and enjoyed the advantages granted to them by Hitler's racial theories. They were given some protection by being treated as prisoners of war. They were allowed to correspond with their families at home, and to receive packages from them and the International Red Cross. The special treatment they received also elevated them to the status of "Übermenschen", at least compared to us, quite forgetting that their homeland had been trampled under the feet of the thugs of that same Hitler who had destroyed our own lives. Our oppressor was the same, but we Jews were slaves to slaves.

So, nothing happened, except for mere talk of freedom. The hope of liberation raised our spirits,

and even if we were not allowed to enjoy freedom, the very fact that we thought and dreamed about it proved to us that our will to live had not deserted us. However we accepted that we could do nothing ourselves, and only a miracle could save us. But the miracle passed by, gliding close to us. We felt the beat of its wings. On July 20th, news raced through the camp like wildfire, there had been an assassination attempt on Hitler, at his headquarters. We heard that it was reported on the radio; even the SS men spoke about it among themselves. The blood froze in our veins. We carefully watched what was happening around us, because if the rumour was true, then, within a few hours, our lives would change for good or bad, for life and freedom – or immediate death.

That day passed like any other. In the evening, the Kommandos, and the SS, with their trained dogs, searched the camp as before, quashing the rumour that the guards had already laid down their arms and fled for their lives. However, the roll call was conducted as usual. We sought confirmation of the rumour from Baretzki, instead, as always, he replied with hatred and contempt. Had nothing occurred?

Our nerves were stretched to breaking point, and our hearts beat louder than the pounding of Baretzki's boots. In the evening, by the barbed wire, the women also waited anxiously. They had heard the news during the day, and expected confirmation of the news from us,

"When will we go home?" they whispered, fearing being heard by the guards.

“In a week,” the more optimistic among them replied. Hope increased as they stood at the fence that fine summer evening. These women, who had until then escaped the crematoriums, already saw themselves at home in their imagination, on the threshold of a new life. We didn’t sleep that night. One of the workers in the clothing stores had a secret source, someone who listened to the BBC’s English radio broadcasts, although we never knew how. But we blindly believed anyone who brought news, and especially when it was good news. He told us that his source had heard confirmation that Hitler was dead. The news was repeated each hour, with the announcer just saying, “Hitler is dead!”

In our barracks, we have to maintain the illusion of a night’s calm. We talk quietly. What will the next day bring? It is possible that when we wake up in the morning the guard at the gate will have gone, as many have predicted. We have become optimistic and believe what we’ve been told. Many are already planning how they will search for their surviving family members, and how they will return home. Some will take a plane, others will steal cars for their journey, but most are ready to set off on foot.

At four in the morning, the bell rang. Shouts of “Aufstehen!, Aufstehen!”, just like every other day’s wake-up call. I got up, went to the bathhouse, and on the way I saw that the women were already standing in orderly silence. The rising sun had not yet appeared on the horizon, but the North Star was still shining in the sky. It didn’t reveal what the

coming day would bring us – freedom and life, or death that would end everything.

The sun brought neither, and only increased our anxiety. Our routine remained unchanged, at least on the surface. But rumours followed one another like clouds in the sky, covering and revealing the sun in turns. True, false. Revolution in Germany. Counter-government in Berlin. Reich Ambassador to Turkey Franz von Papen flies to Switzerland and is negotiating peace<sup>28</sup>.

Speech is forbidden in the clothing store, and no strangers can enter. Every half hour we take turns going out to the latrine to meet the residents of the other Blocks and exchange information. In fact we, in the clothing store, seem to be the best informed, for as quickly as we spread the news it’s often repeated back to us.

There is one positive sign that things are changing, and that is that SS soldiers come every day to rummage through the stores to provide themselves with civilian clothes. We consider this a good omen, and see it as indicating their imminent departure, a preparation for their escape. This activity excites the inmates, and we wait minute by minute for the Allies to save us.

The excitement amongst the women is indescribable. They had also heard the rumours, and in their letters to us they expressed an elation that we had not seen before. The wind of freedom and

<sup>28</sup> *Franz von Papen - Reich Ambassador to Turkey 1939-1944 - did fly to Switzerland, not to negotiate peace, but to preserve his personal papers.*

liberation touched them too, now they can truly feel that they might survive.

I asked my Polish friend from Sosnowiec if there had ever been a rebellion in the camp? He replied that there hadn't, adding that even if some had resisted or escaped, they had soon paid for it with their lives. They were betrayed, and sometimes the informers were Jews, who believed that by giving away the escapers they would gain advantages with the SS. But the majority of them were Polish and Ukrainians, and not Jewish. These trusties were responsible for the worst anti-Semitic attacks in the camp. Most of the Block Kapos were appointed from among them, they constituted the camp administration, and were known as the "Firefighters Battalion". They were the masters, loud, noisy, and always cursing.

From the Polish and Ukrainian dictionaries we soon learned all the swear words that they kept shouting. Only the Allied prisoners of war, mainly the French, gave us the confidence to hope for liberation. They seemed well informed, and it was believed that they also had hidden weapons. I had doubted our ability to get arms, because of the camp's security, but I learned that during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, somehow, the Poles had obtained the bulk of the weapons by bribing SS soldiers. It is true that the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto still had money and valuables, while when we arrived here we had been completely robbed.

Had the Wehrmacht revolted in Munich and

taken over the government? Did von Papen fly to Switzerland and negotiate peace? None of this is true. Hitler is not dead, he only suffered minor burns from the bomb plot<sup>29</sup>. The plotters were arrested and executed. Himmler took over the government<sup>30</sup>. Goebbels addressed the German people and declared that the war would continue, with total mobilisation of German economic and military forces. Our future is decided, nothing changes, there's no indication that anything momentous has occurred. All the same, we are tense and the anxiety that grips us increases by the minute. Our dreams of freedom are soon quashed, and our fears increase.

On July 22nd, about two days after the assassination attempt on Hitler, the SS liquidate the Czech Jewish women in Camp B. That enclosure was one of the pillars for our hopes, with its old women crocheting and its children playing. It offered us the possibility that somewhere, our children, our wives and relatives, might still be alive, living under the same conditions. But the occupants were wiped out in one night by the hungriest Moloch<sup>31</sup> of our time.

The day before, we had seen the preparations for that extermination. The Sonderkommando had gathered in full force to prepare for their night's work. Towards evening, huge trucks entered the

<sup>29</sup> A failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on 20th July, 1944.

<sup>30</sup> Himmler only took command of the immediate situation - not the government.

<sup>31</sup> Moloch - a Canaanite deity associated in biblical sources with the practice of child sacrifice.

camp, and one after another, the inhabitants of the barracks were loaded onto them. They were given the excuse that they were being taken for disinfection, and weren't even allowed to finish the meagre supper that they had just been given, that last slice of bread and margarine, but were ordered to leave everything on their beds, the knitting threads and needles, the tiny nail clippers, and the combs with which perhaps a mother combed her little daughter's curls before going to bed. The thin strands of blond or brown child's hair were still in their combs the next day, when we sorted through their belongings, some for the clothing stores and others for disinfection.

They emptied that camp that night, brutally and heartlessly murdering six thousand people. Then, the next morning, we were transferred to their barracks early, so that we could make room for new death row inmates. Our hearts were breaking as we gathered up the women's personal belongings, a slice of bread smeared with margarine, a spool of thread, a lot of photographs and tiny household items, used, worn-out clothes.

Our SS supervisors did not let us dwell too long on the events that had taken place here. They beat us with their whips, so we worked quickly. By evening we had finished clearing the remnants, and in this desolate block, now empty of anyone except us, a temporary new life could begin the next morning. In place of the six thousand murdered and burned Czech Jews, they moved fifteen thousand

Hungarian girls from the nearby C camp. For them their new barracks was only an ante-chamber on the way to the gas chambers.

This mass murder not only created paralysing stress in us, but also completely crushed the hopes of even the most optimistic. Now we no longer expected rescue from any political or military action. Quite the opposite, for as the Russians approached, we could only foresee our immediate deaths. The shadow of death weighed heavily on us, and lay upon our souls.

News of the war continued to reach us. We knew that the Allied Powers were now waging the decisive battles for France, but we remained sceptical of their victory. We had expected too much over the last few days, and our nerves were strained to the point of breaking, and we experienced a state of total exhaustion. We only raised our heads when the smell of burning flesh and the fumes from the smoke, drifting from the chimneys, hit our nostrils. In the evening, like ghosts, we looked in the direction of the burning columns of smoke. It was eerie. At night, when we went to relieve ourselves, we looked out through the cracks in the door. Our eyes always looked in the same direction. Are they still burning? They always burned. Our world was on fire.

In our minds we recorded the dates from the beginning of August. Every morning we repeated the date to each other, so that we wouldn't get confused, so that we could keep track, "Tuesday,

August 1st", "Wednesday, August 2nd". And we repeated this several times a day. This was our calendar, our memory, just so we would not forget.

On the night of third of August, I dreamed of



you, Zsuzsaka: I was walking down the street at home, and suddenly I was drawn to the garden of one of our neighbours. I saw you sitting there, on the veranda of a lawn bordered by flowers. You were with a girl called Judith. In my dream she was the same age as you. You

were wearing that black velvet dress that I loved so much, that went so well with your sky-blue eyes. When you saw me, you threw your arms around me, and two big tears ran down your face from your dear, beautiful eyes, and with a slight reproach in your voice you said,

"Daddy, you cheated me, you promised to meet me in an hour, and you didn't come!"

I woke up, but I still felt the squeeze of your little arm around my neck and the salty taste of your tears as I kissed them from your face. I had promised to meet you in an hour as you walked to those showers, and I have been looking for you ever since, but I do not know where to search. Then it occurred to me that you couldn't have known Judith, with whom I saw you in my dream. The poor little one had died of meningitis many years ago. At exactly

the age you are now. My God, how do you send me messages! My dear child, live, live, live. Perhaps you are suffering from some illness right now? You must be going crazy waiting for me, how can you bear it?

For that whole day and for many more weeks I was greatly disturbed by this dream, even though I had analysed it for myself. I remembered that a young boy of sixteen from Košice had died in our hut, in terrible agony, of meningitis. I thought of my dear children. And how I had seen my daughter in a dream, in the company of a girl who had died of meningitis, even though my Zsuzsi could not have known her. As a student of Freud, I could analyse and even rationalise the dream, but nevertheless it upset me deeply.

One day, the daughter of one the doctors, whose stout, mature figure had saved her from the gas chambers, when Mengele had let her go with her mother to the women's camp, now fell ill for the second time. The mother reported this to the local guards, then the 'Red Cross' car appeared and she was driven away. But we already knew, or at least guessed, that the 'hospital' was where patients with infectious diseases were taken on Mengele's orders. The mother would never see her daughter again, and we no longer envied our friend who had been allowed to see, at least through their barrack window, his wife and daughter, who were destined to follow in the footsteps of all our other wives and daughters, all the Jewish girls and women.

## Two heroes

THE WAR CONTINUED to rage, but none of it affected our lives, whether Paris had fallen, or the Russians were approaching Warsaw, our lives continued to hang by a thread. My fellow prisoners waged a life-and-death struggle each day in the harshest of work environments. The more experienced veterans knew how to evade the worst placements, and when the new arrivals tried to move from a harsh work Kommando to an easy one, they received murderous beatings from the Lager Kapos. Most didn't go to work, but to the hospital.

In the Kommandos that worked in the harshest conditions, people were dying and disappearing. Now, in the evenings at roll call, the officer in charge of "Arbeitseinsatz," (labour deployment), would appear. His was one of the most crucial positions in the camp. He walked through our ranks and recorded the numbers of the people who seemed strongest. They were moved that evening from block number 20 to block number 8. This transfer was like a death sentence, because the two most savage Kommandos inhabited the same block, the Königsgraben (King's Ditch) and the aerodrome Kommando. In these two work details no one remained alive for very long. The hard work there destroyed a person within three months, and then, as a "Muslim," he would be taken to the gas chamber, and then burned.

In Auschwitz there was always a danger of becoming too thin. Kapo functionaries conducted what was called a "selection." During each "Appell", Mengele, or one of his murderers, would appear, review the ranks, and record the numbers of the weak. These were consigned to barracks number 14. In the course of a day or two, two thousand people were assembled, which was the required number for the so-called gas transports. For smaller numbers than that, it was probably not worth using the extermination camp's killing machinery.

When two thousand people were together, our barracks were sealed, and for an hour or two no one was allowed to leave their hut. During these hours, the "Muslims" were "liquidated" – at Auschwitz this was a professional term! In the outside world, it was customary to liquidate businesses and industries, but here the lives of thousands of people were liquidated industrially.

There was also a second type of selection. From Auschwitz, transports were taken to various other parts of the country, and there – far away, due to hard labour, hunger and disease, the people became weak, emaciated, and then brought back to Auschwitz to be burned. Prisoners left and returned frequently, and were taken straight from the train to the gas chambers. As these shipments arrived, I thought a lot about my younger brother and my brother-in-law, could they still be alive? Had they already been sent back in one of these death trains?

In the first week of August, we experienced

tremendous stress. The residents of the Gypsy camp were liquidated. We learned about this the day before, just as we had with the Czech Jews. This extermination was even more shocking to us than the earlier one. For these Gypsies were Christians – Aryans, and even though they were Gypsies they had, so far been spared the gas chamber – this method of killing was reserved for us Jews alone. Now, the Sonderkommando announced not only was there a barrack lockdown, but also a camp lockdown. No one in the entire camp was allowed to leave their hut. There was silence all around. Only the screams, shouts, and pleas of those being herded into the gas chambers echoed in this vacuum, increasing in intensity as the killing room filled.

The Gypsy camp was located right next to us, a few yards away, and only the wire separated us. Throughout the night we heard the noise of wagons coming to take them to their deaths, the rumble of the engines as the crowds were accelerated to extinction. And through the vehicles' noise, we heard the piercing, heart-rending sobs of the Gypsy women and children.

They already knew that they were going to their deaths when the SS men came for them at night to take them “to the baths”. They had already seen the real purpose of this deception, that the visit to the “showers” had already meant death for tens of thousands of Jews. I don't know what the Gypsies had felt when they had seen the SS taking Jewish victims, but when their turn came, their sobs

and screams penetrated to the marrow of our bones.

All that night, the rumbling of the lorries continued, and by morning, silence reigned on the Gypsy side of the camp. That night, three thousand six hundred were killed, people who had been in the camp for many years and were the sole survivors of many thousands of Roma. Diseases, epidemics, typhus, and dysentery had also killed many, many thousands more of them.

And even though they were our first Block Elders, mostly brutes from whom we received our first punishments and humiliations, who had stolen our bread and margarine rations, we felt sincere grief that their wives and children had met the same fate as our families.

We tried to understand the reason for the Germans' actions. The Gypsy children had received coffee with milk until their last day, and even white bread, and yet they too were destroyed. A long haired girl was also killed, she had become a favourite of Mengele, who, whenever he visited the Gypsy camp, would carry in his arms and take for a ride in his car.

The burning of the Gypsies stunned not only us Jews, but also shocked the Ukrainian and Polish Aryan prisoners. This was the first time that Aryans had been burned, so now they too were fearful, wondering if their turn would soon come?

We Jews, hoped that this might ease the tensions between us, that it might be possible from now on to think about some kind of joint uprising, when

the possibility of liberation approached. It did result in a serious discussion about cooperation, however a few days later a new event occurred, which once again showed that the Germans had contrary views about Jewish and Aryan prisoners.

One Saturday night, about the middle of August, at the end of the roll call we received the order: “Juden, vortreten!” (“Jews, march forward!”). We were immediately alarmed, because the horror stories of the older Polish Jews had long haunted the rest of us. According to them, it had been customary for the SS to hold mass selections among the Jews every year about the time of the High Holidays, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. On these Holy Days they burned us by the thousands. The Polish Jews, who had survived such selections for several years, spoke about it with great fear. A sense of panic reigned among them, although we, who had never experienced anything like it, were unable to understand it.

“Jews, march forward!” and we all march until we are lined up in rows in the large parade ground in front of the camp. Here they arrange us to form a large square, in the centre of which are two gallows. Which of us will have the noose tied around his neck? Behind us Hungarians, they marshalled the Poles, and behind them the Russians and Ukrainians.

As we wonder what new horror will occur, there are sounds of movement from block number 13, and moments later, the guards march two Jewish

prisoners to the gallows, their hands tied behind their backs. The shining triangle on their chests identify their faith, indeed we recognise them. They had escaped ten days earlier but to our regret, were caught and brought back to the camp. The two had been marched through our columns holding a board with the inscription, “Hurray! We are here again”, and publicly flogged twenty five times. Then they were put in a penal Kommando, where the labour demands were such that few survived.

What further punishment could they endure, except being put to death? Some of us are already turning pale and, fearing fainting, dare not look at the gallows. Only the two escaped Jewish prisoners stand there silently, with their heads held high, like two statues of Apollo, not a muscle in their faces betrays fear for what is about to happen. And as their gaze sweeps across the crowd of twenty thousand, as they look at the setting sun, preparing for the last day of their lives, the vast audience is forced to stand silently for over an hour, an eternity. Then an SS officer appears holding a white piece of paper. He reads briefly that according to the order of the 2nd of August, the Jewish prisoners were caught while escaping and brought back to the camp and must be hanged. He turns back and shouts: “Execute!”

Suddenly the two condemned men, of their own volition, leap onto the gallows, where a Kapo fastens the noose around their necks. Then the table is kicked from under their feet and they plummet down until the ropes snap their necks. A few

moments of terrifying horror and life ceases in the two young Jews. Without hesitation, the two chose death, to escape slavery. They no longer wanted to live.

On the way back from the execution area to our blocks, we whispered about the unjust sentence. It was a miscarriage of justice, because their crime, their escape attempt, was a “*res judicata*,” – it had been judged and punishment already given. Therefore, even by the depraved laws of the camp, a death sentence could not be additionally imposed.

We were grateful to our two murdered comrades for behaving bravely, for dying as heroes, and for not giving the Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish watchers a reason to mock them and us. The courageous behaviour of the condemned men affected them too, and we all walked silently from the scene of their hanging. I failed to record the names of our heroic comrades, so I cannot commemorate them here for future generations, even though they deserve it. It was only after we had returned to the barracks that I was able to gather my friends around me and whisper “Kaddish” for their souls.

After the extermination of the Gypsies, the Poles and Ukrainians were quick to calm down. It seemed that the Germans would continue to act with peremptory brutality, to prevent any resistance. However, a week passed and once again we had to assemble in the square. This time the Poles were put in the front row, with the Russians, Ukrainians and

Hungarian Jews behind them. On this occasion two Poles were hanged for trying to escape. A few days later three Russians met their deaths for the same charge.

So, one fate and the same punishment awaited all escapees, regardless of nationality or religion. But we Hungarians never managed to collaborate on escaping, it seemed that the Russians, Poles and Ukrainians had their own jealously guarded plans.

The antagonism between the Russians and the Polish was felt throughout the camp. The Poles proudly spoke about the uprising in Warsaw, but we Jews, both Hungarian and Polish, could not pin any hope on relief from distant Polish forces. We were convinced that we would only be saved by the Allies. So, while the Poles continually discussed the exciting news from Warsaw, our fears were of threats far nearer.

We counted the days remaining until the terrible days of selection – we were so terrified of them. For now, small-scale culls regularly occurred. The camp Kapos and the Block Elders recorded the most emaciated, the weakest, and did not allow them to go out to work. They were told that they had received orders to improve their nutrition in order to restore their ability to work. And indeed, on some days they received a double ration of soup. Of course, this was also another form of deception. Some, not even those weakest, actually asked their block-elder for this special treatment.

One fine day, they gathered all the “recuperating”

people and took them away. Not a single one of them returned. We knew where they were taken “to recover.” Along with them, they also took those who had been injured and had to rest from the heat. This is how strong people, who were still able to work, were sent to their deaths. Some of my friends also disappeared – if they’d been laid off by an injury at work, or if the doctor allowed them two days of rest on a selection day, they simply disappeared.

At the beginning of September – that year the Jewish holidays began early – further mass selections were ordered. In Camp A, there was a block of young boys, aged about fourteen to sixteen, who had been in Auschwitz for about three or four months. They didn’t go out to work, but were starved and flogged. Of course, with fourteen boys lying on one narrow bunk, starved, emaciated and weakened for months, with beatings, poor hygienic conditions, and lack of sleep, they were almost half dead anyway.

Then Mengele began the autumn selections. At the first opportunity, he chose one thousand, two hundred and fifty of the boys. The selection process lasted a week. Every day he checked one or two barracks. Through the barbed wire, we could see how boys from different barracks were paraded before him naked each day, and with that infamous flick of his thumb, he sent them to the right or left, sentencing them to life or death.

Those who were too emaciated and weak were subjected to the merciless selection decree, and

confined to a special barracks, from which they were forbidden to leave. And these boys already knew what awaited them, because they had been in the same camp as the Gypsies, and had already witnessed their extermination. They knew that now their turn had come. These poor little human beings, who only three or four months ago had been robbed of their parents, brothers and sisters, somehow exist here, instead of a warm nest of home, all they have is the sordid life of the camp. The little boys, who every day fought bitterly for a sip of soup and crumbs of food, now saw their excruciating and inevitable death.

It’s perhaps better for a person not to know the day of his death, but these unfortunate boys knew it many days in advance. None of them were asked what their last wishes were. They were locked inside the block, to wait for the SS truck to come and take them to their deaths.

One day I went with the storage facility wagons to the Gypsy camp, which had been renamed Camp A, after their extermination. The selections of these young people had already begun, when a fourteen-year-old boy ran after our wagon and called out to me,

“Uncle Doctor! My mother is in Camp C. Please, somehow let her know that I am still alive! This time I have managed to escape death as I am not so thin! But poor Jantschi Rosenberg and Ocho Nussbaum and other friends of mine are in Block II, the death hut.”

There the unfortunates were locked up, and waited for their execution. They prayed loudly, preparing for their deaths. That terrible day arrived, and by its end Hitler's murderers had gassed and burned ten thousand people, tens of thousands of Jews were killed, the boys, but also women. It was Rosh Hashanah. In our Camp D, but also in Camps C and B, where the women lived, every evening, they selected several hundred people, including every rabbi that they could find, so that by the second day of the holiday there was no religious authority to lead us in celebrating the New Year, for even the rabbis had to be sacrificed to the insatiable Moloch.

The women did not know what was going to happen, but the obvious distress of the men in the camp made them anxious. The day before the holiday, they did not ask us for bread, but for candles. In the evening, after the roll call, they went out en masse to the barbed wire and wished each other and us, a happy and blessed New Year. Many of the people in Camp D were also inspired by the holiday, and decided that in one of the blocks they would hold a public prayer. The women, alone in their hut, lit the few candles that we had given them, and prayed loudly. Their singing of Ma'ariv, the evening prayer reached us, but there were many, made faithless by the hell that they had witnessed in Auschwitz, who could not bring themselves to praise the Sovereign of the Worlds. They screamed and raised their fists at Him, asking how He could

permit all this terror, crying out that on the very day of the time of atonement innocent women and children, and men tortured by hard labour, were sacrificed.

That day the flames from the ovens rose to a terrifying height, as the children of a tormented people struggled in their death throws, abandoned by God to their fate.

"Our Father, our King, we have sinned against You. But you also sin against us, our Father, our King, that you allow Your most faithful servants, who bless and praise Your name to be destroyed in this way."

The young boys of Camp A, those one thousand two hundred and fifty, went like heroes to their deaths. They wrote their names on the inner wall of the block, one thousand two hundred and fifty names written next to each other. And under their names they added: "We are leaving here, and dying for our faith." And when the SS trucks drove up on the night of Rosh Hashanah to take them away there was no crying or commotion among them. They boarded the trucks silently. Locked in our barracks, we stood by the doors and listened, when suddenly, through the rumble of the truck engines, we heard the voices of the boys going to their deaths singing "Hatikvah", the anthem of the Zionist movement.

The women didn't know, nor did they even guess, that many of their children had been gassed that night. However, the next day, they appeared,

almost in a festive mood to the fence and asked for any news, as they had heard that Romania had thrown off the yoke of German enslavement and turned against Germany<sup>32</sup>. The Transylvanian cities passed into Russian-Romanian hands, and this news had rekindled the women's hopes, and their longing – for home, for family, for life – gnawed at their souls.

Once again, we nervously watched as the SS men filched civilian clothes from the clothing stores. We told the women this and it consoled them. Then, cruelly, they were selected, and not only were the weakest separated from them, but even the younger, stronger ones were formed into groups of a thousand or two and sent in “transports.”

I watched as they stood, bewildered, constantly asking whether it was better to leave, or whether it was better to hide, in the hope of a quick end to the war, and to survive.

My nieces feared leaving Auschwitz, as they needed to remain near me. They hoped that we would all be released together and could go home if freedom came. I advised them that, if possible, they should stay where they were, and that I would help them with clothing and food, because if they left, who knows what their situation would be. However, the ever-burning crematory fires and the smoke billowing from the chimneys was a constant reminder that it was still better to escape from Auschwitz, as far away as possible. It

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<sup>32</sup> On Wednesday August 23rd 1944, King Michael 1 of Romania, with the support of many political parties, overthrew the Nazi allied government.

was difficult to decide, or to give them advice.

The Kapos at the crematories continued to bring the dead women's dresses and shoes to the clothing store. I was afraid that if I advised them to leave, I would only hasten their death, fearing that instead of being sent to work, they'd be sent to the gas chambers. It was better to wait despite the ever-present danger. The approach of Yom Kippur also worried us. The ten days of repentance. The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, are also days of somber mood, reflection, and self-reflection at home, even here in the shadow of crematoriums and selections. But here it had special significance for us living in the shadow of the gas chambers and crematories, at the whim of the selectors.

The scales of our misery were tipped by encouraging news from the front. When my nieces asked for news, I would tell them honestly that there was good news outside, but sad facts inside. I tried to console them, whispering that whoever survives Yom Kippur, it's possible that their prayers for a happy new year will be answered, with our hoped for liberation. They understood the hint in my words, yet the terror of death remained on their faces.

Night after night, commands for roll call, and night after night, new selections. Many good friends and acquaintances disappeared each day, as they were transferred to barracks number 14, the ante-chamber to death. I will never forget the seemingly trivial worries of a doctor colleague, who had found that

his wife was still living and in Camp C. They had married three months before their transport to the ghetto. Every day he asked,

“Have I become very thin?” or, “Do I look bad?”

The truth was that the man looked terribly gaunt. Two or three evenings after he had evaded the selections, we reassured him,

“You don’t look too emaciated, you are not yet a Muslim.”

Nevertheless, one evening they wrote down his number, and he too disappeared. His poor young wife waited in vain for him behind the wire every evening, but he never came back. We consoled her by saying that they had indeed taken him in the “transport”, but to work as a doctor, and would remain healthy; that he had no time to write, but he asked that she be well, and that he would send her kisses.

Every day, in various states of alarm, we looked at the tiny fragments of mirrors in our hands, and examined ourselves in the reflections. Had we really become so emaciated? Each day we shaved, so that our faces would look fresher, so that the hairs of our old age would not reveal our decrepitude. We sought to evade, to circumvent death, to outwit it.

Several of our friends were lying in the hospital, and a rumour spread that selections had begun in the wards as well. Mengele would go there daily, to review each patient’s medical cards, and examine them. Anyone who had been in the hospital for

more than two weeks, or who had no chance of recovering, was taken from the hospital without mercy, without shirts, often naked, and crammed into trucks. Within a few days, the hospital was empty.

The doctors tried to evacuate everyone who could be saved, away from the hospital, but Mengele would check the list of patients being sent in his register and if any were missing, he ordered them to be returned, so that they could be included in a selection. One of my best friends, Doctor Namesh, a doctor from Szczecin, was taken too. I could only lie to his young wife, who asked about her husband through the wire, again saying that he had indeed gone on the “transport”, but had been given an opportunity to work as a doctor elsewhere.

Yom Kippur arrived, and once again a thousand Jews were burned at the stake. Tens of thousands of people, who had survived Mengele’s sieve when they first arrived, and had worked day and night in hard labour for months or years starved, humiliated, hoping for release, now found that it was their turn for the showers. Yet, those of us who remained were still able to work, although we could still be selected.

After Yom Kippur, the selections in Camp D, stopped, but in the hospitals and the women’s camp, the exterminations continued day after day. Forty five thousand women from Camps A, C, and B, were rounded up, and led before Mengele. We watched them shuffling by, completely naked. Every day, groups of two thousand women forlornly passed

along the narrow path between Camps C and D, and were then taken to bathe, to be disinfected, and from there to be transported. We watched with anxious hearts to see if there were empty freight cars on the ramp, to see if trains were leaving with them. We were afraid that most of them would only go to the gas chambers, and although one or two trains did leave, we didn't know their destination.

Now I advised my nieces that if they managed to get themselves selected among the strong, young women, then they should go, and leave Auschwitz as soon as possible.

## A mutiny

THE NEWS OF THE WAR continued to make us nervous. The Allies had liberated all of France, the Russians were sweeping through Poland, and we were encouraged by events in Hungary. Had there been a coup d'état in Debrecen? Have the Szálaszi people<sup>33</sup> fled? Will our country really welcome us back home? Will they come to release us? We were already counting the days until October. We hoped that if we had not been lucky enough to see a single blade of grass for a whole summer, at least we would be home by autumn.

"We will eat grapes at home", said the wine makers from Tokaj.

In mid-October news came like a thunderbolt: Hungary had capitulated. Admiral Horthy issued a proclamation to the Hungarian people and the army, declaring that the Germans had betrayed the country. He also mentioned the "Jewish question", promising that the anti-Jewish laws would be revoked. We heard an SS officer telling his friend that the Jews of Budapest were becoming so impudent that they were walking down the street without a yellow star.

The news almost drove us crazy. We saw ourselves at home, and again the wind of liberty touched us and made our heads spin. Freedom

<sup>33</sup> *Ferenc Szálaszi - the fascist leader of Hungary during the last days of World War II.*

seemed so near. Tensions in the camp increased each day as we learned the progress of the war. No one knew where the stories came from, and no one asked their source, but our faces became cheerful, and we were almost able to forget the events that had taken place only two or three weeks ago: the twenty thousand victims murdered during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

We wanted life. We dreamed of our homes again, and pretended not to see that the crematories continued to burn, to blaze, and to smoke. Or perhaps that was precisely why we reacted with such wild joy to every rumour, because the flame of the ovens stood before us as threatening eternal damnation, and everyone wanted to believe in liberation. So we ignored the crematory fires that continued to burn, with winds fanning their flames and raising their smoke. And perhaps that was precisely why we reacted with such passion to every story that blossomed, because when we noticed the fires were growing dim it seemed to be a sign of our forthcoming release, and everyone wanted to believe in their coming freedom.

One evening we were again ordered to assemble round the gallows, to watch the hanging of the block elder of hut number 28. The reason given was that he had been listening to the radio and spreading rumours. He was a long-serving prisoner, with a wife and many acquaintances in the camp. It seemed that the SS noticed the excitement following each broadcast and wanted to set an

example so that they could still exert terror.

From that day on, it was as if all sources of news had been blocked. We learned nothing more, and since there was nothing to nourish our hopes, our yearning withered, and we were once again reduced to our usual depressive apathy. It is true that we could still hear the thunder of cannons from the direction of Krakow, but when, for a few days, they too fell silent, we decided for ourselves that the front was moving away from us. There would be no liberation, only work and hunger and the loss of all hope. Our only reality was the gas chambers and ovens. 'Arbeit macht Frei', Work sets you Free, said the inscription over the gates, but we knew that we were working in vain: for no work would set us free.

The number of women in Camp C. grew less daily, and their fears hadn't subsided. It was clear that the Germans were trying to empty the camp, but it was incomprehensible to us why only the women were being taken. My nieces had also left. Now, all my family had gone. I had no one to take care of. I felt that my life had become unnecessary, entirely without purpose. Perhaps, subconsciously, as long as they had been close to me, I could pretend that my life had purpose, that there were people who could benefit from it. Now that I was alone again, and no one needed me, I felt totally superfluous, and the attraction of the barbed wire, saturated with electricity, appealed to me once again. At least one of the prisoners each day, no longer able to bear the beatings, the hunger, and the gruelling work,

grabbed the wires and put an end to his suffering. I too stood many times, my gaze longingly fixed on the fence, imagining how good it would be to disappear from the world in an instant, to leave behind suffering, not having to endure the nightmare anymore.

I have no more energy now, I no longer wish for anything, why don't I do it? Am I really a coward, or is the desire for life so great that I still hope for something? Sometimes I don't sleep for whole nights. I think about my life – the one that is over and was so beautiful. It seems that I am still clinging to it. I still think about a good book, and about music, which I loved so much. Beethoven and Mozart, they still hadn't told me everything they had to say. I was at an age when I was just beginning to understand them. I had a few loyal friends, great writers, will they all be forgotten when I'm gone? But that won't happen if I stay.

Beethoven's music was beautiful, my Zsuzsi, and I hoped that you would play it one day. Mozart is so cheerful because I saw the same joy in your cheerful eyes my little Helga, and your laughter gushed out of them. Wisdom and philosophy was the favourite study of my mature years, because in it I found the answer to your nature, my Iduka, you were the "big" mother and my Nora, was the "little" mother in the house.

The world is now without our dear ones, without any civilised life. There is only suffering, humiliation, torture, prolonged starvation and the

degradation of personality; and there is only the welcoming wire, which can free you from nightmares, and can reunite you with your loved ones. Why can't I embrace it?

One Saturday in October, in the afternoon, the camp was shaken by constant rifle fire and the chatter of machine guns. We strained our ears in excitement and stopped working, only pretending to perform our duties when the Kapo or the foreman approached us. We couldn't imagine what was happening outside the camp. Cannon shells were falling nearby. Have the Russians really arrived?

We didn't have to wait long for answers. Soon the alarm rang for a complete lockdown. We stopped working and listened. Suddenly, Kommando after Kommando ran into the camp, with SS guards urging them along. Some of them carried human corpses on makeshift stretchers made of sheets or upon blankets tied to two poles. A whispered rumour spread that the Jews of the Sonderkommando had mutinied! Dense black smoke billowed from the crematory chimneys, clouding the horizon. Flakes of soot floated over the entire camp. The crematories were ablaze! The ovens that had burned and consumed tens of thousands of our people were now themselves in flames!

The sight overwhelmed us. It wasn't excitement of a hope for freedom, we felt the opposite: the anxiety of wondering whether we would survive the inevitable repercussions. We had thought and spoken a lot about the need to organise an uprising.

But now, at this moment, we knew that there was nothing that we could do. We could only wait and hope.

A few days before there had been a selection of the trusted prisoners, and one hundred and seventy of them had been taken for the “transport”. However, we heard that they had only reached Auschwitz I<sup>34</sup>, no more than a mile from us. Only one hundred and seventy bodies were brought back, which their comrades had to burn. Other trusties had been taken as their replacements to work at the crematory. They had to live and sleep amongst the machinery of execution, and were forbidden to leave. Even then we could only guess at the reason for this order, perhaps the Sonderkommando were being eliminated, perhaps it was now our turn, or that of the people in Camp D. We imagined that the new crematorium workers were isolated from us to prevent the intentions of the SS being revealed.

The Sonderkommando’s seclusion in the crematories caused terrible stress, both for them and for us. Then the “Sonder”, as they were called, rebelled. The thunder of guns and the explosions of hand grenades continued for an hour or two, and then everything fell silent. The camp’s fire brigade unit went to put out the burning crematorium, and we waited for news. The roll call lasted only a few minutes that afternoon, and then we were taken back to the barracks.

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<sup>34</sup> *Auschwitz I was the first camp to open in 1940, and was primarily a concentration camp.*

Another lockdown was ordered, but this time the Kommandos who worked in the vicinity of the crematory also joined us, and we were able to learn a few details from them. They told us that they had suddenly heard the sounds of rifle shots, and the explosions of hand grenades, and then barracks number 3, in which the Sonderkommando men lived, had burst into flames. The men living there had cut through the barrack’s wooden wall with axes, and escaped, scattering in all directions. They raced for the small forest surrounding the camp, through the camp’s perimeter stone ashlar. SS men pursued them. Hundreds of prisoners surrounded the crematoriums, some broke out, following the escapees, but after fifteen minutes, the SS released their hounds, and shooting wildly in all directions, many of those running for freedom were wounded or killed. Our block also suffered two casualties, a father and son from Oradea. Their bodies were brought to our camp and placed by the side wall of our block. The next day we learned about the appalling circumstances that had led to the Sonderkommando’s revolt.

When the Sonderists learned that one hundred and seventy of their comrades had been murdered, and that they were ordered to burn their bodies, they realised that their own deaths were only a matter of time, and so they armed themselves in defence. For months they had been plundering and robbing the precious stones and gold teeth of hundreds of thousands of the dead, and so had the

means to buy arms. And as the men of the SS were not indifferent to gold, the Sonderkommandos obtained their weapons and hand grenades from the Nazi soldiers. It's also possible that the civilian foremen, who could go in and out of the camp, stole weapons for them in exchange for valuables. On that fateful Saturday, October 7th<sup>35</sup>, when the order of "Entraten!" ("Surrender!"), was heard they refused to obey. They rushed the guards, throwing four of them and their own brutal Kapo into the fire.

The rebels started shooting wildly from their revolvers, they threw hand grenades at the SS, and doused the crematorium with petrol from the cans they had prepared in advance, setting it ablaze. They had plenty of fuel at their disposal, since they always doused the corpses with petrol. The whole thing was the work of moments. Some of the SS guards broke free, but by the time they returned with reinforcements, the Sonderists had taken advantage and cut the wire fence, attempting to escape. Most of them managed to escape the crematorium area, but it's very doubtful whether many got beyond the perimeter barbed wire of Auschwitz.

That evening they brought a mass of bodies into the camp. According to gossip, eighty people had managed to escape, however, the next day their bodies, torn to pieces by the hounds and riddled with bullets, were brought back to the camp. It is

<sup>35</sup> *The uprising at Auschwitz by Jewish prisoners occurred on October 7th 1944. They destroyed Crematorium IV. In retaliation, the SS executed over 450, including four women, Roza Robota, Regina Safirsztain, Ella Gärtner and Estera Wajcblum, who had courageously smuggled arms to the rioters.*

possible that two or three managed to disappear from the vicinity of the camp, but whether they got free, or were captured, we never discovered. Three or four days later they brought the bloodied clothes of the escapees and their bullet-riddled shoes to the clothing store, so that we could choose the best, because in Auschwitz nothing went to waste, except human life.

Within days, the uprising had faded from our memories. Were the rebellious gas chamber workers heroic? It was anyone's guess. I didn't consider them heroes, at least not in the true sense of the word. If they had rioted when they were forced to murder our children, our brothers and our wives, then they would have deserved the crown of heroism, and for us to immortalise their names in the book of our history. But they rose up only when they faced certain death, for the sake of protecting their own lives.

They risked their lives only on the verge of death, and attempting the impossible was only a last desperate act, and not a gesture of heroism. Although they too were victims, forced to perform their shameful deeds, their deaths, even as a result of armed protest, perhaps justified their fate, compared to the millions who they forced into the gaping mouths of the gas chambers.

Even though one oven had been completely destroyed, the others continued to operate, but as we passed by the remains of that sooty bunker, with its blackened walls, a sense of revenge and retribution

satisfied us. It commemorated the uprising, that small short rebellion that with more coordinated planning, and with the cooperation of the entire camp, something more triumphant could have been achieved.

Later we learned that they were going to blow up the other crematories, but, perhaps because of betrayal or cowardice, or because it was impossible to maintain contact, the plan didn't succeed. However we saw in the deaths of those few SS men a small retribution for the deaths of the three hundred Sonderists, after all, millions of us had been killed without even one SS man perishing.

The immediate result of the revolt was that immediately after the following day's roll call, the bell rang and a curfew was declared throughout the camp. On Sunday, immediately after lunch, we were confined to our barracks, and ordered to sleep. The excuse was that we needed to rest after the week's work. This frustrated us, because we couldn't meet the women beyond the fence. Although resentment was pointless, as after selections had been made among them the women were disappearing each day.

Camp C is completely empty. When we stare at the empty space where the women had stood, our hearts sink. Who knows where they've gone? What was their destiny? While they lived near us, we shared their suffering, standing at roll call from early dawn until late at night. We saw them shivering naked from the morning chill, getting soaked by the

cold October rain, standing barefoot in the mud, skeletal, pale, and shuffling to and fro each day. We saw them becoming "Muslims"; and yet we were happy that there were forty or fifty thousand Jewish women still alive, our companions in suffering, with whom we longed for freedom, for life. Their very existence comforted us.

Now that they had gone, we were alone and hopes for our survival were dwindling. We felt something in the air. Rumours spread that the men's camp was to be emptied. But with the Germans, it was never possible to predict their next move. They emptied several warehouses, and transported the goods by freight trains to the interior of the country every day, and we were up to our heads organising the clothing, because every item had to be recorded as it left the store.

At the same time, they began to liquidate the rest of the Kommandos, leaving only a few to work outside the camp. The women's camp, 3B, which had been emptied, was completely dismantled and taken away, the barbed wire fences were removed and rolled up. At the same time, the Kapos continued to build sewage facilities in our camp, which they'd begun several months earlier, and in the back room of each block, cement toilets were installed. Demolition work progressed in one place, while construction work continued in another.

Since many Kommandos had been killed, they kept many thousands of people in reserve, in idleness, as replacements. And for these there was

great danger, because in Auschwitz it was not safe to loiter, or to be seen to be unoccupied. They began new selections for these 'items' that were surfeit to their requirements.

Those who were unable to work and couldn't eat had to use what strength remained in them to get into one of the Kommandos that were still working. The supervisors profited, because everyone gave them items of value that they had secreted, just to be assigned work, as walking around the camp, seemingly inactive, meant death. Mengele and his companions appeared in the camp more frequently, and the terrible selections began again. As before, the weakest were assembled in Barracks 14, and every Monday a new death transport left from there. But now they had also begun real transports. Every day they transported up to a two thousand people, supposedly into other parts of Germany. Our ranks were thinning out.

Many in the camp suffered from facial skin infections, after all, a thousand people had to shave using just one razor blade and one brush. Those afflicted were selected separately and housed in Block 28, before being taken to the gas chambers. A minor skin disease, which could have been cured with treatment in a few days, was enough for a thousand sufferers to lose their lives. It was not the victim's uncleanliness, the Germans simply didn't allow them a more hygienic regime.

On October 26th, at eight o'clock in the morning, there was a general order and sudden

commotion in the camp. The work details were not sent out. They emptied block after block and led the people out of the camp. It seemed like a final evacuation. We were terrified that the ovens were now "processing" this human material, fearing that it would be our turn next. We didn't know where we were being led, and we were frightened by the fact that the cremations continued day and night. The burning of people did not stop for a moment. From Camp A, which was nearby, they forced thousands of people to stand on parade for several days, and only after midnight on the last day, were they taken from the camp.

At eight o'clock the next morning, we were told to remain in place at the warehouse, then, half an hour later, we were ordered to form in lines, because we were moving. We had to leave everything that we had acquired over time, everything that we had managed to secretly hoard, a razor, a pocketknife, a spoon, the most necessary and useful objects for everyday living - we were forced to leave everything. After checking our numbers and wearing only the single piece of clothing that we had, we had to leave instantly. From that moment our privileged status ceased, we were no longer the protected employees of the Bekleidungskammer, we became outcasts walking towards a new life, or perhaps towards death.

I thought of my younger brother, about whom I had heard a few days ago from a camp inmate, that he was still alive, in Auschwitz I, and that he worked

in a relatively safe Kommando. In any case, he still lives and hopes to be reunited with me. I managed to exchange letters with him, to which he replied. A believing and trusting soul. My brother, poor man, still didn't know, or did not believe, that his family was dead. He asked me in his letter if I knew whether they had taken his wife to the hospital, as she was about to give birth. I could not tell him that all the pregnant women had been killed, that he no longer had a wife or a wonderful, beautiful little three years old boy. I could only tell him that in Auschwitz there was only a hospital for men, so the women's hospital had to be somewhere else, and that perhaps his wife had been taken there. He also told me that someone had seen my twin daughters in Auschwitz 1 in August, where seemingly they had been taken for a medical examination. I knew that this could not be true, but the news lifted my spirits, as if, after all, there was still a glimmer of hope that they had managed to survive there too, at the very brink of death, and still lived. Oh, my God! How agonising is the path of suffering that we must walk.

In the meantime, our group was moved on. As we left the camp, we were told that we were to be disinfected at the bathhouse, however the road leading to the baths passed between the crematories 3 and 4. This terrified me, I said to my friend,

“Who knows which showers they are taking us to?”

The Red Cross cars accelerated past us, heading for the crematorium gate. We saw the fate of the

sick, and we feared that we were being taken to be killed. It seemed that the Germans were not making a secret of it any more; there was no more deception, the horror of extermination was being committed without guile.

The first of our ranks was already a few steps from the crematorium gate and suddenly I was filled with an inexplicable joy, as I contemplated being able to follow those I loved most, to meet them again, to be united with them in eternity. Then I saw that we were not turning in at the crematorium entrance, but away, turning left and actually heading for the bathhouse. A feeling of disappointment overwhelmed me. In the disinfection room, I looked back at the crematory, that threatening building that had swallowed my loved ones, burned them to ashes and dust and destroyed my happiness. I felt cheated that it did not want to consume me.

The washing and disinfection went according to routine. In the dressing room, we had to leave our clothes and everything in our possession, even the few cigarettes that we had somehow managed to buy. Then we had to stand naked in front of the barber, and were shaved, holding our shoes in our hands. In the changing room, we were given clothes that did not fit, but there was no choice. We noted one comforting fact - we were also given winter coats. This was very necessary, because it was already very cold.

After we had dressed, they hurriedly lined us up and marched us back, but not to Camp D, from

where we had come, but to the barracks from which the women had been removed. We entered the block and they locked us in. We spent the whole day there without food, in the same block where our wives, at least those spared death, had suffered for almost six months. What do these bunks tell us? What kind of life was endured upon them? How did the women live here? What did they dream of on their hard overcrowded bunks, without mattresses, was it of freedom, of life, of their families, of their homes? But the walls of the block and its bunks remained silent and allowed our imagination to depict any tapestry that had been woven there.

It seems that we were leaving Auschwitz, the vale of our torment, towards new terrors. Many, especially the veterans among us, were very happy that we were leaving the camp. They never thought that they would leave Auschwitz alive, believing that they would only see their days out in the company of other prisoners, where the ever-burning smoke and smell of burning human flesh would always corrupt the air that they breathed. I could only think that I was leaving, and that I did not know where. There were five of us when we arrived here, my wife and three children. How could I leave here, helpless and alone? It would be a betrayal on my part, to leave the place where I had brought them, carrying nothing except the memories of the horrors of Auschwitz, that cemetery for millions. I wished only for the return my family, or if that were impossible, my destruction.

As we waited, we transformed the hours of anticipation into a cultural party. We didn't know where the road would take us, but the faint hope that we would be liberated from Auschwitz lifted our spirits.

At first, only a few sang, but suddenly, on one of the bunks, as if on a stage, our Dutch singer friend, Misha Goebbels, appeared, and in a wonderfully lyrical tenor voice, he sang us several arias from operas. The SS men guarding us didn't object to this. Even after he had languished in slavery for year, his wonderful performance was an extraordinary success. After him, a young Polish friend of ours took the stage and recited Moshe Nadir's<sup>36</sup> Yiddish ballad "Boots, Boots." Never before had an audience appreciated a performance as they did there on that chilly October afternoon,

*"From all corners of the world, boots are marching,  
one-two, one-two. Eins-zwei, van-tu, agi-katto,  
leba-prava.*

*The command is heard in all languages,  
and drives men in combat, one against the other.*

*And the boots continue to pound,*

*Van-tu, agi-katto, stinga-dryapta, leba-prava!*

*They drive the bridegroom of death, until they say,  
Enough!*

*The boots rebel, refuse to obey and once again they*

<sup>36</sup> Yitzchak Rayz (b. 1885, Narayiv, Ukraine, d. 1943, Woodstock, USA), better known by his pen name Moyshe Nadir, was an American Yiddish writer and satirist.

*carry their masters on the road, but not on the paths of death,  
but on the royal road of life, on the road of freedom,  
on the road of world revolution.  
Boots, boots, leba-prava, one-two, van-tu."*

Fortunately, the SS guards did not understand Yiddish. Even amidst the stormy applause, we knew that only one provocative action was needed to end our lives, which were doomed anyway. Our ears heard the rhythmic clatter of our wooden shoes, and our souls yearned for liberation. The sound of applause fell silent, and our revolutionary-artist friend began an improvised tragic scenario,

*"A Jewish-American father sets out with his young son after the war to meet his elderly parents, who live in Poland. They drive across Europe in a car. The little boy is very eager to meet his "Daddy's" parents, because his father has told him so much about the two old people. It is night, and the car stops. All around is silence, the surroundings are deserted, and only the car's headlights are shining. The wind howls, it is midnight. Suddenly, from the east, a million soldiers of a ghost army in white cloaks march in front of them. The child is frightened and runs to his father's side, he puts his arms around him.*

*"Who are you, where are you going?" asks the father. Two old people, grandfather and grandmother, look back from the line, saying,*

*"Don't go any further, my son, don't look for us anywhere else, here is our grave, the Vistula waters carry our ashes, this is your 'Kéver Ovausz', this is your 'Kéver Yisrael', the cemetery of Israel. We are in Auschwitz. Auschwitz? Yes, my son, turn back, and turn back all of you who are looking for a parent, a brother, a mother, a child, Auschwitz, Birkenau, Majdanek, Treblinka, Lublin, this has become the cemetery of Israel, come here if you want to come to 'Kéver Ovausz', to the grave of your fathers. The lines of spirits continue, and thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, six million are passing like this. Oh, World, will you ever understand what happened here, oh, marble quarries, can you ever supply enough gravestones to engrave six million names on them?"<sup>37</sup>*

Eyes moist, even the Kapos, block elders, and foremen, who had caused the early deaths of so many people, were moved. After a long silence we thanked the performers. Towards evening they lined us up and ordered us to leave for the station. We passed through the narrow passage between Camps C and D, the same path that had seen the arrival of so many human transports. This path leads out of Auschwitz, but this is not how we imagined our departure from the inferno. It is not to freedom. The SS surround us. The path does not lead to liberty. Is it enough that we have got out of here alive, away

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<sup>37</sup> *Kéver Ovausz - Graves of our Ancestors. This haunting recitation, vividly recalled by Dr. Berner resonates with Goethe's Erlkönig.*

from the crematories that still remain in view? We might forget the torments we suffered in Auschwitz, the hunger, the beatings, the humiliation, but we must never forget the burning crematoria chimneys and their smoke. From now on, every lit match, every flame of a candle, will remind us of the ovens which, for six months, illuminated the darkness of our nights, and darkened the light of our days.

The freight train was waiting on the ramp to take us away. The guards quickly counted us, and fifty or sixty people were loaded into each wagon. It was freezing, and we collapsed, shivering onto the sodden wood of the bare plank floor. I remembered that airless wagon, a year ago, in which I, with seventy-one people came to the house of death. How many fears filled our hearts on that journey, and yet, how happy I was then, with my family, my dearest ones. Now there is no one to worry about. No matter where they take me, my life ends here, they are just carrying me as someone who is one of the living dead.

After a few minutes, the SS men appeared and gave us bread and margarine for two days, and so, we set off on what turned out to be a long journey. It was getting dark. The doors were locked, and two SS men entered the carriage to guard us. The darkness of the night lay upon our souls. Who knows where the train is leading now? To what black corner of that dark kingdom will we be taken? What else can come after Auschwitz?

## Towards the Unknown

THE TRAIN LEFT the camp with sixty of us crammed into each freight car. The space was very limited, and we huddled together because of the cold. It was a late October night. We ate some of the bread and margarine that we'd been given, because we had nothing in which to store food. We were very hungry, as we hadn't eaten anything that day. The two SS guards who were riding in our car ordered us to sit on the floor, on either side of the wagon. We were not allowed to sit in the middle, or near the doors. They warned us not to try to escape, because they had been ordered to shoot us if we made the slightest attempt. It seemed better not to entertain any thoughts of freedom.

We crouched in utter misery, with our memories – for almost all of us had lost our families in Auschwitz. The freight train crawled slowly along for hours. Many had fallen asleep after the day's hardships. Suddenly one of the sentries, who had apparently become very bored and had difficulty staying awake, called out and said that if there were any singers among us he would allow them to sing.

From the depths of the dark, cold carriage, a warm lyric tenor voice suddenly burst forth. The song, "The Jewish Mother" was heard, and heavy tears streamed down the cheeks of fifty elderly Jews; there was not a single one of us who had not left his "Jewish Mother", or the mother of his children in Auschwitz. Even the SS sentry was moved by the

melody of the song, the tenderness of the singer's voice, and the audience bursting into tears aroused his pity.

He asked for the words and the meaning to be translated for him. Then he asked for something more cheerful. But it was not easy to break away from that intense gloom and sing a livelier, happier song. After a few Russian marching songs, with fast rhythms, the nostalgia increased as we listened to the folk song, "Belz, my town, Belz."<sup>38</sup>

*Belz, my little town of Belz  
My home, where my childhood days passed  
Belz, my home town of Belz.*

*In a small and simple room  
Where I would sit and laugh with all the children.*

*I would run with my prayer book every Shabbat  
To the banks of the river,  
And sit under the green tree.*

*Belz, my little town of Belz  
Belz, my home town of Belz  
My home, where I dreamed so many  
Beautiful dreams.*

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<sup>38</sup> This song expresses the longing for Jewish life in Balti, Bessarabia (today Moldova). The words were written by the actor Jacob Jacobs (1892-1972), and the melody composed by Alexander Olshanetsky (1892-1946), who wrote scores for plays and operettas for the Yiddish theatre in New York. It was written in 1932 for the play *Ghetto Song* as a tribute to the famous female singer Isa Kremer, born in Balti. The song became famous in New York, and in 1935 appeared in score in Poland.

Each of us remembered the streets of our hometowns, the playgrounds where we ran free as children, the schools where we studied, where our carefree youth passed, and where our own children were taught. Now, we cannot allow ourselves to remember those joyful places, because our children are no longer there. In future, there will be no singing and no laughter where we grew up.

In the morning we squinted through the cracks of the wagon's walls, curious to know where the rail tracks were taking us? Were we still in Silesia? We didn't know whether we were being led, to the north or west? When we asked the SS sentries accompanying us on our journey where we were going, they replied that they didn't know, but then revealed that we were being taken near Berlin. But we didn't believe it.

The train passed through Liegnitz (Legnica, Poland), a large and handsome city, built on a hill, with its imposing cathedral towering above it. From our train we could see the bustling traffic in the city. The sight caused us bitter disappointment. It seemed that the Germans still live peacefully in their beautiful cities, and appear untouched by war. We wondered when it would end? We remembered the air raid sirens at Auschwitz, and the hundreds of American planes that passed over our heads, from which we expected a quick end to the fighting. But who knows what targets those planes were flying to?

The hours passed quickly, and although we

could only remain awake with great difficulty, we remained properly disciplined – as befits veteran prisoners. We were not hungry, as we still had some of the bread from the previous day; it was only thirst that bothered us, and the fact that we could not relieve ourselves. When the train stopped at one of the stations, we begged one of the guards to let us get off, but he refused. The weak among us couldn't hold out, and gradually the unpleasant smell of urine and faeces spread throughout the carriage, indicating that once again civilised people were degraded to the level of beasts. Because of this, quarrels and fights broke out.

Each passenger tried to distance himself from the incontinent unfortunates, and in the scuffles the sentries beat us with their rifle butts and ordered us to stand still. They forced us to stand for hours, with our heads held straight, until finally they showed some pity and allowed us to sit down again, and even to lie down on the bare, noxious excrement-strewn cold floor.

The second day was the same. We were exhausted, shivering with cold and our teeth chattered. We had not received any hot food for days and the cold really froze us. But our mood of depression was greater than our frozen bodies, and we prepared to spend our second night in the wagon.

It was nearly midnight when the wail of air raid sirens woke us from our bleak dreams. For a few minutes our train jolted back and forth, then

suddenly stopped. We could hear the drone of hundreds of planes, and loud explosions of falling bombs, and the thunderous replies of anti-aircraft guns. The noise was terrifying, as if bombs were falling nearby, and our carriage trembled and shook as if in an earthquake. We still didn't know where we were. A few hours later, when the noise of the air raid had died down our train was shunted onto a platform, and we found that we were at the station of a large city. We had arrived in Berlin<sup>39</sup>.

Our train remained stationary until dawn, in one of the sidings of a station in the suburbs of the city. As it began to move once again, we saw through the smoke of bombs a city in terrible ruins. This was Berlin, the capital of the Moloch! This spectacle of desolation gave us new strength. We reasoned that resistance could not last much longer in such ruined cities.

"You will see that in a couple of months the whole thing will finally be over," one of us predicted.

"The war must end," agreed another.

For almost the whole day our train progressed slowly, rocking to and fro, but we didn't seem to make much headway. Then we were attacked by another air raid. Our carriages stood on the open track, and even through the crack in the door, we dared not look out. I looked at the faces of my companions and they showed not even a shadow of fear. We weren't frightened of the bombings, for us

<sup>39</sup> The distance between Auschwitz and Berlin is approximately 310 miles.

death was not a distant aerial threat, it was always much closer, in the form of a rifle butt, a club, or a punch, it didn't even occur to us that the planes might bomb us too. We were too exhausted to consider that possibility.

After a journey of two days and two nights, our train was diverted to a siding between huge buildings in a forest. It was late at night. On one building, illuminated by searchlights, we could read the inscription: "Heinkel-Oranienburg."<sup>40</sup>

The train came to a halt. We heard the commotion of people being unloaded from the nearby wagons. We remembered our arrival at Auschwitz. There, we were also welcomed with loud noise and turmoil. The doors of our carriage were opened. A ramp was attached to the opening, and they began unloading their live cargo. We had barely managed to take one step out of the car, when we were flailed by whips. The SS men, Kapos, and the trustees wearing striped clothing cursed and beat us mercilessly.

It was a repetition of our arrival at Auschwitz. Here, however, the SS also unleashed their dogs to attack us, and it was only thanks that we only had a few steps to reach the safety of a building that we escaped serious injury, with only a few casualties, bitten on their legs by the hounds.

Huge arc lamps lit the interior of the building,

<sup>40</sup> Ruins of the Heinkel aircraft hangar where Dr Berner and his fellow prisoners from Auschwitz were imprisoned still remain at Oranienberg, North of Berlin, it is about 2 miles South West of Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

which was about a hundred feet high, and at least several hundred yards long. It had a concrete floor, and on the walls there were iron ladders and strange devices hanging on iron hooks. What kind of building was this? A modern prison? It resembled America's Sing Sing prison, that we had seen at the cinema.

The Kapos and the guards lined us up, again in columns of five. Five thousand four hundred people, a drop in the ocean, all of us insignificant inside the immense hall. There was enough space for at least another fifteen thousand people. In one corner, there were wooden benches, similar to those at Auschwitz.

We were still standing in rows, when suddenly, through the door opposite, several thousand more people began to pour in, all wearing the striped uniform of prisoners. On their heads, they wore strange looking caps, which I learned was called a devil's hat. On their feet, they wore wooden clogs. Most of them were as pale as wax, and clearly frozen to death. They lined up in rows opposite us. The iron discipline and apparent fear of beatings was evident in them, as was their obvious state of starvation. We saw our future in their sorry state.

Eventually, when we had all assembled, there were about seven or eight thousand people in the huge hall, a deafening shout suddenly rang out, "Licht aus!", the command to turn off the lights. At that moment we were plunged into darkness. Our minds were constantly aware of the expectation of death, so we thought that we were about to die. I

asked my friend, Istvan Gábor who was standing next to me in the line,

“Will they kill us with gas, or with an electric current? I remembered what I’d been told about Majdanek, where they had used an electric current to murder fifteen thousand people, and we were only about half that number. Numerous machines, pulley systems, with any number of glass and steel vessels stood in this hall; it had the appearance of a diabolical torture chamber.

We waited fearfully for what might happen to us. After moments that seemed to last forever, the light was finally turned on again. We breathed a sigh of relief. Nothing had happened. What had been planned for us had not occurred. What was this frightening game, from which we are still shaking with fear? The Kapos are running here and there, continually rearranging us. And they are counting us again, continuously counting. We are still nothing but numbers, simply as items. During the six months in the camps, I have never been addressed by my name. We no longer have that dignity, we are not human beings names with professional titles.

We look at these ghosts, wearing their devil’s hats, standing immobile opposite us. From their behaviour, we try to anticipate something of our destiny. But they stand mute and silent. The Kapos count them too, and from time to time, a terrifying howl emerges from their ranks, a shriek that fills us with terror. This is not the scream of a sick person, but the roar of a lunatic. No one reacts to the

clamour, these creatures are no longer human, but beings tormented by terrifying horrors. And the Kapos continue to count...count...count on. The audit lasts for several hours, until finally the camp orderly, wearing a ribbon on his arm, appears and loudly screams the order for the “Appell”,

“Stand still! Take off your hat!”

A short time later, several SS officers appear and goose-step to the front of our ranks. Here we learn a new terrifying addition to the roll call. It’s night, lanterns and large flashlights strapped to the heads of the SS officers are all that illuminates the dark. Perhaps we are going to endure some new camp discipline. We are instructed how to behave in the event of an air raid alarm.

The first order is: “Licht aus!” turn off the lights! We practice this exercise. It corresponds to the daily warning alarm, which is given as a lengthy wail of the siren. If it sounds at night, its blast is heard through a loudspeaker in the huge hall, and we have to get up immediately and hurriedly dress in the dark. And if we hear the sound intermittently, we must hurry outside to the forest, a short distance opposite the building. The alarm is heard frequently, and then we hear, “Disperse!” and we are allowed to lie down on the bunks that have been placed in one of the corners of the huge hall.

Immediately tumult breaks out, as everyone struggles to find a place to sleep, eager to be settled quickly, and if possible with friends, or those we trust, in the next bunks. However, there is no end to

the prolonged commotion, to which the sound screams from heavy blows of the Kapos and guard's clubs is added as they attempt to quell the disorder.

The hall is too small to accommodate all of us, even when two of us share a bunk. Hundreds are forced to sleep on the cold concrete floor. We barely manage to get settled when the cry of "Licht aus!" is heard once more, and in total darkness, we put on the shoes that we had just removed after wearing them for days in a row. After a few minutes the siren sounds. Never before had a sound so terrified me as this screech coming from the loudspeaker above our heads. We race out of the hall, away from the barracks into the forest, where we shiver beneath the few leafless trees that grow there.

Kapos and night guards, with torches strapped to their chests, order us to hide and crouch silently on the ground. It is the 29th of October, a cold wet German night. After a few minutes, we heard the sounds of the day before, the deep throbbing as many hundreds of allied planes flew over our heads. And we felt happy that a few minutes of hellfire would fall on Berlin, as we shivered with cold and fear among the trees of the forest. Here we could die, even without being beaten, tortured or gassed. How much more economical for their killing requirements if they just took us out into this forest every night, where we would catch cold, get pneumonia and perish.

In the distance, we hear the sounds of explosions, and the dull thumps as the anti-aircraft

guns fire their shells. We listen quietly, holding our breath. About half an hour passes, when the all-clear siren sounds, announcing the end of the attack, then there is a frantic race back to the building. Again the same violent fights for room on the sleeping bunks is repeated, with no one finding their former place. Those who had been on the floor fight to get places on the bunks, whilst those of us who had earlier slept on pallets only have the concrete floor to lie upon. Punches are thrown around us, and several hundred tortured and weak people bow their heads and collapse to the cold floor. Again, the violent prevail over the weak.

The great hall falls silent, and we haven't even had two hours of sleep, when the piercing sounds of whistles and the command,

"It's four in the morning, get up!"

And once again, the same damned ceremony of last night's "Appell" is repeated. We stand for many hours, on the cold floor, in our worn-out shoes, shivering. We stamp our feet, but it doesn't warm us. It's been a third day without hot food and our strength is failing. What's the point of enduring this anymore, how long can we bear it? Everyone is standing; we are all exhausted, we don't even have the energy to think.

We look round, examining the vast interior and its equipment, trying to understand what function the building served, given its enormous dimensions. Then, from the iron scales mounted on the steel columns, and from the height of the hall, and finally,

from a sign, we discover that we are in an aircraft hangar. The words identify the manufacturer, “Heinkel”, so we assume that we would be employed making aircraft. The strange thing is that this enormous hall was almost completely empty.

Meanwhile, the roll-call continues. Hours later, comes the order to disperse. The Kapos tell us that we would soon be given breakfast, and after about half an hour, several barrels of black coffee are brought into the hall, and each of us receives about half a cup of the liquid. We drink the coffee, which is “Ersatz”, a substitute made from roast acorns or chicory. It is tasteless, yet refreshing because it is hot. Then we are taken out into the square in front of the hangar. It is still completely dark.

The sun rises late, as winter is already upon us. We shuffle outside, shivering, looking for warmth from the morning sun. We remember those first days in Auschwitz, in the Gypsy camp, when we had shivered so much in our striped clothes. However, that was June and now it was the end of October.

At midday, we receive a small bowl of soup, which by the time it reaches us is luke warm, but it tastes much better than the unpalatable slop that we’d been given in Auschwitz. Here they season the food, which gives it some flavour; but with only a half pint of this and one slice of bread a day, we will all die quickly from starvation.

Food is all we think about. They don’t make us work, they only starve us and beat us at every opportunity, without reason. We sleep on the bare

concrete floor. We cannot take off our clothes, there is no place to wash, and we do not have any drinking water. The worst thing is that the food we receive is highly seasoned, and therefore our thirst torments us. We try stealing a little water from the emergency hydrants, and some even succeeded in doing so, but the Kapos immediately drive us away with terrible beatings. Once or twice we are given snail soup with mustard, which of course we devour with enormous gusto, our mouths experiencing the new taste, but afterwards thirst plagues us terribly.

Every morning we are ordered out of the building, and have to wander all day outside, in the wet, gloomy, cold wintry weather. We examine each other each day to see how we are faring. Somehow, miraculously, our health is improving.

A week after our arrival, a new transport of people appears. They are Aryan Poles, and come with luggage, with food, with bread and meat. A young doctor among us could not sleep. He was tormented by hunger. The food packages of the new prisoners aroused his appetite. He crept among the Poles and stole some food. He risked his life, because if he had been caught he would have been beaten to death. The thief spent the rest of the night eating, devouring the meat, the sweets and the bread. In the morning he hid the empty box, and concealed the leftover food in his shirt tails, carrying it with him throughout the day. He calculated how many calories he had received from this little theft, for here, calories literally meant days of life, or perhaps

life itself. We spent three weeks in that bleak hangar.

The days seemed endless. The hunger, which exceeded anything we had known before, the constant shivering from the cold, the lack of sleep, and of a place to lie down, and the constant night time air raid warnings that drove us into the forest, consumed our strength more than any suffering we had experienced before.

We were already shadows of ourselves. We sought shelter from the cold in the trenches between the hangar buildings, and in the darkness we would hide for hours and sometime days, but when the guards discovered our refuges, they beat us with clubs. They continually hunted us and ordered us out of the shelter. Those who were caught were taken to do evacuation work. On one occasion, I was caught too, and a Kapo punished me by seizing my heavy, sturdy boots and giving me a pair of inadequate shoes, which quickly went to pieces; and later, when I was forced to work in the snow with my feet wrapped in rags and papers, I deeply regretted losing those worn out shoes.

At the end of three weeks, one Sunday morning, we were marched to the sound of an orchestra to the roll-call yard. We were lined up in rows, standing in puddles of freezing water. The orchestra played marches incessantly. "Transport", we thought to ourselves, we would be taken away once again. A high-ranking SS doctor appeared. We paraded in front of him, and each one of us had to declare our profession. One part of the group was sent to the

right, and another part to the left. We didn't know what this meant, because identical people, declaring the same profession, were sent to different groups. Then we were taken to a makeshift office, where our personal details were recorded again, and instead of the tattooed numbers that had been engraved on our arms in Auschwitz, we received new numbers, not tattooed this time, but recorded on paper, which was fastened to our coats.

On the night of November 15th, the numbers of the first group were read out, and we were led to another very large hall. We set off in a "Transport", but first we were taken for disinfection, the ritual cleaning that occurred before each move. We were crammed into a large room, which was probably intended for SS lectures, because it had an empty stage and rows of chairs. There we had to wait ages, because the narrow bathhouse and the disinfection area could only accommodate fifty people at a time.

The small stage in that lecture hall inspired a thirst for art, that food of the soul, which even the terrible mental and physical distress which we had endured could not completely suppress. Here we re-enacted the play that we had performed in Auschwitz in the women's camp, on the eve of our departure. Misha Goebbels, the Dutch singer, repeated his song again, "Shtivl, Shtivl" ("Boots, Boots"), then the Polish Jews sang songs of intense homesickness.

During these performances, groups of fifty people went out, at half-hour intervals, to be

disinfected. Those who had finished bathing remained in the bathroom, because it was warm there.

At six in the morning, we were ordered to march. We thought we would be taken to the railroad tracks, to be transported by train, but to our surprise we realised that we were leaving the Heinkel factory. We walked between massive buildings, where no one was working, although we had heard a rumour that the factories themselves were underground<sup>41</sup>. When we reached the main road, we saw to our amazement that there were still civilians in the world, wearing smart clothes, free people, men and women riding bicycles. And we saw children, German children, children with long curls, with expressions of curiosity on their faces. Our hearts ached. We remembered our own children, wondering if one of the fathers of these children, or his older brother, had murdered our families. Why can't we hate these children?

The SS forced us to march at a frantic pace, beating us with their rifle butts when we lagged behind. They led us through small villages, and then through a large city, Sachsenhausen. We could hardly hold out any longer at this wild pace. After enduring terrible hunger for three weeks, after a sleepless night, we had reached complete exhaustion. Our hearts and minds were pounding, how much longer, God help us!

The civilians that we passed turned their heads

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<sup>41</sup> The Allied air raid of April 18th, 1944, largely destroyed the factory buildings of the Heinkel site.

away to avoid looking at this army of emaciated ghosts. We couldn't see whether it was out of sympathy or hatred. After a frantic run that lasted an hour and a half, we arrived at the entrance to a huge concentration camp. It was the infamous one at Sachsenhausen. We could barely stand on our feet. They marched us in through the main entrance, decorated with the mighty eagle clutching a swastika, and stopped us at a checkpoint. We already knew from experience that this was a guardhouse. Above the entrance there was a tall building with lookout towers. Beyond it was a semicircular area, from which paths ran between the barracks. On the walls of the first semicircle was the inscription similar to those at Auschwitz, in letters of gothic script, it announced, "Es gibt einen Weg zur Freiheit. Zeine Meilsteine Heisen: Gehörzam, Arbeit, Achtung der Forgesetzten, Zauberkheit, Reinlichkeit und Liebe zum Paterland"<sup>42</sup>. We had read these slogans so many times, but we never heard of anyone achieving the desired goal, freedom.

We lined up for the roll call. Again we were counted as "pieces". How many more times will we endure this humiliation? Still standing, we noticed that several hundred people in their striped uniforms were running laps around the camp perimeter, which was at least a third of a mile in

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<sup>42</sup> Exhortation painted at entrance to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Written by Heinrich Himmler, then Munich Police Chief, later Gestapo Chief and Reichsführer-SS: "There is a Path to Freedom. Its milestones are: Obedience, Diligence, Honesty, Order, Cleanliness, Sobriety, Truth, a sense of Sacrifice and Love of Country."

circumference, and on their shoulders they were carrying heavy knapsacks. They dragged themselves with difficulty under this burden, but, amazingly, they were singing. They didn't stop for a moment. Later we learned that this was the "Strappkommando", the punishment battalion. Whoever was assigned to it had to run laps every day, for six whole months, from early morning until late at night, carrying a knapsack containing about four and a half stones of sand. And they had to sing throughout their ordeal. At first glance, it seemed not such a severe punishment, but no one could survive it for six months. Eventually everyone faints, loses consciousness, dies, or simply goes mad.

Is there a crematorium in this place too? This is our first fear, but no one can answer our question. After the roll call we are ordered outside to the meadow behind the block. We are all exhausted and hungry. We don't know why they are letting us rest here. Someone discovers that in the sandy soil beneath our feet there are some wild plants that resemble carrots, which taste bitter. Everyone digs into the soil with their fingers. None of us has a knife or a spoon, because these have been taken from us during the earlier disinfection. Each loss deprives us of the few possessions we have accumulated, penknives or spoons, and even our shaving equipment. We arrived here completely deprived of everything.

Finally, late in the afternoon, a pot of soup is brought out for us, with a hundred plates, and each

one of us receives a bowl of soup. Never has soup been so satisfying as this. After the meal, we are led inside a block, where the biggest surprise awaits us. It is a nicely arranged room, with individual bunks, and a mattress and a blanket on each one. There are also wash rooms, and even special English toilets. Is it really possible? Have we been brought to recover in a sanatorium, after the hellish torments we have suffered so far? After the hot soup, which they gave us last night, with a tiny slice of bread, we now have beds to lie upon. After Auschwitz and the Heinkel factory, our new place seems to us to be a real sanatorium.

We rush to the baths and the toilets, and then lie down to sleep. However, as we doze off, we are woken up and ordered to go to the second hall, to give our personal details. Not our numbers, but surprisingly our names. We are allowed to return to our bunks, to undress and lie down to sleep. But after an hour or two of sleep, we are woken up again. We parade naked before a doctor, and have to show him the palm of our hands. We don't know the purpose of this medical examination, possibly they wanted to get rid of those of us with skin infections? However, we had come from Auschwitz and we were familiar with these bizarre medical examinations, and we knew that as a result, some people disappeared, and did not return. But on this occasion nothing happened. Again, for the third time that night, we are allowed to rest.

At dawn we are woken up for roll call. We form

in groups of five. Always in groups of five. They count us, and check our pockets to see if anyone had stolen a spoon. About eighteen are discovered, resulting in eighteen blows to the miscreant's face. The rest of us haven't been beaten yet, even though we've been here for twenty-four hours.

Then they announce that we are to leave this camp. They give us our morning coffee, and again we are lined up. After walking for about a mile, we reach railway tracks, where there is a long line of freight cars, little more than cattle trucks, open to the sky. After sixty of us are loaded into each wagon, they close the sides on us. We sit down on the cold, wet, coal-strewn floor, and wait for the train, which is still being loaded, to move. We know that no matter which direction they take us, our future will not improve.

## Dachau

FOR TWO DAYS and nights, our journey continued, and during that time we were allowed to eat only once, when the train stopped at one of the large stations. We were given hot soup in paper cups. The warm liquid warmed our frozen limbs, but failed to wake us from our lethargic, exhausted state. Finally, on the morning of the third day of our journey, our train stopped in a forest. The doors were opened and we stumbled out of the carriages. We could hardly move our frozen limbs. It was November 17th. All around us were pine forests covered with sparkling white snow, and in their midst were the railway tracks and our train.

The SS force-marched us as we descended a hill, with their hunting dogs helping them - we'd become used to this violence, and it didn't intimidate us. We tried to guess where we were, and what work we would now be taken to? According to a rumour, this was the last stop on the way to Kaufering, although we had no idea where that was, or in which part of Southern Germany we were in, was it Bavaria or in Tyrol? Only the scenery, the snow covered forests and high peaks indicated that we were somewhere in that region. As usual, we were not allowed to look around us.

We are ordered off the road, and to run along a forest path, made treacherous by being knee-deep in snow. The two days we had spent in the cold of the wagon without food, after the previous three

terrible weeks in the Heinkel factories, have weakened us to the point where we can no longer keep up. Many faint while running, and others are beaten to keep up by the guards. Those who can, continue running, using their remaining energy. In the meantime, we notice on both sides of the road, green wooden huts, and standing in front of them, women of various ages, all dressed in men's striped trousers, the likes of which we hadn't seen since we left Auschwitz. They shiver in the thin material of their trousers. Who knows who these women are? Are they Jewish or Hungarian? And are there children with them?

We thought that we knew everything about Auschwitz, where mass-murder had killed so many millions of women and children, but can't miracles happen, even here? Did they actually kill every mother and every child? Is it possible that any of our families have survived? We couldn't speak to the women, and they made no attempt at calling out to us either, they just stood in silence, wraithlike, with sad faces, looking at us.

We ran on for about two miles until we entered a camp surrounded by a barbed wire fence. But this was unlike any that we had seen before. We looked for the same kind of buildings that we had known in Auschwitz and Oranienburg. But we could only see the roofs of tiny houses, set at a sharp angle, all of them green. It seemed that the accommodation was underground, with only the snow-covered roofs protruding above the surface.

Surrounding us were pine trees, seemingly planted with geometric precision, and within them, the camp formed a kind of meticulously planned square. Under the snow, we came across trunks of fallen pines. It seemed that we were to live in the heart of a forest.

The SS guards inspected us during the inevitable roll call, and we were separated into "barracks". About fifty or sixty people were crammed into each underground bunker, and it was only when we were inside that we noticed that these were dug straight into the earth, without any walls to insulate us from the cold. On both sides of the bunker there were places for us to lie down. The floor was wooden, the damp planks smelling of rot, and there was no straw or mattresses.

We soon discovered that we were in an unfinished camp, and that our task was to complete the construction work. As we became accustomed to our new surroundings, we wondered if we would spend the winter here?

We immediately noticed that there was not even a stove to give us heat, and in the heart of this forest, we had every prospect of freezing in the winter. We desperately needed to wash, but it soon became clear that there was no water supply in the entire camp. We quenched our thirst somehow by melting snow that we scooped from the ground, but what will happen in a few days, when the snow gets dirty? There are not even toilets here, not even a trace of a kitchen, although some say that cooking facilities

are on the way, perhaps in a day or two we may get some hot food. Meanwhile, the whole day is spent preparing our accommodation inside the bunker, and appointing camp leaders. Camp Elders and Kapos appear with clubs in their hands. We can't imagine what will happen next.

The veteran prisoners know how to obtain privileges for themselves with the SS. They are rewarded when they beat us. In the evening, they distribute one slice of bread and a scraping of margarine. At four o'clock in the morning we are woken up. We've spent the entire night without sleep, shivering on the bare earth floor, and that seemed to be our future. Hunger, freezing and lack of sleep would be our daily bread. We would not be able to survive in these conditions for very long. The cold was a frozen fist that gripped our limbs.

In the morning, after the roll call, we were counted and assigned to work commandos. Some were busy covering the roofs with mortar and mud, so that the rain and the melting snow would not penetrate our sleeping quarters. Others uprooted pine trunks, from which we lit a fire in the centre of the underground room, even though the wood was damp. The heat warmed us, but the rising smoke stung our eyes.

Other groups were ordered to build toilets and baths. This work was carried out by workers belonging to the German civilian "Todt" organisation.<sup>43</sup> They

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<sup>43</sup> *Organisation Todt was a civil and military engineering organisation in Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945, named for its founder, Fritz Todt.*

wore brown uniforms with swastika armbands. These German labourers questioned us, asking where we came from, when and why we had been arrested. And when we dared reply, with our stories of Auschwitz and what happened to our families and children, one of them sighed apprehensively,

"God help us if we ever have to answer for all these crimes!"

We become friends with some of them. One sneaks me a newspaper every morning, and we read the news anxiously during our lunch breaks, or in the evening, interpreting the German war announcements, each in his own way, according to his hopes. In fact, the great Anglo-American offensive has begun at Aachen. The war is being fought on the Siegfried Line. The fall of Herstal could bring either our liberation or our death.

At roll call on the second day, Dr. Blaha<sup>44</sup>, the Hauptsturmführer's physician, appeared, and chose six doctors from among our group, and charged us with organising a hospital. I was one of the six. We occupied one of the empty barracks, and we six doctors, with a few of the pharmacists, moved into it. We hung a red cross on the door, and there it was, a hospital! We had no medical equipment, no medicine, but a large number of patients.

There were many cases of pneumonia, due to the cold, following our terrible journey in the open wagons. We laid the patients down in the hut, and

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<sup>44</sup> *Franz Blaha, Czech physician, was forced to conduct experiments, that involved studying the effects of hypothermia in prisoners by freezing them.*

without medicines, the only treatment we could offer was words of encouragement. Dr. Blaha had promised medicines, faithfully assuring us that he would send drugs and medical equipment;

however most of our patients recovered without any special treatment. But as we still didn't have any hot food we gathered pine needles and cooked a kind of hot broth from them, which is how we cured the patients with pneumonia. Later we found out that this is also a useful remedy against diarrhoea.

The first snow is slowly melting, but we still don't have any drinking water. There is only a promise that they will soon install a water pipe into the camp. Thirst plagues us more than hunger, and we can't even give a sip of water to our patients with high fevers. The lack of water lasts for nearly three weeks, and then a pump arrives, which allows us to draw water from a well dug in the forest. A set of cooking utensils for the kitchen is also supplied, and after three weeks, we can prepare hot meals. However, there is still a lot of confusion. We still lack knives, forks and spoons, which again we are promised. The kitchen can no longer cater for two thousand five hundred people, and anyone who receives half a bowl of hot potato soup at least once every two days has to be satisfied.

Slowly the camp is becoming organised. New boilers are installed in the kitchen, carts bring food supplies, and after several weeks, our food is adequate. A sixth of a loaf of bread, a bowl of potato soup, two ounces of margarine, or five ounces of

sausage, and occasionally five ounces of cheese, this is our daily menu. But this diet will not sustain us, as now hard labour begins.

After the construction of the camp is finished, work details are sent outside to two large German factories. One supplies building materials for roads and railways. This was the easiest work, and everyone was happy to be assigned to this, because they laboured only ten hours each day, paving and tarring roads, or carrying wagons full of stones as foundations for railway tracks. But woe betides anyone assigned to the other one, the "Moll" kommando.<sup>45</sup> This workplace was located four miles from our camp, in a vast pine forest. Labourers set out, and after fourteen hours of punishing hard labour they returned, totally exhausted on foot. These slaves carried cement and heavy iron beams for the construction of a huge concrete building, the purpose of which remained a mystery to us. The immense frame, similar to an ocean liner, but five times larger, towered over us, and we had to fill this iron skeleton with concrete. The huge structure swallowed hundreds of wagons of cement each day. It also swallowed hundreds of people, who sacrificed their lives building the monster, workers from our camp, but also others from eleven other camps near Kaufering, workers living in conditions similar to ours, hungry slaves sent there for hard labour.

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<sup>45</sup> This may refer to the notoriously cruel SS camp guard Otto Moll - he had previously committed the most shocking atrocities at Auschwitz, before being posted to Dachau in May 1944.

Two shifts operated at this construction site. The one at night meant almost certain death. At midday, those going there to work were given a bowl of soup, little more than potato peelings in hot water. And with this inadequate sustenance they set out to do the arduous work, in the bitter winter cold, in rags, with only linen or paper to wrap their feet, they are force-marched four miles each morning and night through the forest's icy track.

Cement was everyone's fear. The men collapsed under the weight of the sacks, and those too weak to carry the material were simply beaten to death. At two o'clock, the following morning, totally exhausted, they struggled back to the camp. At least fifty dead bodies returned with them. The SS and the Ukrainians marched ahead of the long rows of crippled labourers, carrying up to forty corpses. Some had been beaten to death while working, while others just fell on the way, when their strength could no longer bear their tortured and weary bodies. And even if they just lagged just a few steps behind, they were beaten to death.

In these circumstances, the battle for life and death continued constantly. Everyone tried to evade the threat of the "Moll" Kommando, each trying to join the easier road and rail construction party. When they were ordered to line up, the stronger and more canny ones pushed the weaker ones to the front to be chosen, and so avoided being sent to the "Moll" site. Those weaker and more prone to illness, were sent there to endure fourteen hours of back-

breaking work carrying sacks of cement, where the "Moll" factory consumed them.

After a few weeks, groups of women arrived. Our ranks had quickly diminished due to the high mortalities of our work at the two factories. The dead had to be replaced with new labour forces. At the hospital, the number of patients increased each day. Instead of the single hut for patients at the beginning, there were now six assigned for our hospital, or as they called it here, the "Reha" (Rehabilitation). But we could not safely keep the most seriously ill patients in that recovery hut for more than four or five days, as the SS constantly examined the patients in the hospital, demanding that we fill the gaps in the depleted "Moll" workers from those lying in the wards. And there is no more soul-destroying an order for a doctor to leave his patients to death.

Only six doctors worked in the "Reha" where we had neither instruments or medicines, although there were more than a hundred qualified doctors available in the camp, who they wastefully sent to labour at the two building sites. It grieved us that each day when we recognised professional colleagues among the corpses brought back from that work. And yet I longed to work outside, without having the terrible responsibility for abandoning my patients to certain death.

In early December, on the night of a great snowstorm, I am woken from my sleep by a loud alarm, and a voice roaring through the camp,

“Doctors and medics to the entrance of the camp!”

We run through the darkness, along the smooth, snow-covered paths. At the camp gates, we are greeted by the hellish glow of fires. An SS guard voice pierces the air,

“Doctors and medics here!”

We run towards the command, where we see a pitiful group of people, frozen, worn out and in deep distress. Women and men are lying on the ground, and moaning. Their language is Hungarian, they beg for water, for warmth. They tell us that in Budapest, Szálasi holds the reins of power.

We are ordered to take these unfortunates to the hospital. They are so weak that we have to carry them on our shoulders throughout the night and house them as well we could in the “Reha”, even though there is no room. There had been no women in our camp until then, and we were forced to lay each of these new admissions on top of our old patients, literally one on top of the other. Women and men together. Poor, half-frozen, dirty and reeking of excrement.

Those of them who can still speak say that they have all been force-marched from Budapest, for three weeks, from November 8th<sup>46</sup>. They were herded like sheep across Hungary and Austria into Southern Germany. Many die a short time later, before we can do anything for them. They suffer from high fevers, many lie unconscious in a state of

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<sup>46</sup> The distance from Budapest to Dachau is over 400 miles.

coma. We cannot determine whether they have infections or are just exhausted beyond all measure? Only the stench that emanates from them tells us that almost all of them suffer from diarrhoea.

In the morning, we get a clear picture of what had actually happened that night. A large crowd of deportees from Budapest had arrived. One thousand two hundred women and one thousand three hundred men. Their numbers imposed a huge burden on us, especially upon us doctors. There was no place for them to sleep. One hundred and twenty people were squeezed into one small hut. The kitchen, which had barely been able to feed the existing camp residents, barely equipped to serve fifty people, was now packed with one hundred starving souls.

Due to the lack of water, we were unable to provide hot food. The barracks were unable to house them. Our supplies had declined greatly, and we only received hot food every two or three days. Voluntarily, we gave up our own ration of soup for the newly arrived women, all of whom were famished and on the verge of physical collapse. But the most serious task fell upon us, the doctors.

Three quarters of our new arrivals had severe intestinal problems. We had to treat them somehow, struggling with the lack of medicines and equipment. Within a few days, the diarrhoea epidemic spread throughout the camp, infecting the elderly patients, and then us doctors. By the following week, there was hardly anyone in the

camp who had not fallen ill. There were not enough toilets, and in any case people vomiting blood did not have the strength to crawl to them, they simply relieved themselves where they lay. We tried confining the incontinent to the toilet area, however this was impossible, especially at night, and soon the entire camp became awash with excrement. Until then, we had been swallowing snow instead of the piped water, but from then on that became impossible.

We often cursed the moment when we had chosen to study medicine, as now it imposed an unbearable weight, because we were forced to witness the death throes of hundreds of people helplessly. We couldn't even console the surviving wailing women. We were also ill, we simply had no strength or indeed time, for instead of treating the sick, we were totally occupied in evacuating the dead. We begged the SS commander to obtain several thousand Sulphaline tablets urgently, but it was two weeks later before we were supplied two thousand of the alternative Elaudron tablets,<sup>47</sup> too late for half the camp population who had already died during that terrible epidemic. With the Elaudron we somehow managed to stop the contagion.

Each patient received two tablets, the most serious cases were given four.

The Hungarian women who had brought the

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<sup>47</sup> *Sulphaline and Elaudron, were groundbreaking antibacterial treatments in the era before modern antibiotics like penicillin became mass-produced.*

contamination with them, gradually introduced a little colour into the life at the camp. At first their barracks were unfenced, and the doctors in particular were able to talk with them. They told us about the mass deportation of the Jews of Budapest, and the horrors of their three-week long march. They, in turn, learned about the horrors of Auschwitz from us. They asked about their relatives from rural towns, or about their husbands who had been taken to labour camps, whether we had met them in Auschwitz, or in the other camps?

However, after two weeks most of the women disappeared, leaving only a few hundred. They lived in three blocks that were surrounded by barbed wire, and from then on we could only see them through this impenetrable barrier when we went out to work. They were also forced to labour in the same inhuman conditions in which we worked.

When I saw their suffering, the terrible filth in which they lived, and the gruelling work they were forced to do during that devastating winter,<sup>48</sup> I thought that it was better that my family had been killed in Auschwitz, because they would not have endured this punishing routine in any way, especially my daughters, who would not have survived the cold. And the freezing Bavarian winter was only just beginning, and had already claimed so many lives.

Our main hope now came from reading the

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<sup>48</sup> *Temperatures regularly fell below zero, often as low as -30°C during the winter of 1944. Prisoners, wearing inadequate clothes, were forced to stand in freezing conditions for several hours.*

newspapers. The German papers naturally refuted Churchill's claim that the war would end by Christmas. However, we preferred to believe the English leader, and waited in hopeful anticipation for the holiday. But the Allies failed to break the German defence at Aachen. And though the Germans resentfully admitted to minor territorial losses, they greatly exaggerated their small victories.

We knew that only a sudden leap forward could bring peace. Christmas Day was approaching and there was still no sign of Churchill's decisive victory for which we had been eagerly awaiting. For some reason the Russians, too, were slow in liberating Warsaw.<sup>49</sup>

From the Balkans the Red Army is slowly approaching towards the west. The ring of encirclement is still quite wide, but the air attacks are repeated every day, and even here in Southern Germany, air raid sirens are frequently heard. American planes in their hundreds fly noisily over our heads. And in those silver birds, bringing destruction to our enemy, we see the harbingers of our freedom, but, alas, the road to liberation is still far away!

Instead of the longed-for peace and freedom that we are promised at Christmas, we are disheartened by news of the success of a German counter-attack. The newspaper headlines shout with triumphant

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<sup>49</sup> *The Russians deliberately delayed liberating Warsaw in order to weaken Polish resistance. The Red Army only entered Warsaw in January 1945, after the Nazis had crushed Polish fighters.*

glee over reports from the front, writing arrogantly that the initiative, which had been in the enemy's hands since Stalingrad, has again become a German success<sup>50</sup>. But we know that these boasts are their last dying breaths. Nevertheless, we know that if the war continues for months, or even just weeks, it will mean our certain death.

Our worn out frozen bodies, the starving and sick, forced to work all night, will not be able to survive the winter in those bunkers dug in the cold ground. Our numbers are reducing daily. Hardly anyone that we arrived with is left alive. Old friends, with whom we set out on our continuous journey of hardship, have all already found their rest in the forest, in a mass grave.

The work of the SS Death's Head units grows without cessation. Now a new curse visits us. At the end of December, several hundred Jewish prisoners from Lithuania are brought to us from a neighbouring camp, and they are exhausted almost to death. The SS medical officer, Dr. Blaha, houses them in our barracks in such a way that every hut accommodates a few of the newcomers. After a few days we understood the reason for this – lice have been introduced into the camp, by infected Lithuanians. We had not yet encountered this scourge – in Auschwitz there were constant checks for lice, and our clothes were frequently disinfected,

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<sup>50</sup> *On 16th December 1944, the Germans launched a counter attack through the Ardennes forest. Known as 'The Battle of the Bulge', it successfully held up the Allied advance through Northern Europe for about a month.*

so we arrived at Dachau without infection; and although the Budapest women and men brought dysentery, they were not infected with lice. Now we discovered the worst of plagues.

After two weeks, Dr. Blaha asked us, with a mocking smile in his usual, measured soldierly style, “Perlauszt?” (Lice?), we could only silently confirm, “Yes”. Damned monster, your accommodation plan worked, for in your mind we are all lice.

The infection made no distinction between doctors and patients, between men and women, between those who bathed frequently and those who, after exhausting labour, just lay on their beds unwashed – we were all covered with lice. It was impossible to protect ourselves from the plague. Ten times every day we undressed and picked off every louse from our clothes and bodies, but after a few moments we were crawling with them again. I never knew that there were so many species of lice in this world. On black clothes, lice become black, on lighter coloured clothes they become light. They irritated and tormented us.

Before, in the crowded bunkers we could not rest properly, and it was only thanks to exhaustion following work, that we were able to doze for an hour or two, but now, with the lice, we didn’t have a moment’s respite. In Auschwitz, I had always thought of killing myself out of utter despair, but here I would rather choose death as an escape from the lice.

## Epidemic

WITH THE APPEARANCE of lice, we knew in advance that after a short incubation period the horror of all wars and all prisons throughout the world would appear, typhus<sup>51</sup>. The Lithuanians told us that the camp from which they had been transferred had been quarantined due to the spread of the disease. After travelling for eighteen days they arrived with us, bringing the infection. It seemed clear, the SS wanted to spread typhus among us as well, and after sixteen days, a typhoid epidemic broke out. Blaha and his staff went to the camp every day, but abstemiously did not enter the hospital. They ordered us, doctors to speak with them in the open air. They were afraid of the pestilence, and stood at a safe distance to hear of its progress.

We had tried to hide the first typhoid cases, because we knew that if we were quarantined and no longer be able to work, our food rations, which were already meager, would be reduced even further. In addition to the terrible disease, we would starve to death. We wanted to protect ourselves from this new death penalty.

But we could only hide news of the epidemic from the block elders for a few days, because by then most of the camp was infected. Healthy

<sup>51</sup> As Zyklon B was in short supply the SS relied on diseases such as typhus to kill as many inmates as possible. The phrase “Ein Laus - Dein Tod!” (“One louse – your death”) was a common cynical phrase.

prisoners lived in the few barracks that were free of infection. However, each day we were forced to use additional barracks for the needs of the sick. The first cases of the outbreak had not even been treated, when a new stream of infected patients appeared.

When the numbers of the infected decreased for a few days, we hoped that the worst of the epidemic had subsided, however, the next day it flared up again, and we were overwhelmed with new patients. We tried to eliminate the lice. We evacuated block after block and crowded the occupants into other, clean, huts. In the evacuated blocks, we plugged the cracks and crevices with paper and disinfected them with chemicals. We took everyone, including the sick, to the newly installed water tap, and we washed them thoroughly, and after shaving their hair, we disinfected their bodies with sulphur. This was effective against the lice. But the journey from the block to the place of disinfection and back, barefoot and naked in the bitter winter's snow that February, was not without danger, and almost half of the patients died as a result of this extreme treatment, ordered by Dr. Blaha and his callous administrator Dr. Pai Miklos, a captured medical officer of the Czechoslovak army, who didn't use the privilege of his position to help his fellow prisoners. Quite the opposite, he ingratiated himself to the SS by enthusiastically carrying out their most sadistic orders.

Around mid-February, I also fell ill. I recognised the symptoms of the disease in others, and when I

lay with a fever of over forty-two degrees, I also developed severe bronchitis, I knew I had not escaped infection, even though, at home the previous May, I had given myself a typhus vaccination. In the past, I had only observed this terrible disease as a doctor, now I saw it on my own skin. Life in the "typhoid fever" block was hellish. Ninety-five percent of the patients spent several days in a fever. Almost every hour one of them would die.

Although, living in the extermination camps, I had already come to terms with death, the way the patients were transported filled me with horror. The "Totenkommando" (Death Squad) would appear, stripping the corpses naked, because even those rags that covered their bodies had to be recovered by the SS. The garments of the dead, the shoes and clothing, had to tally exactly with the deceased wearers.

A source of the death commando's profits came from removing a good pair of shoes from the feet of a dying person, and replacing it with a worn-out shoe from one of the living prisoners, who would earn an extra ration of bread and margarine for this swap. And despite the hunger that raged in the camp, everyone willingly gave up their rations in order to get a good shoe.

After they had undressed the dead person, the camp's "Dentist" appeared and examined the mouth of the deceased. He pulled out any gold teeth, which were handed over to the SS. Then the men of the death squad carried the deceased by his hands and

feet, dragging his corpse on the ground where they placed it on a small cart, with twenty or so other bodies, that were taken to the morgue.

When enough corpses were piled up, they were taken to the forest and buried in a mass grave, which had previously been dug by the Totenkommando, who were all doctors. Their work was easier than carrying cement bags, but mentally it was soul destroying. Many times I warned Dr. Nussbaum, a doctor-friend from Kolozsvár, who was the head of the “Totenkommando”<sup>52</sup>, that I would die quite happily, but I asked him to promise that he would not drag my head on the floor when he took my body out of the hut. My poor friend kept promising me, until one day he was laid down next to me, with typhoid fever accompanied by very severe pneumonia. He was so seriously ill that we all thought that he too would be placed on the same wagon in which he had dragged so many of his friends on their last journey, but in the end he recovered, and we continued to be together until we were released and returned home.

Over the next few weeks, one after another of my friends collapsed and died. Occupants of the bed next to me in the hospital changed several times. In place of the dead person, a new patient would immediately be laid next to me. That’s how my good friend, Dr. Tibor Remta died. He was a urologist

<sup>52</sup> Totenkommando - a major branch of the Nazi Party's paramilitary Schutzstaffel (SS) organisation. It was responsible for administering the concentration camps and extermination camps.

from Budapest, and the assistant to Professor Ellish; then there was also old Miklós Englaj, a man from Baczek, whom we nicknamed “the old Comitatchi” because of his sympathy for the partisans. We also lost the famous builder Erwin Kuitner, a member of the Hungarian nobility, and Misha Goebbels, the Dutch singer. I cannot remember more, there were so many.

A general phenomenon was that the patients, in the fever of their nightmares, would make imaginary journeys. They would often call out the names of their relatives, and even visit their loved ones, from whom they had been separated for so long. Some would remember journeys to America; others would travel by plane to London, from where they would return with cigarettes and alcohol, and in their delirium, they searched for those fantasy cigarettes in their beds. In addition to the high fever, lack of appetite and constant diarrhoea, the disease was accompanied by sinister side effects, mainly nightmares, hallucinations and illusions of a split personality.

During my illness, when I had coughing fits, I became convinced that it was my alter ego, the self within me, and I would often rebuke that imaginary doppelgänger with,

“Well, my dear, you’re done with your coughing, now let me sleep another five days!”

Anyone who remained alive after a week, usually recovered, but most died after only four days. The feverish state lasted for as much as two weeks, and

was followed by diarrhoea, and anyone who suffered that during typhus was doomed to die, since we received no treatment, either for typhus or the diarrhoea. Everyone was left to their own fate, and the doctor in me found it interesting to observe that those who appeared to be stronger, died in higher percentages than those who were weak and thin. The cause of death was usually prolonged heart failure. The disease attacked the heart muscles. Meningeal irritations, nightmares, and deafness were the side effects. Many suffered from deafness long after they had recovered.

At the beginning of April the epidemic subsided. Those who hadn't died from typhus died of hunger during their days of convalescence. In the meantime a strict quarantine had been imposed on our camp, since most of us were bedridden and unable to work. The SS provided inadequate food, instead of an eighth of a loaf of bread as before, we now received one loaf of bread a day, which had to be shared by eighteen people, it didn't even amount to a single slice per person. The soup we were given at midday was nothing but water, as our captors didn't even add potato peelings.

Hunger had reached indescribable proportions. Weakened by disease, we lay on our beds, without the strength even to walk. We couldn't sleep either, and by sunrise we just thought of the hours that would have to pass until noon, when we would be rewarded with that meagre soup, with which we might be lucky enough to get a handful of potato

peelings. We examined each other's portion of soup, and envied the lucky ones, whose tin plate had a tiny slice of potato shining on it.

"You lucky one!" cried the whining voices, "I never get that!"

In our starvation our legs had started to swell. I watched as someone eating with his father suddenly averted his head, so that his father would not see the extra food that he consumed. One welcome day his father bowed his head and died.

A little boy came up to me and joyfully announced that his father was dead, immediately adding,

"Mr Uncle Doctor, today I will have my father's portion!"

The little boy was unable to understand the tragedy that had befallen him, and could only think of his father's death as being the good fortune that he had been lucky enough to double his portion of food.

The distress of hunger gave rise to a peculiar psychosis. Men began to fantasise about preparing meals. Large groups gathered and argued loudly about what they would eat if they were free, and what we would cook for ourselves. Over long hours they would argue about whether onions or garlic should be added to a particular dish. Each remembered how his wife or mother would prepare it. As for me, even when I was extremely hungry, my imagination could not reach higher than a hot morning coffee with fresh bread. However, at the

top of my wish list was a bathtub full of hot water for bathing. The reason for these longings were the lice, which continued to swarm over us in their thousands.

On April 15th, a truly inhuman selection was held. Those unfortunates who were chosen were so weakened by typhus and hunger that it was impossible to assume that they would ever recover. Out of two thousand five hundred people, only eight hundred of us remained, and of these five hundred were selected. We were stripped almost naked, and I was among them.

One hundred of the weakest were loaded onto a single truck. We were stacked one on top of each other like sacks of flour, while the remaining four hundred walked on foot following the cart, which was pulled by a tractor. This is how we were taken out of the camp.

Since Auschwitz, we already knew what the selection of the weak meant, and we were certain that we were being taken to an extermination camp, or even that we might be killed on the way, in the forest. This is certainly what my “doctor friends”, Dr. Pai Miklos and Dr. Chamo Dzhu, who conducted the selection, explained. They said goodbye to me, saying,

“Don’t worry, if you are killed now, our turn will surely come in two or three weeks.” And with these “comforting” words, we set off. The tractor dragged us through Landsberg, the nearest town, a few miles from the camp. For the first time in months, I saw

small children, who contemptuously shouted after us: “We know you’re Jews!” They knew who we were, infants infected forever by the ancient blood libel of a diseased society.

Our transport advanced less than seven miles and turned towards a forest camp similar to the one we had come from. “Lager 4, Flecktyphus”<sup>53</sup>, was the sign that greeted us at the entrance to the camp. They lined us up in groups of five, and marched us inside. We were greeted by doctors, among them some of my old friends, such as Dr. Aleks Miklos the famous neurologist from Kolozsvár. From them we learned that this was a “convalescence camp”, where, as there was no work, the food provided was inadequate, and therefore no one recovered. About three hundred people were dying of hunger every day.

My colleagues immediately assigned me as a doctor in one of the barracks, where each block was headed by a medically qualified prisoner. We could not help our patients much, and the best that we could prescribe was the bread and the hot water that they called soup.

Here I met one of my best friends of my youth, Mor Bargar, a fellow doctor from Nagyszól whom I had not seen for twenty years. We were very happy to see each other again, even though our reconciliation took place under such bleak circumstances. Mor had spent a few days in Auschwitz, and had then been transported to Warsaw, where, after a

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<sup>53</sup> *Flecktyphus* is an acute disease, transmitted by lice.

few months, he was transferred here. I told him about Auschwitz, and he reluctantly began to accept the truth. He had only spent four days at the camp, and didn't see the gas chambers or the crematories. He couldn't believe the horrors until I had told him everything, of being in Auschwitz for six months, and about the murder of my family. It shocked him when I revealed my suicidal thoughts – for by then I didn't care if I lived or died.

Dr. Bargar told me about the horror called the “Warsaw Road.” In midsummer, as the Russians approached Warsaw, the Germans evacuated the Polish capital. They also transported the prisoners from the Ghetto. First, they marched them on foot by day and night for three days, without food or water; the SS amused themselves by leading thirsty people to a puddle of water, and forbidding them from drinking from it. They teased them, saying that it was “suspected of typhus.” Anyone who could not resist, and crouched down to quench his thirst was shot. Like hunters stalking, they hunted their human prey. Finally they reached a single railway track, where their prisoners were packed into freight cars. One hundred and twenty people crowded into each wagon during those hot August days.

The journey lasted for sixteen days. They were not given water at any point during the journey, and people collapsed. One hundred died of thirst. The SS escorts offered water in exchange for gold, and those with gold teeth allowed them to be pulled out of their mouths to receive water. Those who did not

allow the extractions were in extreme danger, because other prisoners murdered them, in order to pull out their teeth, simply for drops of moisture. Hearing of this appalling sacrifice totally shocked us.

Our hunger was more terrible than the lack of food in Camp II, because the method of extermination here was not gas, or electricity, but starvation. And they achieved their goal. Kapos came to our blocks every hour to collect the corpses. My body had become bloated, my legs felt as thick as an elephant's, and I could barely crawl. We had received no protein, no fat, and no sugar. Our muscles had wasted to the point of exhaustion, and only water remained in our bodies. When I examined the occupants of my hut, I could predict when they would die. I gave myself only another eight days of life.

A result of the hunger that plagued my fellow prisoners was that, at the risk of electrocution, they reached out their hands through the barbed wire to pluck blades of grass that grew just beyond the edge of the fence, which they ate with great appetite. If they touched the electrified wire, they would convulse and swell up on the spot, and if the SS sentry had enough charity to end their agony, he would shoot them. But hunger was so great that they took this risk for a handful of green grass.

Meanwhile, air battles continued above our heads. American bombers, seemingly in their hundreds and thousands flew overhead, probably heading for nearby Munich. Hardly any German

aircraft came out to attack them, and the few that did engage rapidly plummeted down in flames.

At night, wonderful firework displays would take place in the sky, colourful illuminations as beautiful as in a fairy tale, but what did they mean to us, doomed to die of starvation? Newspapers were smuggled to us from Landsberg, and we knew that we were surrounded by the Allies, but we had very real fears that the Americans would not rescue us in time.

On April 25th, events unfolded with dramatic speed. A Swiss car, painted white, emblazoned with a red cross, appeared at the gate of our camp. From it emerged three Red Cross officials. After a few minutes, our leader among the prisoners, Dr. Alekash, was called to the SS headquarters, where he was given a box full of medicines; these included vitamins. The Red Cross left with the promise that they would return in a few days and bring with them greater quantities of Swiss medicines.

Again, anxiety consumed us, a fear of disappointment, we had come face to face with a neutral committee from Switzerland, who were able to observe us and, although they were not permitted to speak to us, their presence was a reassuring sign that they knew about our existence. We hoped that the SS men would not dare to kill us, and we hoped that our liberation would take place in a few days, if hunger didn't kill us. We knew that we were surrounded by a tightening ring of Allied forces, and that the American liberators were near.

## Uprising

ON THE MORNING of April 26th, Dr. Blaha, the SS doctor, appeared in the camp. He issued an order that everyone who was able to walk should prepare to move. He announced that we would have to walk about forty miles as the camp was being evacuated.

He told us that at five o'clock in the afternoon, we would leave, and that if he found anyone remaining in their huts, able to walk, he would shoot them on the spot. This caused great fear. People didn't know whether it was better to begin walking forty miles, in severe ill health, exhausted, hungry, with swollen feet wearing wooden clogs, and with the risk of being shot if they fell behind, or whether it was better to remain in the camp, knowing what would happen to the sick, or anyone unable to walk.

The confusion was also increased by the fact that at about nine o'clock we noticed that Camp 3, which was about a mile away, was on fire, apparently started by the SS. We could see the flames, and the smell of smoke stung our nostrils. We were sure that our camp would also be set on fire.

I could not undertake walking forty miles. I knew that with my swollen legs, I would not be able to walk even one mile. I would fall behind and be shot. So I decided that no matter what, I would stay where I was.

My friends Dr. Berger and my brother-in-law

Dr. Zoltan Simon<sup>54</sup> were concerned, but since they had not suffered the effects of serious illness, they had assumed that I might be able to stand the test of walking; but they didn't want to abandon me, and so they loyally resolved to stay with me in the camp.

Of the four thousand camp inmates, perhaps three hundred people left on foot. Later we learned that they had all been killed. At 2 p.m., more turmoil broke out in the camp. Prisoners stormed the kitchen, emptied the storerooms, broke into the potato cellar and stole everything; one even kidnapped a Kapo. The amazing thing was that the SS were present at the robbery and did not fire into the crowd. Was the end really that close?

In the afternoon, at about three o'clock, an SS commander gave the order that everyone should leave the camp immediately and assemble at the edge of the forest, about half a mile behind the camp. The Kapos appeared, brandishing their clubs, and literally beat us out of the barracks. Everyone scrambled through a cut in the barbed wire fence. We had to say goodbye to the sick, and also to those who were still recovering, but could not walk. We left with sadness. It was a disturbing and oppressive feeling, leaving the barracks, without being able to care for the remaining patients who desperately needed help. They cried out to us,

"Take us with you. Don't leave us like this!"

But we couldn't give them any help as the

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<sup>54</sup> Zoltan Simon was the brother of Bibi Simon, the wife of Dr. Berner's brother, Avraham, both were already safe in Palestine.

Kapo's clubs beat us mercilessly, and we had to run frantically, to save our lives. With great difficulty we somehow dragged ourselves across the frozen earth to the railway line, about a mile away. Here the SS made us sit on the ground, to wait for a train that would pick us up. That evening a locomotive with several cars, steamed to a halt in front of us, and on its engine the hated name "Moll A" was painted. We grimly remembered the enormous construction that we had built for "Moll", and we imagined that we were being led into the great bunker excavated beneath that monstrosity of a building, to be gassed. Auschwitz remained very much alive in our memories, and we could not think of anything else except of being exterminated.

The Kapos and the SS beat us with their clubs and rifle butts to hurry us to board the train, but the vast majority of us had no strength to get on. Finally, they managed to heave over a hundred people into one carriage, crowded like salted fish in a barrel.

Darkness fell, and the train started to move through the Bavarian forests. We felt as if we were on our last journey. We said our farewells, and became resigned to our deaths. Knowing that our families had experienced the same fate as us robbed us of any will to live. It did not occur to us that this journey might be different. The train travelled for about an hour or two, then suddenly stopped. Above our heads, we heard the drone of passing planes, and the thunder of a huge explosion. Then it seemed as if cannon shells were hitting the roofs of our train.

We tried to guess whether this was an attack by the Allies, or by the Germans, seeking to eliminate us once and for all.

When the air raid was over, our train circled past the “Moll” building, and continued on its journey. We breathed a sigh of relief, again hoping that the end had not yet come upon us. It was close to midnight when our train stopped in a forest. They opened our wagons and allowed us out into the fresh air. They lined us up in groups of five, and by the light of the moon, we were marched towards a destination obscured in the mist, along an unknown forest road.

We walked for several miles. Occasionally the sound of rifle shots rang out, killing our comrades who had been too weak to continue. We arrived at the gate of a camp. It all looked so familiar. All the camps were built to the same hellish layout. We learned that we were in Camp 1, one of the eleven satellite camps in the vicinity of Kaufering.

We had not travelled far from our last prison with its blocks built below the earth. They led us into this new gaol, lined us up again, and arranged us in blocks. Our group was put into a barrack hut, in pitch darkness. However, when we asked to lie down on the bunks, tired and exhausted, we were immediately kicked and beaten, as the block was already full of people. Fighting continued intermittently until morning, and no one slept. At dawn we were moved into an empty block.

Here too the bunkers were dug into the ground.

They reappointed the block leaders, and we set about reorganising our lives. We spent the hours before noon at roll call, where our numbers were registered, and where we were assigned to work details. At noon, we received a meal, green pea soup, the kind of which we had not tasted in a year. In the afternoon, there was a “Liquidation sale”, in the kitchen and in the warehouses<sup>55</sup>. The Kapos reappeared among us, like lunatics, raging, and clubbing us to leave the block.

Once more, the order was given to march, and again the great army of sick and exhausted prisoners set off, in a mournful procession. They led us back to exactly the same place where we had arrived that night, the forest, where a train was already waiting. They piled us into its carriages, and we didn’t care where we were being taken, as we were too exhausted and near to death.

The train continued to travel through the night, but we had the feeling, that we were being driven from place to place without any clear destination. At about nine o’clock in the morning, we halted at a station at Schwabhausen, and a few minutes later a German military train halted next to ours, seeking a safe refuge from aerial attack by stopping next to us.

Allied planes appeared and began strafing the military wagons. Two carriages in our train were hit, and about two hundred of us were injured or killed.

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<sup>55</sup> *The Dachau Uprising was a revolt of prisoners, citizens of Dachau and deserters on 28th April 1945.*

They were mainly women. I never discovered where they were from. During the air raid we jumped out of the carriages and sought shelter in the forest next to the tracks. The SS men, who had also left the train, watched us with loaded pistols, to ensure that we did not escape. After the raid, they ordered us back into our carriages, however the train could not move, because both locomotives, ours and the military engine, had been damaged and were on fire. We stood at the station and tried to guess what would happen to us.

Our main concern was hunger. We had not received any provisions for the journey, and we were still eating the green pea soup from yesterday. Less than an hour later, there was another air raid. The American planes had returned to attack the military train again. This time SS even forbade us from taking cover by seeking shelter in the forest, and we were forced to remain on the train during the attack. We lay flat on the planks of the car, believing that if we closed our eyes, the bullets would not hit us. Many of us closed our eyes forever, as the bullets failed to discriminate their target.

After a few moments, which seemed like eternity to us, the attack ended, and we were allowed to get out of the cars and sit in a ditch near the tracks. As the morning progressed, we witnessed strange activity. The SS guards who were on duty in the German ammunition train, together with the SS officers in charge of us, broke into the food wagons attached to the military train, and stole any food and

drink they found there, and within half an hour they were completely drunk. They paid no attention to us, and even made fun of us as drunkards do.

At noon, they even allowed us to go in groups, accompanied by an SS guard, to a nearby village and fetch water for ourselves and our comrades to drink. We were ordered to return with water for the wounded among us, who were lying with broken limbs at the edge of the forest. We had no bandages, but from worn-out cotton garments, we made pressure bandages and cut branches from trees to make splints for the broken bones. This *al fresco* surgery lasted until late in the afternoon.

We lay in the trench, exhausted by hunger to the point of fainting, until we noticed that the drunken SS guards had disappeared, in fact we were wandering, unguarded at the edge of the forest, completely left to our own devices.

Suddenly, one of our group continued the thieving that the SS had begun earlier. They broke into the food wagons that had been left unlocked, and loaves of bread wrapped in cellophane, cheeses, and jams appeared. People crowded around the military food wagons, however anyone lucky enough to steal a loaf of bread was immediately attacked by the crowd of starving people trying to kill him for his prize.

People went wild in their madness, it was worse than hell. The meeker one – I was among them – kept clear, because we feared that the SS only allowed our plunder to cover up their own robbery.

We were frightened that on their return we would be punished.

Meanwhile, the locomotive engine continued to burn. We became alarmed that the fire would reach the ammunition wagons and the explosion would blast us all from the world. Suddenly that evening, as darkness enveloped us, the prisoners abandoned the wagons, and began to walk away from the railway tracks, through the small forest back to the nearest village. We slowly realised that we were free, and that no one was watching us anymore. Apparently the Americans were very close, which is why the SS had let us go, and had fled in their desperation to avoid capture.

We fell into each other's arms, crying, and with tears, we thanked the Holy One, blessed be He, for having liberated us. It was April 27th, and I remembered that the following morning, the 28th, was my wife's birthday, and she had been dead for a year. What would freedom be without her and my dear daughters?

We walked through the small forest, down into a valley's plain. We saw two rural settlements, the domes of their churches beckoning us. We walked towards them but had not gone more than a hundred steps, when someone, looking back, shouted,

"Something's wrong! SS soldiers have appeared. Turn back. They'll shoot us!"

I burst out at him angrily, he was one of the corpse bearers in the camp,

"Shut up, Totenkapo! Always cawing like a crow!"

Nevertheless, I turned my head, to see if he was right, and at that moment, there was a rapid volley of gunfire, and I felt a sharp blow to my shin, then a sharp pain pierced me, and I immediately fell to the ground. I screamed in pain. My friends also fell to the ground. The bullet had hit my right shin. The bullets continued to whistle over our heads, and as I felt the terrible pain, I told myself that tomorrow was my wife's birthday, and if everything is over for me, perhaps, at last we will be reunited? Better yet, maybe dying will be the real liberation! After that, there was silence. My friends helped me to my feet, and I began to hobble, leaning on them. No bones were broken, we decided, and I only felt a sharp, burning pain in my shin, and warm blood flowing over my foot.

We tried to continue on the road in the direction of the village, but again bullets were fired at us from all sides, and again fell to the ground. From the flashes of the shots, we determined that we were surrounded on all sides, and in the twilight, that they were shooting at us wildly. Instinctively, we covered our heads with the tin plates we had in our hands, seeking shelter from the encircling death. For a few moments, this wild shooting continued, and then silence prevailed. We raised our heads cautiously and looked around. We saw that the men of our groups that had gone ahead were running in panic in the direction of the two villages. We also

got up and cautiously returned to the abandoned train carriages.

As we approached, we saw the SS sentries standing on the tracks. They started shooting again, but this time only in the air. As we approached, they shouted at us,

“Why do you want to escape now? Tomorrow you’ll be free! We will take you to Dachau. The Swiss Red Cross is waiting for you there, and they will receive you and bring you to Switzerland.”

However, we didn’t believe them. We thought that this was nothing more than another cunning ruse. Nevertheless, we got back into the wagons. It was very difficult for me to climb up, but my fellow passengers in the carriage, oblivious to my cries of pain, somehow pulled me into the carriage again. The carts were open to the sky, and we were soon soaked by the cold April rain, and shivered in our wet clothes.

The train stood there for hours, until we no longer believed it would ever move again, as the locomotive had been damaged in the two air raids that morning. The night was getting dark, the rain had stopped, and in the vicinity of the railway station, there were hundreds of barrels of gasoline set on fire by the SS. Again, we continued to fear that the ammunition train next to us would explode, and that the blast would finish us off. We had already risked everything, we even had a brief taste of freedom, but now we were facing death again, wet to the bone, and with bullets hitting us.

The sight of the dead surrounding us almost made no impression, we had just left hundreds of our comrades behind in the forest, some wounded, but many killed by SS bullets. Near the railway tracks were the bodies of comrades who had died and been thrown from the carriages. Many of those crowded into the carriages were fighting the bitter taste of death, many with high fevers, still sick with typhus. There were also a large number of wounded. After a few hours, a replacement engine arrived, to which our train was connected, and we steamed off, into the dark night, towards an unknown destination.

That terrible journey continued until the next afternoon. The train had taken us through strange, unknown landscapes. We were not given food or water. Only the rain moistened our lips, which by then were roughened and blistered by the heat, as it fell on us all the way, without pause, as if the forces of nature are also attacking us.

At each intermediate station, dozens of our dead were unloaded from the train and dumped at the side of the tracks. And as our train did not stop at station platforms, but in unsigned sidings beyond, we didn’t know where we were. However, the scenery, the high mountains and the pine forests that adorned the view gave reason to assume that we were still somewhere in the south, in Tyrol.

## Liberation

ON SATURDAY AFTERNOON, the 28th of April, our train stopped and remained still for hours. We didn't care where we were, and even though the SS guard of our carriage had abandoned his watch several hours earlier, we continued to lie in complete exhaustion on the wet floor of the roofless carriage. It was nearly five p.m., when there was a loud disturbance outside. We saw people getting off the next door carriage, all walking in the same direction. Following the same herd instinct, we decided to join them too. We clambered down from our carriage and headed in the same direction. We walked a few hundred meters when we saw that our friends were forming up in the usual fives, under the order of an SS man. A rumour spread, that we were being taken to the main camp, at Dachau.

We pass through a beautiful and undamaged city, stopping in every square and looking around helplessly as we are lost. We ask civilians, who are watching us with wary expressions, for directions to the concentration camp. From their instructions, after about an hour and a half, we reach the camp gate with its welcoming inscription: "Arbeit macht frei!" the name to the entrance to Hell.

Forty Red Cross cars, all of which have the inscription: "International Society of the Red Cross", are parked in the square in front of the entrance to the camp. Standing beside them, in a group, are about thirty Swiss Red Cross officials. Are

the SS men telling the truth this time, and are the Swiss Red Cross cars really waiting just for us?

After a long wait outside, the concentration camp gate opens and in rows of five, as we are accustomed, we march to the parade ground. We stand in disciplined lines in front of the inner entrance, waiting for some block elder to deign to count us.

Meanwhile we see gangs of SS men forming up in front of the guardhouse. We notice their shiny new uniforms and boots, as if they were preparing to leave. It seems that our hour of liberation has come. The SS ignore us. We are shocked by how young many of them are. We later discover that there is an SS school within the camp, and these boys are surely the cadets in training to be the future sadistic executioners and torturers.

When we are finally allowed to enter the inner camp, the Kapo and the block elder counts us, and leads us to the disinfection bath. This is urgently needed, as we are all still infested with lice. But I did not reach the baths, because a doctor and some French prisoner medics appear, calling the wounded to stand aside. Fearing extermination, I didn't want to be counted among the wounded. But in the end, they persuade me that it will be better for me to go to the hospital, and not to stand outside in the cold, since the disinfection process will last the whole night, as there are three thousand five hundred of us.

I can't examine the severity of my wound to my ankle, except for the blood that was flowing from it.

So I lie down on a stretcher and let them take me for treatment. Swiss cars are parked in front of the camp gate, and this reassures me. I no longer anticipate the possibility of starvation and death.

I was carried into to a hospital barracks, where someone recorded my name, and the number tattooed on my arm, and then I was given a special disinfection. They shaved me, put me under a shower, disinfected me and dressed me in clean striped clothes. Then they took my suit, my shoes, and my precious pocketknife, and laid me down on a straw mattress on the floor, in a large, cold hall, with several hundred others.

Shivering with cold and high fever, I waited for morning. My shin burned. I could see the nature of the wound, my ankle had been pierced, but the bullet had gone straight through, its exit point was clear. If I had not turned when the shots were fired, the bullet would have hit my peritoneum and gallbladder, causing certain death. Before noon, they stitched my wound, and afterwards I also received a portion of soup, which, after four days of hunger, I gulped down with a ravenousness appetite.

I spoke with wounded comrades, and we shared our experiences of our journeys. We believed that the Americans must be very close to us, since throughout the night, as we lay on the floor in the large hall, we heard a constant barrage of cannons and machine guns, so close that we were convinced that the explosions were taking place within the camp itself.

At about midday, on April 29th, 1945, one of the Italian medics suddenly burst into the hall and shouted with great excitement,

“The Americans have arrived! There’s white flag on the guard tower.”

Suddenly, almost as a release from the unbearable tension, a mighty shout of “Hurrah!” bursts from the throats of thousands of prisoners. From our hospital beds, we can’t see the wonderful spectacle, the moment when a few heroic American soldiers enter and liberate Dachau concentration camp. Only our cheers echo from the walls of the hospital, punctuated by the sound of an occasional rifle shot.

Our excitement reaches its peak, and ignoring the pain of my wound I get off my bed, oblivious of the medic’s order to return to it. I go out into the corridor, to a window so that I can witness something of the great event. And I see, in the small marshal’s yard in front of the blocks, thousands of prisoners wearing their striped hats. They embrace their comrades, shouting loudly and crying, and through the gate, we watch the moving spectacle as a lone American soldier followed by about six or seven others wearing combat fatigues approaches the guard tower, with their rifles cocked.

The SS men are descending the steps of the tower with their hands raised. Then a rifle shot is heard and panic breaks out in the crowd of cheering prisoners. We see that one of our comrades is lying on the ground, dying. The American soldiers immediately open sustained fire on the SS guards

who fall under the hail of bullets. They are now paying with their lives for the death of their last prisoner.

Then American troops are racing through the camp gates, and moments later take over the guard and command posts. The stars and stripes is raised above the guard platform. Joyful cries of “Hurrah!” and “Hail!” in all the languages of Europe, for there is hardly a nation in Europe that is not represented at Dachau.

I returned to my bed and try to share in the general exultation, but I couldn’t, because as the first excitement faded, the idea of “freedom” had no meaning for me. A new life? Where, and with whom? And why? After all, I still lie wounded in this hospital. How many days or weeks will it be before I am able to leave this camp, and where will I find my home? Will I return to Vásárhelyi? Do I really have a home there? Is anyone waiting for me?

As I lay on my bed, the events of the past year and their torments flashed through my mind again. I remembered all the agonies I had been subjected to over the past year, eighteen months of forced-labour service, then a few brief days of happiness spent with my family. And in recent months, the punishments and beatings that, defenceless and helpless, we all had to endure. Then the German invasion of Hungary, and the tragic events that followed one after the other, bringing me to Auschwitz.

The yellow star, which sought to stain our little

children from the age of six, the obligation to register all Jewish property and then hand it over, our cruel transport to the ghettos, without any human compassion, torture by the SS who enriched themselves by robbing us of our property, the disgusting witches who groped the bodies of our wives, the guards who photographed them as they were relieving themselves, to amuse their friends over beers in the taverns, the officer who took our spectacles on the grounds that they were “Hungarian national property” from us at the train station, before sending us to our deaths.

I remembered the journey that lasted four days, with seventy-one people crammed into one freight car, without air, without water, and without bread, locked in the dark. And I thought of my children, who even dying of thirst, when I had once managed to collect a few drops of precious water that leaked from the roof of the wagon, they only dared drink half a cup, because they said,

“Dad, save it for tomorrow, we may not get any more water!”

And tomorrow, by God! What did the following morning bring them? Their slow death from gassing, and then their burning. In my mind’s eye, I saw the chimneys that smoked continuously, day and night, day after night, and the flames of the ovens burning into our nights and darkening the light of our days. In my nostrils the smell of roasting human flesh, still remains.

And we remember friends and brothers stricken

with typhoid, who, in their fevered early morning delirium, shouted out the names of their loved ones and made journeys – endless journeys home. Home! A nightmare of longing, until they too were sent in flames to their loved ones, from whom they had been separated forever a few months before. And we, the living dead, envied our murdered comrades, because we had not known what awaited us: the starvation, lice, hard labour, beatings, and death. No one expected to come out of this hell alive, and it was only thanks to those heroic American soldiers that we, thirty two thousand people, survived.

I also remembered our neighbours who, even in the days before our transportation to the ghetto, would visit, share in our sorrow, and comfort us, as they could not help. I remember the people who silently stood, mournfully in the street, as we were led out of the ghetto. I saw the tears in their eyes, tears of pity and perhaps even of rage. I also remember those few who sent us food parcels and bedding to the ghetto, even when it involved great risk to themselves. I cannot draw up a balance: I can't decide whether the majority were good or evil. I cannot decide whether it would be possible to live among them again. Perhaps it is too early to contemplate all these things.

We don't even know whether we will be allowed to decide our future ourselves, or whether this will be decided for us, because we have become institutionalised by life in the camps. It is a few hours since we became free before we are given something

to eat. The noise in the camp is increasing. The loud voices of newly released prisoners and their shouts are heard through the thin walls of the hospital, but standing by the window, we are still witnessing grim scenes. Hundreds of corpses are being brought from the various blocks, bodies of comrades who have died in recent days. The dead are placed under the window, and coffins are being prepared for them, two corpses to each coffin.

American soldiers and their officers constantly visit the hospital rooms, eager to talk with us, to ask us about our suffering. They take pictures of us, their eyes brimming with sympathy. They give us American cigarettes and chocolate bars. They comfort and encourage us, and promise that we will soon be home. And until that time comes, our conditions will improve, because the American army will provide us with food and clothing.

For the time being, they are distributing the bread and canned goods they found in the German warehouses. Instead of the eighteenth part of a loaf of bread, that we received as prisoners, we are now given half a loaf and a can of meat, it amounts to over two pounds per person. But even if their motive is benevolent, it is a serious mistake. The starving skeletal survivors cannot digest such a quantity of meat, and within a few days several thousand people are suffering from the most terrible diarrhoea. Several hundred people die in the following days as a result, and could not be treated by any medicine.

The Americans quickly realise their mistake and prohibit the distribution of canned goods in order to gradually accustom our weakened organs to a better diet. From now on, they mainly serve nutritious soups in carefully measured quantities.

A wonderful operation was then carried out by the American Military Economic Organization, which had entered Dachau immediately after liberation. Their willingness and self-sacrifice, and their organisational ability, were admirable. They waged a courageous struggle to save the lives of the people, whose health had weakened to zero. In the first days, everyone was given typhoid injections, even those who had already recovered from it.

They evacuated and set up barracks outside the camp that had previously served as hospitals for the SS men. In hundreds of trucks, they transferred thousands of the infirm there. Then it became the turn of the healthy people, who were housed in SS barracks and tents, after they had been disinfected and discharged. Even the healthy among us were treated like recovering patients, although none of us were totally healthy.

The survivors were housed according to their nationality. Each nation elected its own independent governance, and a president to represent them as a member of the International Prisoner Committee. This was in contact with the American headquarters, and negotiated on every issue and request.

Food and clothing were distributed through the committee, and options for returning to our homes

were discussed. Unfortunately, we did not receive civilian clothing, because only uniforms belonging to the SS were available, and these sinister garments were reluctantly distributed to us.

Our food was also limited according to the normal economy of the German camps, only in greater quantities. The sick were also given milk and eggs. Our main concern was not for clothing, but for the possibility of returning home, and we Jews were especially concerned about searching for our relatives. We constantly asked the American authorities to obtain a list of the survivors from the various camps, and we couldn't understand why our request encountered such difficulty, and why we had to wait so long? The Americans explained that there were different occupation zones, for themselves, for the French, the British, and the Russians, and that so far no way of effective communication had been established between them, so we were only able to obtain the list of our own province, Bavaria, and even that took months.

With heavy hearts we watched as the camp slowly emptied. France, Belgium, Holland and Czechoslovakia were the first to send their Red Cross vehicles. They arrived loaded with relief packages, and returned with their fellow citizens, who had been deported by the enemy.

After a few weeks the Yugoslavs also managed to return home, and only the Hungarian, Romanian, Austrian and Italian prisoners remained in the camp. With gratitude, I remember our Czech and Yugoslav

friends, who in returning home, also included some of us in their group.

In accordance with the instructions of the American military authorities, we, the Jews of Northern Transylvania, were designated as Romanians. My friends elected me president of the Romanian-Yugoslav committee. The Czechs also allowed us to enter their borders, generously assuming that if we were closer to those of our own countries, we would be able to contact our governments easily.

We had no newspapers except one published by the American authorities. This was printed in four languages, although it told us nothing about Romania. From its pages we learned that Himmler had issued an order to the SS men to liquidate the Dachau camp on the night of April 29th. Three courageous Dutch prisoners had managed to escape the previous night and made contact with nearby American forces, informing them of the order. Thanks to this, the Americans were able to liberate the concentration camp on the outskirts of the city, before the rest of the American forces had captured the city of Dachau, saving the lives of thirty-two thousand prisoners.

## Homecoming

SLOWLY, THE WEEKS and months passed. The hot summer and homesickness weakened us and sapped our mental strength. The American authorities were frustrated that our government had not sent trains for us, and explained that they could not provide our transportation home. However, Colonel Roy and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration men, headed by the director Miss Shotton Osborne, who had arrived in Dachau, did everything to make the lives of the liberated prisoners of Dachau, more pleasant.

The American military chaplain Rabbi Klausner<sup>56</sup>, was the one who did the most good, he tirelessly toured all the camps in Germany, compiling a list of Jewish survivors. Later, he printed a four-volume book called “She’erit Hapletah”, which contained the names of Jewish survivors. To my regret and heartbreak, the names of my wife and children were not included in this record.

I searched for my younger brother’s name in the various lists, but I could not find him. Finally, with a feeling of dread I searched in the list of the camp office in Dachau, and came across it, and with it a note: ‘Died on April 14’. The poor man had died just two weeks before the liberation.

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<sup>56</sup> Captain Abraham Klausner (1915-2007). Rabbi in the American Army, arrived in Dachau in May 1945, and compiled the list, ‘She’erit Hapletah’, of survivors from all concentration camps. Controversially, he advocated forced emigration of displaced Jewish prisoners to the British Mandate of Palestine.

My younger brother, Izidor, the one who trusted in his God, the eternal optimist. Sadly, I could not find the cause of his death, or where it had occurred. I mourned him as I did the rest of my dead family, whom I will never forget.

In the month of June, a dramatic event took place. The soldiers of the Jewish Brigade, a unit of the British army, who had been recruited to fight Hitler and fascism, appeared in our camp, and sought contact with us. They were looking for the Jewish leaders in the camp. And indeed, it was a wonderful meeting, one of a kind. They came to us as messengers of a living people, and brought us the good news of Zion, of resurrection. They came to us as brothers, ready to share their bread, and to tell us of life in the homeland, and they also told us wonderful news, that during all these dark years, our people never stopped waiting for us. Now our brothers in the Land of Israel await the survivors with open arms.

The soldiers of the Jewish Brigade touched our hearts. They brought us encouragement and consolation. They showed us the way to a future life in Palestine. At the initiative of Rabbi Klausner, the Americans gathered every Jew who had expressed a desire to emigrate to Palestine, or to another country, into special Jewish camps, under the command of a Jewish-American officer, where they enjoyed special treatment and received special food rations.

On June 27th, we witnessed an astonishing public

trial. Colonel Roy gathered around him all the former prisoners of Dachau, and delivered the following speech to them,

“I order all the SS and guards here to march before you in a line. If you recognise anyone among them guilty of cruelty or murder, to point out that person, and if there are any amongst them who saved anyone’s life, to identify that person by clasping your hands together as a sign of mercy. Think of God, consider your conscience, and act accordingly.”

We lined up in parallel to the camp barracks, outside the barbed wire fences, and the SS men began their march, one by one, facing us. In silence we examined the faces of the SS men, most of them distorted with great anxiety. Their eyes bulged with fear. They’d lost that arrogant look of heroism that they showed when they were killing defenceless people. Beads of sweat rolled down their foreheads. However, it must be said to the dignity and restraint of our tortured people, that no shouts of outrage were heard from our lips, nor was any expression of hatred seen on our faces. Although we were certain that all eight thousand and six hundred of those damned thugs were guilty, some of them as the murderers of our dear family members and fellow prisoners, and all were collectively responsible for our persecution and torment.

Two hundred of them were clearly identified as murderers. They were not executed immediately, but their names and the witnesses were recorded for the military trial that was to be held later, and which we

ourselves would attend to testify under oath. And it should be said to the fairness and compassion of our men, several of whom asked for mercy for three of the prisoners, along with four of the camp commanders, who had behaved humanely. Those who were spared knelt down and raised their hands to heaven, expressing their gratitude for the justice, and Colonel Roy released them immediately.

This impromptu trial was surprising. We were the main participants in this entire impressive spectacle, we who a few weeks ago would have been sentenced to death. However, despite all the torture, suffering and degradation that we went through, we, the thousands of prisoners of Dachau, showed the highest standards of morality. And although we were convinced that the hands of all eight thousand six hundred SS men were stained with blood, having freely chosen to act as executioners in Hitler's regime, we only identified about two hundred, who we recognised as being guilty of mass murder.

The following weeks were spent consumed by homesickness and a desire for true freedom. Every day we wrote memos to Colonel Roy, and through him to the Romanian Consulate in Paris, asking them to arrange our return. Meanwhile, our numbers dwindled day by day, as the brave and daring set off and joined the return convoys of other nations. Many went with the Russians, Yugoslavs and Czechs, in the hope that through those countries they would finally be able to reach their homeland, Romania or Hungary.

The remnants of our group also set off, thanks to the leadership of the Yugoslav Committee, hoping to reach home across the Yugoslav-Romanian border. After a week-long journey through Austria we arrived at the Yugoslav border. However, to our dismay, the British authorities only allowed Yugoslav citizens to cross the border. We returned to Munich in the same cars in which we had travelled, to the American authorities, who said that they would take care of us in the future and that they would drive us home.

We spent two more weeks in the transit barracks in Munich, until finally, one August morning, a Romanian delegation appeared, taking down the names of all the people who wished to return to their homeland, and informing us that a special train was waiting for us in Prague. It was organized by the "Aferaria Patriotica" – Patriotic Affairs, and equipped with food. We didn't know what "Aferaria Patriotica" was, but we thanked them heartily for finally remembering and taking care of us, after sixteen months of captivity. Now we had only to get to Prague.

I turned to our saviour from Dachau, Miss Shotton-Osborne, and again she helped us, by placing at our disposal American cars and supplying appropriate documents. She also equipped us with food and cigarettes. As we set off, she wished that this time the journey would be more successful than our last.

We reached Prague, where we were warmly

welcomed by the Red Cross. A train decorated with the flags of the “Aferaria Patriotica” awaited us at the station. With hearts heavy with foreboding, we took our seats on the train, which was intended to return us to the same places from which we had set out on May 25th 1944. On that tragic journey and its intermediate stations, in Auschwitz and the other camps, all those we loved and for whom we had lived had perished.



During the winter of 1944, as the Red Army approached Auschwitz, Dr Berner and surviving prisoners were transported north to Oranienberg, near Berlin, and then to nearby Sachsenhausen concentration camp, as above. From there they were taken to Dachau, on a journey that took two days. Many died en-route. On April 29th 1945 a small heroic group from the American 42nd Infantry Division, forewarned by Dutch escapees that the remaining prisoners were to be liquidated, entered the camp and ensured their safety. Following liberation, the new Communist authorities in Romania, in denial of the Holocaust, procrastinated for four months before allowing Dr Berner and his compatriots to return home. It wasn't until 2004 that acknowledgement of the Holocaust was made by Romania. According to the Wiesel Commission, Romanians murdered more of their country's Jews than any of the Axis partners.

As we remembered the freight wagons in which we had been transported by the Hungarian Nazis, we all doubted whether there was still any point in returning home, when we knew that those we had lived with there no longer existed. And yet we set off, because if we were destined to live, we must return home and try to start a new life.

Will we succeed?

Only God can say.



*Dachau 1945*





*Portrait of Zsuzsi, aged four, by an unknown Romanian artist. Oil 1936.*

## From the Ashes, a family reborn. Eilat Negev

THE ROADS OF Europe were flooded with refugees, each wanting to return home to see if any of their families, were left alive. Thousands upon thousands of emaciated men and women were scrambling for trains, trucks, travelling on broken roads. Walking.

Mauritius Berner was not among them. He was too disillusioned to believe that Ida and their three girls could still be alive. Also gone, he knew, were his younger brother with his wife and son, named David after their father.

The only thing that could await him in Târgu Mures was the tomb of his first born, Erika who had died aged only four of diphtheria.

He decided to stay on in Dachau, a liberated man since April 29th 1945. He then frantically began to transcribe the events of



*Erika Berner (1927-1931). Marci and Ida's first child.*



*Erika Berner's grave, Târgu Mures.*

the inexplicable catastrophe that had befallen him and his fellow Jews. He immediately set pen to paper and put down every detail of the previous year and a half. His return from slave labor in early 1944. The family's tormented days in the ghetto. Daily interrogations and torture to learn if, and where, they hid their valuables. The four-days travel in a cattle car to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The pleas of his daughters for a drop of water. Their refusal to eat the sweets they still had from home and save them for later – it was then taken by force and the poor girls never got to taste it. Their arrival at the camp on May 29th – at that time he only thought it was for work.

He had parts of it written in his head, in all details that he could recall. He did not want to forget anything. An entire scene engraved in his memory were his conversations with a new friend who explained to him what the scene on the ramp meant, who was the man who inspected them, and what happened when he mentioned that he had twins.

He described everything in the order that it happened or remained vividly in his memory. His feelings in the garment warehouse at the Canada II camp, where he folded clothes of the murdered, and traced the different fashion houses, department stores or top tailors in Budapest, Amsterdam or Paris; he thus learned the nationalities of ill-fated dead Jews, who, like himself, had felt at home in their adoptive homelands until they were brutally kicked

out. And he sometimes found little combs with golden hair still tangled in them. Parents combed their children on the ramp, to make them look more presentable.

The flux of hundreds of thousands Hungarian Jews necessitated the expansion of the 'Canada' camp in Birkenau, which at that time held 1500 to 2000 workers, men and women alike. The complex consisted of thirty barracks, where the looted possessions were held and sorted. As much as it was difficult emotionally, he was lucky to be assigned to this work, which allowed him better conditions and the ability to help himself and others.

Everything was fresh in his mind. He only wrote what he had seen or experienced himself: he documented the castration of young men, who had one testicle removed, or both, and then subjected to horrible experiments. Some of them involved women who had undergone similar tortures. He wrote of the several atrocities performed in the name of science:

"If I had not examined these unfortunates, who desperately sought my medical advice, I would not have believed what they said. I had to face the fact that there is no nightmare or depravity that man can dream of that has not occurred here", he wrote. "Experiments conducted on humans that could only be justified on animals, and even then, the animal protection leagues would have been justified in protesting against them. I imagined my poor little twin daughters enduring Mengele's experiments".

Dr. Berner's testimony was written much before the emergence of any Holocaust research. When personal accounts were rare, or nonexistent. It was one of the first public Holocaust accounts. It was important - it is important - because it was uncontaminated by hindsight, or by information that he may have read much later in other books.

Dr. Berner's account became a primary source, known for its reliability. It was used later in several articles and books dealing with some aspect or other of the Nazis' "Deadly Medicine". He complete the text in a matter of weeks. He put the precious handwritten manuscript in a suitcase. He now hurried back, 1300 kilometers from Dachau, Germany, to his hometown in Romania.

I had known Dr. Berner for the last eight years of his life. I was his daughter-in-law, wife of his only son. He remained a kind, humane person, generous of spirit, with a perceiving eye and sense of humor. He treated me as if I were a daughter that he still had. His was the first family of Holocaust survivors that I had encountered. It was a home where the Holocaust was not hushed, but discussed at every opportunity. Part of normal daily life.

*Mayor's Office Micasa, State reg. of births No. 38 - 1902  
December 19 - Birth of Mor Berner, son of David Berner,  
shopkeeper, 26 years old, born in Mic sasa, and Zseni  
Fried, 19, born in Turda, residents in Micasa*

These are the city records that document the

birth of Mor Berner, Hebrew name Moshe-Meir; his nickname, Marci, used by family and friends, stayed with him until his death in Jerusalem on July 10th 1976. I shall use his nickname from now, although in my eyes he was so dignified, and fifty years older than I was, that I never dared call him by his first name.

Marci's brother, Adolph-Avraham, nicknamed Dodo, was born 18 months later in 1904. A third and youngest son, Izidor-Issachar was born 1906. Three babies in just three years. Their mother passed away shortly afterwards and the small ones couldn't even remember her. Their father remarried, to a woman who had no children of her own. She was a loving mother that they adored and remained grateful to for life. It was a non-orthodox Jewish home, with respect for tradition but not bound by strict rules.

The two brothers, Marci and Dodo moved together to Vienna, 800 Km from their home, to study medicine; it was all part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and they spoke fluent German. But Dodo fainted at the autopsy class, right at the beginning, and dropped from medicine. He remained



*Izidor Berner (1906-1945) with  
his wife Rozsa - née Segal (1915-  
1944) on their wedding day.*

in Vienna to study engineering. It was a wonder how a shopkeeper from a small town could finance the university education of his two sons, especially at a time of restrictions in high education for Jews. But he did.

Marci was greatly impressed by the lectures of Sigmund Freud, and although he became not a psychiatrist but a dermatologist and an expert on venereal diseases, he always maintained a psychological approach with his patients. Upon graduation from medical school he returned to Transylvania, to a lovely historical, cultural and beautiful town of 140,000 inhabitants today, only 100 Km from his birth village. The Berners always used the Hungarian name, Marosvásárhely, meaning “Market on the Mure River”, although the Romanian name Târgu Mures is more prevalent today.

He married Ida Salomon in 1926: she was 20, he, 23. Their stunning wedding photo shows a Hollywood style couple dressed in the modern fashion of the day. A year later they had Erika. She was a glorious bright only child. They gave her the Hebrew name Ruth. When she caught diphtheria aged only four, he tormented himself how he, a physician, could not save her. Penicillin was discovered in 1928, but was only in clinical use fifteen years later. Erika died in 1931. Suzi was born a year later. The birth of the twins, Helga and Nora, in 1935, was a joy that somehow mitigated the loss. The three girls were also given additional Hebrew names: Suzi was Tel Aviva,

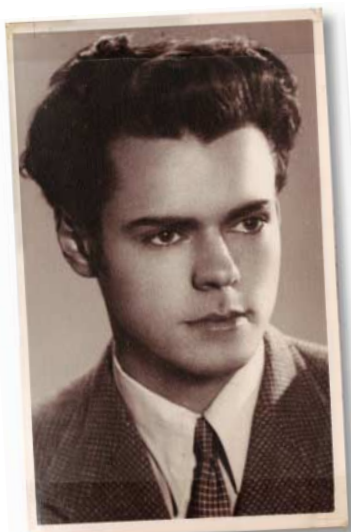
after the new, modern town in the revived Holy Land. Twins Helga was Rachel, and Nora, Leah.



*The Hirschhorn and Salomon siblings on vacation before the war. From left at back: Schoma Hirschhorn and his first wife Frieda, Kornelia and Ernest Hirschhorn, Unknown man, Armin Salomon. In front: Olga Salomon-Hirschhorn, Unknown woman, Irma Hirschhorn, Shari Salomon. The three Hirschhorn sisters were at Auschwitz with Ida's nieces Olga and Shari Salomon. Their brother, Armin survived forced labour in Ukraine, and following the birth of their first child Marriene, his wife Péri gave birth to twin daughters in 1954, who they named Helga and Nora.*

It was a close-knit extended family. Ida Berner's niece was married to Ernest Hirschhorn, and the Salomons, the Berners and the Hirschhorns met regularly. So much so, that the youngest and most intelligent and vivacious of the Hirschhorn girls, Kornelia, was courted by two Salomon men: one was another brother of Ida, an old bachelor, and the other, the handsome student Erwin. The family joked that one man would arrive in the morning, and the other, in the evening.

Kornelia gave her heart to Erwin and they



*Ervin Salomon, 1923-45.*

exchanged gold chains engraved with their names. They hoped to marry after the war and make their home in Palestine.

At that time, Marci's brother, Dodo, was already there. Disgusted and anxious with Hitler's rise to power, he decided to go, although he had a comfortable job in Vienna as an engineer. He was so determined that he di-

vorced his wife, a well-known musician who insisted on staying. He teamed-up with his girlfriend Bibi, 11 years younger than he was and from a well-known Zionist family. They emigrated to Palestine in 1933. Typical of that family, the divorced couple remained on amicable terms, and years later she made sure that Dodo would get his pension from the Austrian government for his years as an engineer. Dr. Berner had a flourishing medical clinic. He and his brother Izidor lived comfortably in Târgu Mures. They corresponded with their brother in Jerusalem until war did not permit it any longer.

Most Jewish men were taken from their families to do slave labor in Ukraine. It was useless and pointless work, like moving rocks from one place to the other. Or deadly, like finding a safe

path in a minefield by walking through it. It was meant to deprive the communities of their livelihood and weaken them into submission. Many men did not survive the hardship and never came back.

Ernest Hirschhorn was torn from his young wife Olga, while his brother Schoma was forced to leave his wife and their 9-year-old son Andrei. His ordeal at the camp almost left him dead. When Dr. Berner returned from labor camp on March 14th, 1944, his two relatives were back as well. But just five days later, German troops invaded the area. They were all rounded up with their families in makeshift ghettos and after weeks of torture and anxiety were transported in cattle trains to Auschwitz. They arrived there on May 29th, 1944.



ON 30TH AUGUST 1940 by the Vienna Dictate of Hitler, Northern Transylvania was transferred from Romania to Hungary. It was Postcode Lottery for the Jews of Transylvania: those who remained under Romanian rule escaped extermination, but the majority, 450,000 under Hungarian rule, were deported to Auschwitz. 90% of them were murdered there. Romanian Jews were not deported to extermination camps, but many of them suffered horrible pogroms organized by the government and the fascist "Iron Guards". Between 280,000 and 380,000 Jews were murdered in Romanian-controlled areas.

Ida's brother, his wife and young son, managed to flee to the Romanian region and were of the lucky ones. As the war ended, they returned to Târgu Mures and reclaimed the family property, a large wholesale business. They lived in the flat upstairs, hoping for the return of their older children, deported to Auschwitz.

Under the Final Solution, entire Jewish communities, extended families of dozens of people, were transported to concentration or extermination camps. It was rare that one member of a family survived. Two were a miracle. Of the Berner-Hirschhorn-Salomon families, more than two thirds of those taken to Auschwitz, perished there. The few that were saved was because they had a chance to cling together, and help one another. Later, Kornelia recounted the countless times that her sisters saved her, when she could not stand any longer in the hours-long roll-calls, naked and freezing, and they propped her up.

I wondered how was it possible that Kornelia and the others from her family group, were clearly at Auschwitz-Birkenau but were never tattooed. The reason was made clear only later.

In June 1944, at the height of the extermination of Hungarian Jews, transitory camps were created at Birkenau. The huge scale of deportations, and the backlog of the SS in running the selections, made it necessary. The number of victims vastly surpassed the capacity of the gas chambers and the crematoria. Yes, these words seem cruel, but this is the formal,

precise reason given in the historical literature – in this case, “Auschwitz – Anatomy of a Death Camp”.

As a result, Kornelia and her sisters were held in Transitory Camp number BIIC. They were not registered and had no numbers since it was still uncertain what to do with them. Every few days there was another selection and they just prayed that Mengele, or whoever was in charge, would overlook them. For some, it was a waiting room before the gas chambers. Later, others were sent to forced labor in German ammunition plants. By summer of 1944, there were 30,000 women in that transitory camp.

Kornelia was 24, her sister Amalia, 30 and Irma, 34. Olga, their sister-in-law, was only 26 but she was the unquestionable leader. The only married woman among them and the most worldly, experienced and self-assured. They nicknamed her “The Captain” – a name that stuck to her even decades later, because she remained bossy and decisive in normal times as well. At Auschwitz, she was the one who commanded the rest never to give up. She alerted them to Mengele's presence and sometimes they managed to hide. In the eternal, daily roll calls where they stood naked to be counted again and again, she would pinch their cheeks to make them look red and healthy. She split every piece of bread in five, and saved hers to assist the ones who were collapsing. And she would stand before any one of them who looked too frail, in order to hide her with her own body and somehow survive the selection.

They were surprised to spot Dr. Berner in the

men's camp, just behind the barbed fence. They could not believe when he said that his wife – their aunt Ida – was dead, as well as the three little girls that they knew and loved so well. They thought that suffering had made this intelligent man lose his mind.

His obligation to help his relatives brought new purpose into his life and prevented him from running to the electrified barbed wire. Often, he was caught and beaten savagely. They looked horrified from across the fence, and he signaled them that it was nothing, that he was OK. Once, when he threw them a sweater, Olga hid it and saved it for times of greater danger. And then, in one of the selections, her own sister Shari, only 22 years old, was chosen for death. Olga rushed to one of the Kapos and bribed her with the sweater. Shari was spared.

Marci Berner urged the five young women to try and stay on in Auschwitz, so that he could continue to protect them. But by the autumn, when the Russians were approaching, it became increasingly dangerous.

During Yom Kippur, September 26–27 1944, they all passed before Mengele's eyes again. The war effort needed more working hands, and he was selecting women for slave labor in Germany, at an ammunitions factory in Altenburg, a satellite camp of Buchenwald. He scrutinized them – four were found fit to work. Their older sister Irma was sent to her immediate death. Her fingers seemed too delicate for work, and she also had a rash on her face. Mengele decided that she would not be of any use.

In July 1945, Olga and Shari Salomon returned to their parents in Târgu Mures. Their mother insisted that the orphaned Kornelia and Amalia – sisters of Olga's husband – would stay with them.

The American soldiers who met the four young women after they were released from Altenburg, said that all their relatives were surely dead, and offered them tickets to the USA. They refused, and said that they wanted to go home. Olga was hoping that her husband, Ernest, was alive. Kornelia hoped that her fiancé, Erwin Salomon would be waiting for her.

Then, Marci Berner returned. He was only 42 but his hair had turned white. The shock of losing his dear ones and the torture of the camps, struck him with severe diabetes. He was crying incessantly for his girls.

On his homecoming to Vásárhely, he modestly re-established his medical practice with the following advertisement: – *"MEDICAL NEWS. Dr.*



*Dr Berner at work at a clinic in Târgu Mures, 1960.*

*Berner Mór, dermatologist and venereal disease specialist, has returned home from abroad and has resumed his practice.*" His poignant euphemism, 'returned from abroad' hides the tragedy of his time in Auschwitz.

In October of that year, just a few weeks after his return, he married the 25-year-old Kornelia. Life had to go on. Decades later, in 2005, in an interview to historian Dagi Knellessen, of the German Historical Museum in Berlin, Kornelia said that she asked herself three questions at the time: Can I love this man? Can I sleep with him? And can I have a child with him? She was able to answer all three questions with a resounding yes.

It seems almost unbelievable that they married so quickly after the catastrophes that both had endured, but it is a fact. Their two gold wedding bands are inscribed with the date – October 2nd, 1945. His ring is inscribed with her nickname, Duci, while her ring is inscribed Marci. Their granddaughter Inbal Berner in Jerusalem keeps them safely. In spite of the circumstances and the 17 years age difference, they had a very happy marriage.

Ernest and Olga Hirschhorn were one of only five Jewish couples in Târgu Mures where both husband and wife survived. All the others, either the man, or the woman, or both, were murdered. Ernest's older brother, Schoma, lost his wife and his nine-year-old son, a very bright boy named Andrei. Also gone was 22-year-old Erwin Salomon: the Americans who liberated Buchenwald fed him, but his system collapsed under the strain. Thousands died

like him, free men for just a few days. He was buried in a mass grave with a hundred others.

Within just two years, all survivors of the family married and had a child. In July 1946 Olga and Ernest celebrated the birth of their daughter Judith. A year later Schoma and his second wife Zelma – she, too, had lost her husband – bore a son, named after the first who had died, and as bright as he was. Today, Professor Andrei Keren is a leading cardiologist in Israel.

And on January 18th, 1948, Marci and Kornelia finally had their own much-awaited son. He was named Peter Eli Erwin Issachar Zvi: the last three names were a memento of Kornelia's fiancé and of Marci's younger brother. He had the perfect childhood. The family's photo album shows him, aged 5 or 6, playing the violin, and sitting by the piano, his legs not touching the ground. A bust was sculpted of him – a smiling, happy boy. Kornelia studied at the music conservatory and sang on stage. She was a classical singer, a mezzo soprano who could sing Bartók and Kodály. Marci bought her jewelry from a German countess who had lost her fortune. Peter was taught German by the same countess.

The families lived near one another, and the cousins were as close as siblings, each being an only child. When baby Judith caught diphtheria in 1948, Marci Berner was beside himself with worry. He made gigantic, expensive efforts to get penicillin, which he found only in Vienna. Everything to



*Eli (son of Kornelia), Peter (son of Amalia), Judith (daughter of Ernest),  
Andrei (son of Schoma). The cousins were as close as siblings.  
Târgu Mures, c.1953.*

prevent her fate from being like that of his daughter Erika 17 years before.

When Armin Salomon, Ida's nephew, later had twin daughters, the choice of names was self-evident. Helga and Nora - Hebrew names Naomi and Nava, who now live in Israel. They have children and grandchildren. Every Sunday the extended family lunched together in one of their homes. Communist rule, which began in 1948, made life complicated, with lack of civil liberties. Families of strangers were put into their homes, and Kornelia had to share her kitchen with a family that were given a couple of rooms in her house.

Dr. Berner had a flourishing career and was extremely affluent and in demand; venereal diseases

were rife in Romania at the time. He was also made head physician in charge of the schoolchildren in town. He always smiled, but the girls all reminded him of his own dead ones, and although he was again a father, he was tortured by thoughts of his dead girls. He remembered that at that time, the gas chambers and crematoria were so busy, that they could not accommodate all the new comers. He saw open pits where little children were thrown in and lit with kerosene. He tormented himself that maybe on May 29th, it was the same and Suzi, Helga and Nora met this kind of death as well. He would go around the pharmacies in town, begging for sleeping tablets, but the pharmacists, who all knew his story, refused. Kornelia tried to reason with him and convince him logically that the girls were gassed and not burned alive. She caught him several times with a hypodermic of lethal drugs in his hand, and managed to stop him in the brink of time.

Romania was a dictatorship, a terror state. They all wished to emigrate to Israel, but the Romanian authorities refused to let anyone go. For 17 years, they tried time and again, but were rejected. Only in 1961 was it made possible, when the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee paid huge sums, thousands of US Dollars, for every "head" of Jew that was allowed to get out.

The Berners left without a penny, having to leave everything behind to the Romanian State. They made their home in Jerusalem, in Kiryat Hayovel, a working-class neighborhood built mainly



*Top: Marci and Eli, Târgu Mures, 1948. Bottom left: Eli, Kornelia and Marci, Târgu Mures, c. 1959. Right: Marci and Dodo, Jerusalem, 1960s.*

for new immigrants from Europe and North Africa.

Dr. Berner worked in the local NHS clinic, and was known as the kind doctor, with his white mane of hair that resembled Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel. The two brothers, Dodo and Marci, reconnected and would visit frequently with their families. By now, Dodo and Bibi had two daughters, Nava and Miri.

Israel brought peace of mind and much happiness to the Berners. Marci never tried to kill himself again. Somehow, in the new homeland, the old ghosts let go of their grip. Eli – now he was using his Hebrew name everywhere, but called Peter by his parents – was admitted to the best school in Jerusalem and did well. Kornelia reverted to her Hebrew name, Yehudit-Judith that will be used hereafter.

Always having a pampered, charmed life, she felt that she had to step in when they bought their flat and had a mortgage to pay. She took a short course in hairdressing given especially to new immigrants. She opened a hair salon in their tiny, 50 square meter home. In the mornings, after Eli went to school and Marci went to the clinic, she would move aside the sofa and replace it with massive chairs with hair dryers. The clients loved her. She was different, cultured. When Eli came back from school, he would join her in shampooing the women's hair. He would also work as an errand boy in the local grocery shop, carrying parcels home, to have some pocket money. He was very proud to be working.



*Eli with Kornelia and Marci. Târgu Mures, 1948.*

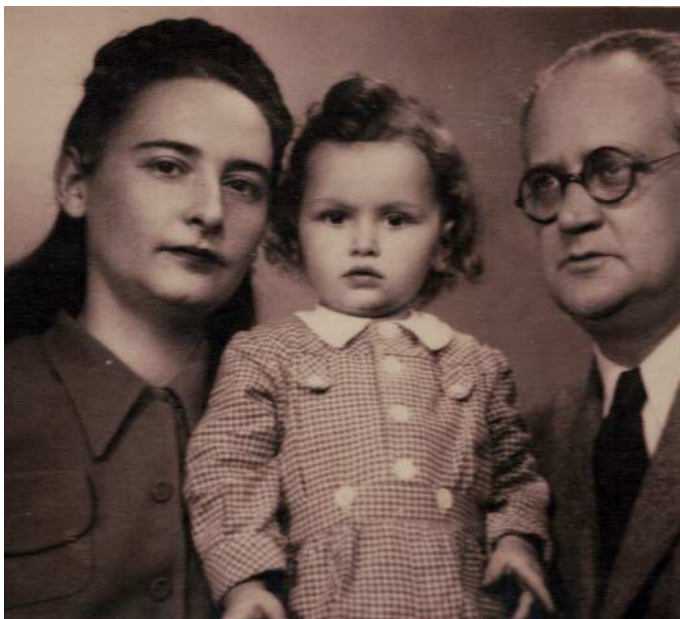
In the evenings, they would push the chairs to the balcony and the living room was converted into an elegant salon. They had an elite circle of friends, most of them Hungarian-speaking lawyers and journalists. Judith was an extraordinary cook and conversationalist.

Two couples of their friends survived thanks to the Kastner Train, organized in April-May 1944 to rescue Jews; through negotiations with Adolph Eichmann himself, 1600 prominent, intellectual or rich Jews were transported out of Hungary in exchange for diamonds, gold and cash. Dr. Berner was shocked to learn that he was on the list with his wife and three daughters. He never knew it. When the train, consisting of 35 cattle cars, finally left for safety, his family was already dead.

When time came for Eli's army service, he knew that his parents would never agree to him becoming a combat soldier. An only son needed his parents' consent. Instead, he asked to serve in the military censor's office, using his knowledge of five languages: Romanian, Hungarian, German, English and Hebrew.

He was rejected: anyone from East Europe was suspected at the time, in case the Romanian authorities sent spies among the immigrants. Eli was made to run an army canteen. Although being a 'Shekemist', as it was called, was far from prestigious, almost shameful, he never resented his parents. He would say, "I am the fifth, and only child".

Their son understood how dear he was to them.



*Eli, with Kornelia and Marci. Târgu Mures.*



*Amalia Hirschhorn and her son Peter, with Eli, Marci and Kornelia.  
Târgu Mures.*

The Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt took place between 1963 and 1965. Twenty-two Nazi criminals who had served in Auschwitz were accused. Dr. Victor Capesius was one of them. He denied any connection to the crimes. The prosecution called Dr. Berner as one of the witnesses.

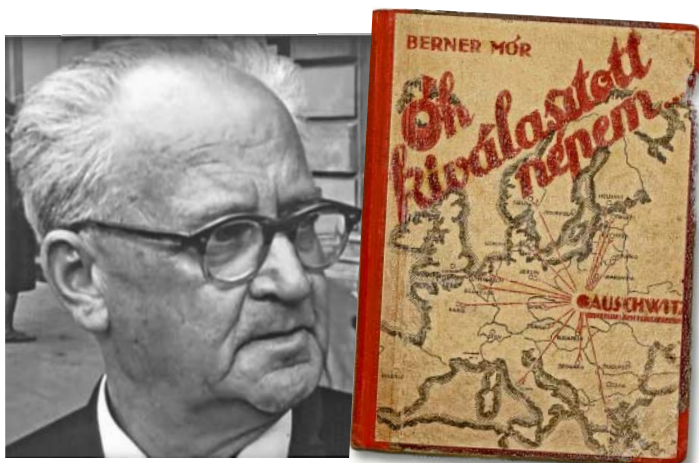
Already in 1962, soon after settling in Israel, Dr. Berner had given a deposition to an investigator working with the German prosecutors attesting to his acquaintance with Capesius. It was his book, known to many, that aroused the interest of the German prosecution.

Dr. Berner appeared before the court in Frankfurt on August 27th 1964 and told in detail his encounter with Capesius. Just twenty years earlier they were on opposite sides, in a different way, when Dr. Berner was a prisoner, at the mercy of Capesius and Mengele. He told me that standing opposite him at the trial was harrowing. Because at that time at Auschwitz, he thought that his old colleague, the sales-representative who was trying to promote his company's products, was well meaning and was trying to help. Little did he know, then, that the chief pharmacist of Auschwitz was an SS officer and was looking to find favor with Mengele and add more specimens to Dr. Death's "Zoo" at Auschwitz.

Dr. Berner's testimony, on the 78th day of the trial, caused frozen horror among those present in the courtroom. The media reported on his story nationwide for days. It even reached the New York Times. The testimony revealed what the

Nazis' last major murder campaign, the murder of over 400,000 Hungarian Jews, had meant in terms of personal experience and dramatic suffering.

From a criminal law perspective, Dr. Berner's testimony proved beyond doubt that Capesius had been involved in selections on the ramp at Birkenau. He was sentenced to nine years in prison for complicity in the joint murder of at least two thousand people in at least four cases. Today, Capesius is named among the 20-30 Nazi doctors that supervised selections at Auschwitz.



*Marci in Frankfurt, 1963.*

*Oh, my chosen people!, Bolyai, 1947.*

The Berners were the first family of Holocaust survivors that I got to know. My own parents came as young children to Israel, then Palestine, in the early 1930s, and I was lucky to have two sets of grandparents. Eli had none. When I met him, in April 1968, I was a high school student, and he was a soldier, four years older than I was.



*Above: Eli, Marci and Kornelia with Eilat Negev. 1973.*

*Below: Eli and Marci during his Military Service, Jerusalem, 1968.*



On the living room wall at the Berners' home was an oil painting of a blond girl with blue eyes – she was Suzi, Dr. Berner's 12-and-a-half-year-old. My daughter Inbal now keeps this painting in her house, and the similarity between them is uncanny. There were many other pictures of little girls, and later on I learned who they were. Their birthdays were marked with an electronic memory candle plugged into a socket, as were all their dates of death. But it was not a sad home. It was full of humor, full of life.



*Eli, Marci and Kornelia. Jerusalem 1960s.*

Eli and I married on October 29th, 1970: two days after my nineteenth birthday. Understandably, my parents were not ecstatic that I was marrying my first boyfriend, and so young. I began studying at the

Hebrew university. Eli was already studying mathematics and physics for his B. Sc, and computer sciences for his M.Sc.

Testifying at Frankfurt brought Dr. Berner some peace and quiet. He wanted the story widely told. He had written his book in Hungarian and wanted it to appear in Hebrew as well. It eventually happened in 1973. He could not read the language but was curious to hear my opinion. I was struck by the thought that he could have died a thousand times; one never knew if a decision would lead to death or to another day of a tortured life. He enjoyed speaking German and had no grudge against German acquaintances, separating between the past and the present.

Family was of the utmost importance to him. When Andrei Keren immigrated to Israel in 1973, he lived for a time at his aunt and uncle's home in Jerusalem. As a young, aspiring physician, Dr. Berner was instrumental in opening the way for Andrei's specialization in Cardiology and starting his career in the renowned Hadassah Medical Center. Andrei always thought that one of the greatest things about Marci Berner was the warm, simple and unpretentious way he influenced other peoples' destiny and lives.

A year or two after our marriage, my father-in-law was asking about grandchildren. I said that we are young and have time, but he said, "But I don't!".

Amir was born on May 19th 1975. We named him after the soldier-son of family friends,

Holocaust survivors like the Berners, who was killed fighting terrorists on Israel's northern border just eight months earlier.



*Marci at Zionist Conference, Jerusalem, 1972.*

The birth of his grandson was a great joy. He would push Amir's pram in the street, the proudest and happiest of grandfathers, almost unbelieving. Every time he parted from the baby, he would put his hand over the baby's head, and recite the Priestly Blessing:

*May the Lord shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
May the Lord lift up His face to you, and give you peace.*

Dr. Berner's health problems caught up with him: severe diabetes, together with emphysema, a lung disease caused by heavy smoking. When he was taken to hospital in July 1976, it was after 14 months of intense bliss as a granddad. One night he was so

delirious, that he called the nice young nurse by my name.

"You are so beautiful!" he said to his wife Judith on his deathbed. She felt it was the most intense declaration of love he could give her. Turning to Eli and to baby Amir, he urged them with his last words: "This boy should stay alive. He must live!" It was a time of suicide bombs in Jerusalem and he was worried for the future fate of his grandson in Israel's eternal war with its Arab neighbors.

When Marci died Judith was left as a ship without a rudder. She was 56, and he had been a father-figure to her. I was her friend and confidante. A few years later my own mother died prematurely of cancer, and Kornelia remained my only Mum. It was then that she told me about his attempts to kill himself. About her own ordeals at Auschwitz.

While Marci was alive, he took the center stage; before that, I was not really aware that Judith was a "real Holocaust survivor". Only then she told her own terrible story. How she sat with the half-dead, wanting to give up. About how, when once they received some margarine, she used part of it to rub on her face, which were achingly dry. I always remember it when my own skin gets dry.

She spoke about the preservation of humanity, dignity and morality among the female prisoners. They forbade themselves from stealing. They split everything among themselves.

And then she told me about her experiences in the ammunition factory in Altenburg: where her eyes

became so red, that she was unable to perform the precision work required for ammunition production. She switched places with another girl. Judith had to move heavy crates of arms all day, but it saved her from being sent to death as useless for work. She told me about her hunger, making her eat little snails that she found at night in the wet grass.

And she always returned to a story of great insult, in the brick factory; just before they were deported to Auschwitz: a young policeman from her home town told her that he had always been in love with her, but did not dare to approach her since she was so much superior to him socially and intellectually. Now he asked her to come with him into the wood “for just fifteen minutes, no more”. He made sure that she understood his intention.

She answered that she was saving herself for her boyfriend, Erwin. He told her that both her boyfriend as well as she were doomed to die anyway and that there was no point in preserving her virginity. She said, if so, we shall meet in heaven, and I want to stay as pure as I was for him. She somehow escaped him but the hurt never subsided.

It was typical of her, to refuse to accept any compensation from Germany – refusing, she said, to sell the blood of her parents, her sister and her fiancé, for money. She never forgave the Romanian neighbors who looted her parents’ home and who asked, “Why did you return, it was much better without you.” She never again called Romania “my homeland”, but “my land of exile”.

Judith embraced Israel with all her might. She joined a choir and travelled around the country. She took courses in history. She made friends. She was happy as never before in Romania. An artist friend, Paul Fux, made her his muse and she features in several of his paintings. Judith felt as if the Bible was coming alive. All dark eyed women, like her sister Irma and their mother, seemed to her as if taken from King Solomon’s Song of Songs.

We’ve known some complex times. In early 1987 Eli and I separated. We divorced the following year. But then there was Judith’s great joy of his second marriage, to Nira Cohen, and the birth of Omer, their son, in 1989.

Twenty four years after Dr. Berner’s death I visited Auschwitz-Birkenau for the first time. My partner, Yehuda Koren and I were writing about the Ovitz family, five sisters and two brothers, all under 90 cm tall. They lived in Transylvania, and had a flourishing career as singers and actors before the war. They were also transported to Auschwitz in May 1944, just like the Berners, the Salomons and the Hirschhorns.

The Ovitz family became Mengele’s guinea pigs. He also made experiments on their three average height siblings, and their two children. They all survived. It was the only full family of all ages that entered Auschwitz and all emerged alive. We interviewed dozens of twins who knew the dwarfs and were also subject to Mengele’s experiments. Hearing their stories, I could not help but reflect on



*Kornelia and Marci in their Jerusalem flat, 1970. The 1936 oil portrait of Zsuzsi hangs on the wall behind them.*



*Eilat, with her daughter Inbal, who bears a remarkable resemblance to Zsuzsi, and her brother Amir. 1980.*

the possible fate of twins Helga and Nora. Judith Berner became one of our researchers. She translated documents and testimonies in Hungarian, telling us some more about her own experiences.

Eli had always been a heavy smoker, from the age of 17. We all pleaded with him, but he couldn't stop. On June 14th 2002 he passed away, only 54 years old, after a short and violent struggle with lung cancer. It was a devastating blow for all who had known and loved him.



*Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi, with Judith and Omer on Holocaust Memorial Day, Jerusalem, 2009.*

In 2009, when she was 90 years old, the Israeli Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi, visited Judith Berner at her home on Holocaust Memorial Day. With her grandson Omer at her side, she recounted her story and presented her husband's book. Ashkenazi told her that every soldier is taught that the State of Israel is the answer to the Holocaust. Judith told him that she has always

dreamt of coming to live in Israel, but never imagined that she would get to meet the Chief of Staff. And she concluded by saying that we must have peace. We must believe in peace.

Kornelia-Judith Berner passed away on May 7th 2012. Ten years after her only son. She was 93 years old.

All four women from her group reached ripe old age; Amalia was 90. Olga died aged 99, and Shari Salomon-Dascal got to be 102. The same Shari, who was caught in a selection aged 22, and would have died then and there if not for the sweater that Marci Berner had thrown over the fence.

Only Irma remained no older than 35.

Through all these years, we have been one joint, caring family to one another. We celebrate the holidays together, the two mothers with their three children and three grandchildren. Omer Berner is an M.D and specializes in oncology.

Dr Mauritius Berner would have been thrilled to know that his third grandchild – born 13 years after he passed away – is a fresh, young and brilliant Dr. Berner.



*Amir, Inbal, and Omer Berner. Passover, Jerusalem, 2026.*

## Judith's Story. Eilat Negev



*Judith, interviewed at her home in Jerusalem, 22.09.2005.  
Courtesy, Dag Knellessen.*

IN SEPTEMBER 2005, Judith Berner gave an interview to historian Dag Knellessen of the Leibniz Institute for Jewish History and Culture – Simon Dubnow in Leipzig.

The two had met three years earlier, when Ms. Knellessen curated an exhibition at the Fritz Bauer Institute, on the Auschwitz Trials of 1963-1965. Dr. Berner was long gone, of course, but his widow provided photographs and the information needed. The Fritz Bauer Institute invited her and six other survivors and witnesses to Frankfurt am Main for the exhibition opening in spring 2004.

As her daughter-in-law, I, and the entire family followed it all. But when the time of her flight

approached, Judith fell and broke her pelvis. Travel from Israel to Germany was out of the question. She was greatly disappointed. Heartbroken.

Dagi Knellessen became a friend and a household name and they continued to be in touch. When she approached Judith again and asked to include her in the International Slave and Forced Labourers Documentation Project, since she, too, was a survivor, Judith was happy to comply. As difficult as it was for her to return to painful memories, the many hours they spent together filled her life. Especially that she was mourning the death of her only son, Eli-Peter, who had died in his prime of lung cancer.

All through the interview they spoke German, a language that Judith enjoyed to practice; it evoked memories of her childhood in a family that longed for the Austro-Hungarian period. She was by now 86 years old, thin and frail, but mentally alert. The interview was held for several hours each day, on four successive days. Here are some passages and topics from the 128-page text: it is condensed and shortened for space and clarity. The entire ten-and-a-half-hour interview was videotaped and included in, *“Forced Labor 1939-1945. Memory and History”*. It can be seen via this link:

<https://archiv.zwangsarbeitarchiv.de/en/interviews/za399>

Judith grew up in an affluent Jewish family in the village of Szentmáté, in the Hungarian-speaking



*The Hirschhorn family, from left standing: Schoma, Amalia, Irma, Judith, Ernest. Sitting centre: Alex and Roza Hirschhorn (their parents who were murdered at Auschwitz on arrival), and on the right Olga (nee Salomon, Ernest's wife). The boy is Andrei, son by first marriage of Schoma Hirschhorn to Frieda, seated left. Both were murdered at Auschwitz. Photograph c. 1941.*

district of Romania. Her mother, Roza Dascal, was a dark beauty with an extraordinary singing voice. Her father, Alex Hirschhorn, was a merchant who preferred books to business; he never insisted on being paid when he felt that the person was needy.

Four children were born in quick succession: Schoma, 1907, Irma, 1909, Ernest-Yehuda, 1911, and Amalia, 1913. Soon after, Alex Hirschhorn was drafted to the Austro-Hungarian army for the duration of WWI. Judith was born in November 1919. Named Kornelia, she was also given the

Hebrew name Judith, after her paternal grandfather, Yehuda, who had moved to holy city of Safed, in his old age, around the year 1900.

Each child was a favourite for one reason or another, but Judith, the youngest, was pampered by all. It was a home full of laughter, full of guests, Jews and non-Jews alike. They were not orthodox and her photo album shows her and her sisters dressed in modern, revealing bathing suits. Judith had artistic tendencies and loved being on stage.

After finishing school, she and her sisters moved to Marosvásárhely, to live with their brother Ernest and his young wife Olga. It was much more fun there, a vibrant city with lots of opportunities to attend concerts, films, plays and operas. It was there that she met Olga's extended family. Olga's young cousin, Erwin Salomon, became her sweetheart. They intended to marry after the war and move to Palestine together. She also got to know Ida Salomon, who was married to Dr. Mauritius Berner and had three lovely daughters.

When Transylvania fell into German hands in March 1944, the sisters hurried back home to their parents. Together they were herded into ghettos, and then into brick factories - the Germans did it systematically, dividing the country into six districts and transporting the Jews in quick succession to prevent protest.

They arrived at Auschwitz at the same time that

the Berners did. Judith clung to her mother, but suddenly a man in striped prisoner clothes slapped her on the face and pushed her to the other side. Only later she learned that he saved her life. Their parents were too old to work and were sent immediately to be gassed. The three Hirschhorn sisters and the two Salomon sisters, Olga and Shari, were put in the temporary BIIC Camp, until their fate could be decided.

Judith was too exhausted to go outside, but her sisters did. And they recognised Dr. Berner.

*(Although they married after the war, she often calls him "my husband" in her interview).*

J.B.: We were in Lager C. There was a large path between us, the women and the men. And then there was wire. Whoever touched this wire, he was finished, he died. Not died, he, he was burned. But we could talk. And we saw the men. There were towers between us with soldiers, with guns, always with guns.

But they could talk. They saw my husband [Dr. Berner] and they shouted from far away. And they asked, "Where is your wife and children?" So he told them, "Upstairs." They knew what that meant. And they came back and told me, "What a shame. A man like Dr Berner, so clever, and he's gone mad." We asked him this and that about our parents, and he pointed to the sky! That they were in heaven! He's not normal, he went mad so easily. And for a few

days we were sure that he was mad. But they always went to the wire, but far away, far away from the wire. And Dr Berner, they knew, he knew that there were four, five, the fifth doesn't come to the wire, she rests – that was me. And very rarely did I go.

He also threw us bread from his allowance, from his own portion! And sweaters, it was very cold in Silesia in the mornings, when we stood for roll call it was very cold. And we put these on, but when other workers came, we were in danger. It was a struggle and you couldn't tell anyone. We threw it aside so that no one would see. And then later in the afternoon, when we had more freedom, we put it on: sweaters, jumpers, food from his mouth, taken away from himself.

He was like that, he didn't think about himself, that he should live longer. That we, the five of us, should live. He knew that not only Olga and her sister were there, but also the three of us.

He wrote on stones, he shouted on stones. He also had paper, because everything was in the clothing room: paper, clothes, everything, even pencils. Sometimes it didn't come, sometimes it did.

Frequently, Olga saw him being hit. Many times, not just once. And they scolded him with words that you couldn't hear. We saw that he was being slapped. And yet, when soldiers came without him noticing or they were too close to him, he waited until the last minute.

It was as if he was sent by God for us to live.

Outside through the dangerous barbed wire stands my husband. He heard that now people are leaving, many people are leaving. As he stood there my sister-in-law Olga, wrote to him that I had very nice shoes but they are completely ruined. There in Auschwitz. She doesn't know what will happen next. She wrote: What will happen?

And we went into the line, into the middle, and there were soldiers everywhere. And next to us was a guard, also a soldier, an older woman. At that time, they already had older people in the military, both men and women. And my husband took this pair of shoes and gave them a big swing, and they fell right in front of us on the path. And we quickly picked them up, so she shouldn't take them. And the guard in her wickedness was already a possessed woman, not like other bad women. She said, "You idiot!"

*And Mengele's selections:*

We knew that we were no longer being treated as human beings. That you kill people and it smells like roasted meat day and night, day and night. Sleep was not really sleep either. And sometimes there were encounters with Mengele, who could appear unexpectedly. At first, he selected fewer people for work or something like that. Later, he was seen there more often. And we were terribly afraid of him.

Why did Mengele always look at us naked? So that he could see who was still vital, fit for life. And

he was dressed. And only the hands. And my hands (laughs) until now, now they are, they were so small and beautiful and he selected me for his group. My sister Amalia too, Olga, Shari too. Then Irma came, Irma has such long piano fingers. He said, "I'm sorry, these are for piano players and not in, a factory. And she was supposed to go with the others he had sent, because they were too young or they weren't good enough...and they locked us up in a block. In a block that was already empty. There were already many empty ones, because they kept sending people further and further away.

Why were we chosen? The gentleman always chose more than he needed. Why is there always something he doesn't want? Someone was cross-eyed, cross-eyed...No. He said with his hands, they are piano hands, not working hands. We cried, she cried and we spent one night together.

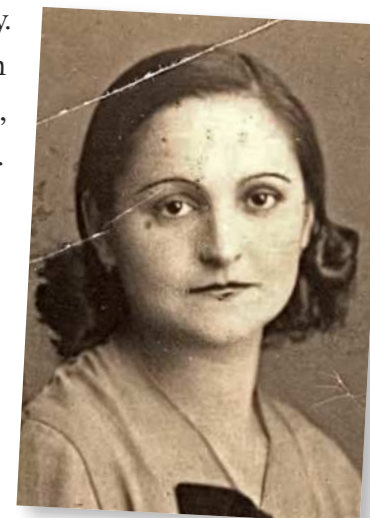
*Judith herself was lucky to pass the selection:*

You saw Mengele here or there all day long, selecting people for transport. There, at the train, it was work. They sent us here and there to work in Germany, we were labourers. We were going to Altenburg. But before we left, we were in the FKL camp for three days, where the crematorium was.

And we, the chosen ones, were standing outside, we had to take a strange woman as the fifth. It was terrible, instead of our sister Irma, a strange woman was with us.

Mengele will select me – that was almost certain. I got an eye inflammation. And my eyes were closed in the morning, as if they were stuck shut with glue. And red like a cat's. And everyone had to stand in front of me with their eyes open. And then stand up and walk: lice, lice. And with their hands, one hand without, completely naked, of course. And with their breasts exposed. And when I came, I was sure he would select me.

I took out this stickiness from my eyelashes, but I was red like a cat. All red, red, red! Here too, here too, red everywhere! And whoever had it squinted, squinted, he was sent away. Whoever had it with glasses too. With glasses, with everyone, nothing. And my sister was selected before me with one or two of those. She had two or three tiny little spots like this. Like you have here. And with that, he didn't need her anymore!



*Irma Hirshhorn, 1909-44.*

*D.K.: That was Irma.*

*J.B.: Irma. It was terrible! But it wasn't so terrible for us yet, why...*

And then I ran away from him. He just looked at my body and didn't look at my face at all: "Next!"

If miracles happen, there are miracles in the world.

*Judith's arrival at the Altenburg factory, where they prepared ammunition for German weapons:*

Some of the female guards said, "Ah, that's the good Altenburg workplace." We were sure it was a lie. Why didn't they always tell the truth? We should be calmer.

I arrived with my half-blind eyes. Sitting in a chair, looking through a microscope. After one day I said, I don't know what will happen to me. At that moment, when I say that I can't see well and that my eyes aren't good, that they're dangerous to others, that they're swollen and inflamed, another young girl comes in crying, with a (ponders)...

*D.K.: With a trolley.*

J.B.: With a small trolley, but almost as big as her, and she's crying. I say, "Why are you crying?" "I've got it, we've been here longer." She spoke Hungarian. "And I can't do it. It's so hard for me. I have to drag them out. And I can't do it."

I told her we weren't registered yet, no numbers, that was the second day we got there. And I said, "Then come here instead of me. Just don't tell anyone." I said to the sisters, "And I'll do it instead of you." I knew that if I didn't do it, I would go with the first group that was sent back to be killed. And I did it, I did it, it was terribly difficult for me. Terribly difficult! Ten, twelve hours, days and more, pushing heavy carts with ammunition boxes. Then sleeping

at night and every week it changed, we did night shifts or day shifts. It was terribly difficult, night shifts without food. And for me, I became like this (*indicates how emaciated she was*). Not like in Auschwitz, where we weren't given any food either, no food, only weeds. Yes, we ate weeds. And that worked, that worked, that worked, and every day when I went into the hall, I said: "Today I'll say I can't do it anymore. What will happen? I'm going to die, I can't!" And my good new shoes, which I got from my husband, had his number written inside. He also gave us a note there with an address on it. And his brother in Jerusalem lives here, if we stay alive, then we should write to his brother.

*She was so hungry that she ate snails that she found in the grass. As disgusted as she was.*

My teeth, they were very bad there, I thought I would come home without teeth. The flesh was completely swollen here and there. The teeth didn't fall out. It just hurt a lot. It was lack of vitamins. But these were minor issues compared to our major problems.

Her hands were burnt from work and the skin was peeling. I was close to the machines. The whole twelve hours. And I walk down the whole hall, and I do it with both hands down. I did that with both hands. And I was already completely burnt. And there were so-called nurses, one comes in and she takes something like a scalpel and she gives me a

black cream, a paper bandage, and, “Go back to work tomorrow!” And I went, I work with this hand up to here. But it bothered me so much, I had to scratch myself.

It was the end of the war. The commander of the labor camp was vicious, but many of the supervisors were a bit more kind, and another one comes. She says to me: “Girl, do you want to lose your hand?” I say: “No, but, it’s just, I’m working, it hurts.” She says, “At twelve o’clock you go back to the camp and you’ll get a bed card and you’ll sit in the camp for three or four days. You can’t work like this; you’re not allowed to.” I say, “Thank you.”

At twelve o’clock she recognizes me, despite the crowd of people. She comes up to me and says, “You go with the soldier.” He was such a nice, dear old man, old, old, old. And it was winter and there were beautiful, beautiful stars and he spoke to me and he said, “Beautiful, beautiful are the stars.” And he spoke so beautifully. He only spoke of the beautiful. And we came into the entrance of the camp, and I went in with him into a room, and there were some soldiers there, and he said, “Here is a wounded woman. She is to be sent to the infirmary tomorrow morning. Until tomorrow morning, she is to be left where she is.”

But it was a trap. The next day, some female guards arrived and said that whoever is sick will be taken to a hospital. One of them looked at me and

said, in Hungarian, “You crazy woman, you’ve gone mad! Don’t you know where they’re going? Get away from here quickly!” And I quickly left and hid. And I continued working with these hands, I don’t know how many kilograms in a day. Until the end of the war.

*It took them three months to get home. When they arrived at Târgu Mures, they were welcomed by Olga and Shari’s parents who had survived the war. The orphaned Hirschhorn sisters were urged to stay with them. Marci Berner returned in late August. Judith’s eyes were still inflamed and she was hiding behind dark glasses. He managed to get an antibiotic ointment from Bucharest. He cured her. And proposed to her.*



*Judith, with Inbal, Omer, and Amir Berner. Jerusalem, 2005.  
Courtesy Dagi Knellessen.*



Judith with Inbal and Amir, Jerusalem, 1980.

EILAT NEGEV is a journalist and author of many acclaimed biographies and critical essays. Her collaboration with her husband, Yehuda Koren, includes:

***In Our Hearts we were Giants.*** *The remarkable Story of the Lilliput Troupe - A Dwarf Family's Survival of the Holocaust.* This astonishing narrative of cruelty and survival was first published in Germany by Econ-Ullstein, 2003, and by Carroll & Graf, New York, 2004. It was then translated into French, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, Swedish, Finnish, Greek and Serbian.

An extended edition, titled, *Giants: The Dwarfs of Auschwitz*, was published in Britain by The Robson Press, London 2013, with a foreword by Warwick Davis. The book has been the basis for four international TV documentaries:

***Perla - the last of the seven dwarfs***, directed by Debbie Brukman, USA, 2002.

***Standing Tall at Auschwitz***, directed by Bill Brumell, USA, 2006.

***Warwick Davis and the seven dwarfs of Auschwitz***, directed by Ursula Macfarlane, Britain 2013.

***Par la Grace du Diable***, directed by Dominique Maestrati, France, 2019.



The Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, were a series of three trials running from 20th December 1963 to 14th June 1968, charging 25 defendants under German criminal law for their roles in the Holocaust as mid-to lower-level officials in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death and concentration camp complex. The trials were primarily driven by the Hessian Attorney General Fritz Bauer, who played a central role in initiating and prosecuting the proceedings.

*Note: the longueurs are included to indicate the duplicitous attitudes of the post-war German legal establishment with regard to their part in dispensing justice during the Third Reich.*



*Defendant Victor Capesius. - the 'pharmacist of Auschwitz'. He had been a sales representative for I.G. Farben, and had regularly visited Dr. Berner at his practice in Târgu Mures. At Auschwitz, he had cruelly allowed the three Berner children, and his wife to be gassed.*

**District Court Frankfurt  
am Main, 78th Trial Day,  
Monday, 17th August 1964.**

*Testimony of Mauritius Berner  
[given in German and translated  
by Catherine Mullier].*

Presiding Judge [Hans Hofmeyer]:  
So, you were saying that they came, were banging on the doors of the carriage and shouting: "Get out!"  
Were the carriage doors still locked at this point?

MB:  
The carriage doors were locked from outside. And the stream of people went forward, and I told my wife – I was with my wife and three children, three little daughters: "Do nothing. The main thing is that the five of us are together." [breathes in] "We'll soon see what will happen to us next." As soon as I said that, another soldier stepped between us and said: "Men to the right, women to the left" and separated us. I didn't even have time to hug my wife. She screamed at me:

"Come, kiss us!" Maybe out of some sort of woman's instinct, she was, she felt what kind of danger we were in. I walked back to them through the cordon, kissed my wife and my three children. And again I was pushed to the other side, and we went on – in parallel, yes, but separated. Between the two tracks, between the two trains, parallel but separate. [breathes in] Then, no, the crowd pushed me on as well, I lost sight of them, my family. [pause]  
Suddenly all I hear is: "Doctors and pharmacists gather here." We doctors and pharmacists all arrived with the Red Cross band on our arms. That was because we were allowed or even recommended to do this in Marosvásárhely, where we were put in the carriages: doctors and pharmacists should wear a Red Cross band on their arms. I also joined this group. Slowly, there were already 50, 60 or 70 of us. There were about 38 doctors and some pharmacists from our town, and there were also 63 from the surrounding area, who were also in the same ghetto. [pause]  
We stood there. Suddenly two German officers joined us.

One of them, a tall, handsome, young-looking man asked us in a friendly manner: "Where did you gentlemen study? You, for example? You, for example?" I said: "Vienna", another said: "Breslau", and so on. The second officer, that was Doctor Capesius. We recognised him, we whispered to each other: "That really is Doctor Capesius", who we knew before. He often came to us doctors as a representative of IG Farben. And he actually told the second doctor, the second officer – at that time I didn't know who that was, but now I know that it was Mengele: "Yes, almost all of these gentlemen studied abroad and most of them at German universities". [pause]  
Such a friendly conversation had developed that I felt encouraged to ask Doctor Mengele: "We have our diplomas in our suitcases, in the luggage that we put down there. May we perhaps take them out?" To which Mengele, after a little thought, said: "Well, you might need them. Go and get them." We walked back. I also picked out my luggage and took my diploma and [pause] some pictures of my wife and children. And we went back

to the group of doctors and pharmacists. [pause]  
In the meantime Mengele went away from us, and we saw him standing – not far from us, 20, 30 meters away – as the crowd was streaming towards him, and he pointed with his hand to the right and to the left. And so some people go to the right, and some to the left, women and children [breathes in] together to the left. [pause]  
Suddenly I see my wife and my three children walking further away from Mengele. And it occurs to me: I'll make a request to Doctor Capesius. I approached him and said to him: "Herr Hauptmann," I did not know the distinctions [i.e. ranks], "I have two children who are twins, they need greater protection. I will work as you wish, just allow me to remain with my family." I didn't know why we were there, where they [breathes in] were going. He asks me: "Twins?"  
I answered, "Yes."  
"Where are they?"  
I gesture: "There they go."  
"Call them back", he tells me, whereupon I call my wife and children, their names, loudly. And they turn around, and I gesture that they should come back. [pause]  
They come back, and Doctor

Capesius even took them by the hand, the two children, and leads us to Doctor Mengele. And stopping at Mengele's back he says to me, "Well, tell him." And I said again: "Herr Kapitän I have two twin children", I wanted to continue speaking, but he told me: "Later, now I have no time." And with a dismissive gesture he sent me away. [pause]  
Doctor Capesius said: "Well then, you must go back to your line. Get back!" And my wife and my three children continued along the same path. I began to sob, and he told me in Hungarian: "Ne sírjon – Don't cry. They're just having a bath. You'll see each other again in an hour." So I shouted to my wife and kids in Hungarian and went back to my group. I never saw them again. [pause]  
At that moment I was grateful to Doctor Capesius even in my soul. I thought he was trying to do something good for me. Only later did I learn what it meant to hand twin children to Doctor Mengele for his experiments. [pause]  
And I have also found the explanation for why Dr Mengele did not notice that they were twins. He probably noticed, he had a good eye

for that. Except that he was only concerned with identical twins. And my twin children were non-identical. I have their photographs here. If the court permits, I can show them to you.

Judge:  
Please do.

MB:  
That was my wife, that was my older daughter, and those were the two younger ones, the twins. So you can see they weren't alike.

Judge:  
Yes, Mr Witness, what happened to you then?

MB:  
I went back to my group, to the doctors and pharmacists. We stood there for a few more minutes. Then they lined us up in rows of five, and one of them in a striped suit – now I know that these were old prisoners, I didn't know it then – and a German soldier led us further into a large barn. There we had to undress naked. We were only allowed to keep our shoes. Then, in an open space, hairdressers received us, cut our hair and depilated us completely.  
They took us to the bath,

called sauna there. There they shaved us completely once again, so that no hair remained on our bodies. And we had to go barefoot through a disinfectant and wash our heads with it. And in a dressing room we got the striped suits, a pair of trousers and a shirt. We didn't get underwear. [pause]  
Then we were led out into the open. [pause]  
And there we waited – that was early in the morning – until about afternoon, so we had no sense of time. We waited there for a long, long time. We almost collapsed. And then a man with the inscription "Kapo" – "Block"... "Block...?", I don't know, 20 or 21, came and led us into a block where we were supposed to get coffee to drink. [pause]  
It was a terrible commotion, as soon as they let us in there. They had already beaten us in the meantime. And everyone was in a hurry to get this coffee, because we hadn't had a drop of water in our mouths for four and a half days, the fifth day already. And then they really brought a barrel of black coffee, which they distributed there. But it was a terrible commotion. People were even beating each other. So that's when we

began the prisoner's life.

Judge:

Yes. Now please tell me, was there not another selection? Or was it already on the ramp, where you were told that there were also cars there with the Red Cross sign?

MB:

Yes, that was still on the, on the ramp, when we were still in these...

Judge [interrupts]:  
On the ramp?

MB:

Yes, when we were still together. And that was still before I called my wife back. Before this conversation, I think Dr Mengele said that if any of the gentlemen were ill or tired, please, you have to walk another ten kilometres, please cross over to the other side, you will be driven in cars. [pause]  
We also saw that there really were trucks there. A colleague, a doctor, Doctor Löwenstein, who could have been about 52 or 53 years old at the time, stepped forward and a pharmacist Kovári, who said: "Please, I have half a lung." "Please, please, step over", they were told. They crossed over, too. Of course,

we never saw them again.

Judge:

Yes, and did someone point out the Red Cross sign to you there?

MB:

We saw a small car there with a...

Judge [interrupts]:  
Red Cross on it.

MB:

Red Cross, yes. And of course this gave us more confidence.

Judge:

You wrote a book about these events?

MB:

Yes.

Judge:

Do you have this book with you?

MB:

Yes, but in Hungarian.

Judge:

It's written in Hungarian?

MB:

Yes. But I translated this part into German myself, almost word for word.

Judge:

We've got it recorded on tape.

MB:

Yes. The book is here.

Judge:

Yes. You then arrived in Sachsenhausen on 29 or 26 October 1944.

MB:

Yes.

Judge:

Then to Kaufering and Dachau.

MB:

Yes.

Judge:

And you were on 30 April 45...

MB [interrupts]:

Liberated in Dachau.

Judge:

Yes. You haven't seen Dr Capesius since this time?

MB:

Not since the liberation.

Judge:

And before the liberation?

MB:

I saw him once or twice more in Auschwitz.

Judge:

[interrupts] You were a prisoner doctor then?

MB:

No, no, I worked in the clothing chamber. We were in the Gypsy Camp for five weeks, not working, only standing daily in roll call. We were very run down there, physically. After that we were selected again, they tattooed numbers on our hands. I also have the number A 16.058 tattooed on my arm. [pause]  
We had been taken to the A-camp - that was the first camp, A-camp, it was called quarantine camp - and held there for a few days. And then we were, we were selected once again. There I saw Doctor Capesius once again, accompanied by Doctor Mengele. But he had no active part in it at the time. It was only said that those who felt strong and healthy should come forward. And we were told that people who might have an injury should not come forward. [pause]  
But a colleague of mine, who didn't want to separate from us who had an injury tried it and he came into our line. And it was noticed, and he was beaten terribly and led back to his group. Doctor Capesius was only there, but

he didn't...

Judge [interrupts]:  
He didn't do anything?

MB:  
Didn't actively take part. And then we were transferred to the D-Camp. There we spent a whole night outdoors, under the open sky. It was pretty cold that night. Then someone took pity on us and led us out to the toilet. There were such long toilets there, up to 100 holes, and there we waited until the morning.  
[pause]  
In the morning a Kapo of the clothing chamber came and selected some people for himself. Among them he also selected me, so that I worked in the clothing chamber until October 26, in the D-camp.

Judge:  
I have no more questions for the witness. Are there still questions for him? From the side of the court, no. From the side of the prosecution, please.

Kügler[Counsel for Prosecution]:  
Dr Berner, would you please say what your wife's name was?

MB:  
Ida Salamon.

Kügler  
Ida. And how old was your wife then?

MB:  
She was born in 1906, so 38.

Kügler:  
38. And what was the name of your eldest daughter?

MB:  
Zsuzsi.

Kügler:  
And how old was she then?

MB:  
Twelve and a half.

Kügler:  
[pause] And what were the names of the twins, and how old were they?

MB:  
Helga and Nora.

Kügler:  
Can you say how old...

MB [interrupts]:  
Nine. Nine and a half.

Kügler:  
[pause] Dr Berner, you told us that you then arrived in the quarantine camp. And

there a selection took place, Dr Mengele and Doctor Capesius were there.

MB:  
Yes.

Kügler:  
I'm not sure I understood you correctly. Was it Doctor Capesius who said that those who feel weak should come forward, and especially those who have a fracture?

Judge:  
No, no, he said it the other way around...

MB:  
No, no, I didn't mean it that way. It was a selection not in this sense, again for gas or for the crematorium. Maybe they were looking for workers, or for manpower. But they said that only those who were healthy and had no injuries should come forward.

Kügler:  
Yes, and Doctor Capesius said that?

MB:  
Didn't say anything. He was just there.

Kügler:  
When you arrived, did you notice that Doctor Capesius

made any requests to the people arriving in Hungarian?

MB:  
He translated into Hungarian what Doctor Mengele had said: that whoever feels weak or ill should go to the other side, because you have to walk ten kilometres.

Kügler:  
Yes. Thank you, I have no further questions.

Judge:  
Attorney Ormond.

Ormond [Counsel for Prosecution]:  
Mr Witness, did you yourself experience Doctor Capesius as a doctor's visitor in your practice before?

MB:  
Yes.

Ormond:  
Did he visit you there repeatedly?

MB:  
Yes.

Ormond:  
Was your wife at the same time your doctor's assistant, the receptionist and kept files or something like that?

MB:  
No.

Ormond:  
He didn't know your wife,  
only you?

MB:  
Me, yes, but my wife no.

Ormond:  
Doctor, one more question.  
Is there any doubt that the  
second SS leader on the ramp  
was Doctor Capesius?

MB:  
No.

Ormond:  
Thank you.

MB:  
No doubt. May I say why?

Ormond:  
No further questions.

Kügler:  
The witness wishes to say  
why he has no doubt.

Judge:  
Yes, go ahead.

MB:  
Because not only I realised  
that this is Doctor Capesius,  
but also the other colleagues.  
We whispered to each other:  
"Look, that really is the

Doctor Capesius who used to  
visit us."

Judge:  
Dr Laternser.

Laternser [Counsel for  
Defence]:  
Mr Witness, you said earlier  
that you had gone to that  
doctor's group. When did you  
realise that, as you said earlier,  
Doctor Mengele let the men  
go to the right and the  
women and children to the  
left? When was that exactly?  
Were you already in the  
group of doctors?

MB:  
Yes.

Laternser:  
You were already in the  
group of doctors.

MB:  
Yes.

Laternser:  
And then you saw that the  
men went to the left and the  
women to the right.

Judge:  
No.

MB:  
No.

Judge:  
You misunderstood.

MB:  
No, not men to the left,  
women to the right, it's the  
other way around...

Judge [interrupts]:  
The witness said something  
else.

MB:  
That was earlier, when we got  
out of the carriages and when  
we were separated. In two  
streams the women and  
children and then men went  
separately.

Laternser:  
Yes.

MB:  
Then the doctors and  
pharmacists were put into  
another group again.

Laternser:  
Yes.

MB:  
And as we stood there, I saw  
Doctor Mengele standing at  
a distance of 20, 30 metres.  
These streams, which at that  
time had initially gone  
forward, turned around  
somewhere and came  
towards him – already  
separated into men, and

women and children. And  
there he sent them to the  
right and to the left.

Laternser:  
Yes. Where was Doctor  
Capesius standing then?

MB:  
There, near our group.

Laternser:  
Near your group?

MB:  
Yes, a couple of metres away.

Laternser:  
Yes.

MB:  
I can remember when I  
looked at my wife and  
children and this thought  
came to me so suddenly that  
I will ask him, he was  
standing about five or six  
meters away from us. And I  
stepped out of the group and  
went to him.

Laternser:  
Mr Witness, at the time when  
you saw that this selection  
was taking place, did you  
know or have any idea at the  
time what fate awaited this or  
that group?

MB:  
No, if I had known, I would

have gone with my wife and children.

[pause, complete silence in the courtroom]

Latarnser:

Yes. And now you asked Dr Capesius to help fulfil the wish that the five of you should stay together?

MB:

Yes, I asked him to help me with that. On the grounds that my twin children needed more care and I would accept any work that is given to me. We were always told that we were going to a labour camp, that we would work.

Latarnser:

You said...

MB [interrupts]:

I had no idea where we were, that it was called Auschwitz or what it was called or what was there.

Latarnser:

Yes, yes. You said earlier that this was a friendly conversation, wasn't it, between you and Doctor Capesius. Didn't he seem helpful to you then?

MB:

Yes, I just said I was grateful

to him even in my innermost soul. I thought he was trying to help me.

Latarnser:

Yes.

MB:

Only later did I realise what a devilish help it would have been to take my twin children to the experiments of Doctor Capesius...

Judge [interrupts]:

Of Doctor Mengele.

MB:

...of Doctor Mengele.

Latarnser:

And did you come to this conclusion later?

MB:

Yes of course, when I learned what happened.

Latarnser:

No further questions.

Steinacker [Counsel for Defence]:

That's not what I meant earlier. I just wanted to make the observation. Have you already described this in your book, which you published in 1947, this second event I am referring to now? Or did you only notice it afterwards, as

you just said?

MB:

I described it. I described this case, how this colleague was beaten because he wanted to stand with us with his injury.

Steinacker:

Yes.

MB:

But of course I didn't describe that Dr Caspesius was there or who did what.

Steinacker:

Are you prepared to make the book available to the court?

MB:

Certainly.

Steinacker:

Then I would ask you to give it to the court. No further questions.

Kügler:

May I ask another question?

Judge:

Go ahead.

Kügler:

Dr Berner, just to make it clear: I have understood that you were standing with a group of doctors and pharmacists, yes?

MB:

Yes.

Kügler:

Then the incident with your wife and children took place.

MB:

Yes.

Kügler:

And did I understand you correctly when it went on as follows: Doctor Capesius translated into Hungarian a request from Doctor Mengele, addressed to the group of doctors and pharmacists, that those who were weak and could not walk should come forward because there were still ten kilometres to go.

MB:

Yes.

Kügler:

Did others step forward? Or did you only these...

MB [interrupts]:

No, from this group only two people, Dr Löwenstein and the pharmacist Kovári.

Kügler:

And were you able to find out about the fate of these two people later?

MB:  
No one saw them again. So probably they were immediately taken to the gas chamber.

Kügler:  
Did you see whether these two gentlemen got into the truck?

MB:  
No.

Kügler:  
You didn't see that?

MB:  
No, I was busy with my things. I saw the scene as I have described.

Kügler:  
Yes. Thank you very much, Doctor.

Laternser [Counsel for Defence]:  
Dr Capesius would like, if the questioning is over, to give an explanation.

Judge:  
Go ahead. Are there any further questions?

Raabe [Counsel for Plaintiffs]:  
One question: Dr Berner, did you see whether Dr Capesius was concentrating a lot on

the prisoners' luggage on the ramp?

MB:  
No, I didn't notice.

Raabe:  
Thank you.

Judge:  
Dr Capesius, you wanted to give an explanation?

Capesius [Accused]:  
I was in Berlin during Whitsun 1944, for the whole holiday. That can be proven. In addition, in 1945, after the survivors returned to Marosvásárhely, a number of former Auschwitz prisoners came to my wife in Schäßburg and offered to speak well of her or of me. At that time no one said anything about Capesius' selections – like Dr. Martin Berner, who at the time went by Márton, Mauritius must have come later – at any rate no one claimed that Capesius made selections. Doctor Klein probably made the selections as is evident from the position between Doctor Mengele and Doctor Klein. Because the witness describes in his testimony how Doctor – he now says Doctor Capesius, but I say Doctor Klein – how Doctor Klein had to ask the

Hauptsturmführer Doctor Mengele. And since he now knows that Mengele was Hauptsturmführer – at least today he knows it – he still wrote in his statement, "Obersturmbannführer Mengele." There is a difference between the Sturmbannführer Capesius, of whom he heard later, because otherwise this question would not have been explicable. Because with the same rank nobody had to ask. Moreover, these statements, about how they are to travel in a car, with the ten kilometres distance, are the typical statements of Dr Klein. [pause] When Doctor Berner stepped out at the beginning, he claims to have left his luggage behind. Of course I cannot swear to it, but it was very common that the doctors had to take their doctor's bag to the lower wooden barrier. There was a small guard's house. And that's where all the doctors dropped their bags off. Otherwise it is inexplicable – as Doctor Berner states retrospectively when asked about his diploma, how he should go back to get his things. The trains are 45 carriages normally, as we can see from the reports of the

gendarmerie in Hungary. How he suddenly finds himself there next to the prisoners' commando, which is beginning to clear out and load up, how he is supposed to find his luggage there to get his diploma, would be inexplicable. It is proven that we took the luggage from the ramp, the doctors' luggage; but not at night, rather during normal working hours. And in any case I did not fetch it during the Whitsun holidays. [pause] In any case, I did not select the doctor or anyone else. But during my office hours, between half past eight and half past four in the afternoon, I was at the ramp more often, as I said in my first statement.

Judge:  
So, Doctor Berner, first of all: You told us and specified the date exactly that you arrived in Auschwitz was May 29, 1944?

MB:  
Right.

Judge:  
And you told us "I know that it was the second day of the Whitsun holiday".

MB:  
Yes.

Judge:

No? Now Doctor Capesius says that he could not have been there at the ramp on that day, because he was in Berlin and could also prove that. And he thinks you must have mistaken him for a certain Dr. Klein. Now first of all the question: Did you already remember the date of 29 May, that is, the second day of the Whitsun holiday at the time, or did you only later bring the second day of the Whitsun holiday together with 29 May?

MB:

No. I already knew then that it was the second day of Whitsun. We were brought in by train from Marosvásárhely Thursday morning. That was the 25th, and the 28th, Sunday, was Whit Sunday, and the 29th, Monday, was Whit Monday. By the way, I did not write my book for this trial. I wrote it in the year 1945 in Dachau immediately after my liberation, and it was published in 1947 by the Bolyai publishing house.

Judge:

[inaudible] And when it was then established that this year the Day of Atonement fell on another day, he told us: "I only knew the fact of the Day

of Atonement, and I enquired afterwards and established that the Day of Atonement had taken place on that day. And from that day on I knew what day it was."

MB:

The dates were imprinted in my head. I am sure that it was these dates.

Judge:

So at the moment I have no way of confirming when in 1944 Whitsun was.

MB:

That is easy to confirm.

Judge:

Yes, it's easy to confirm. But you stand by your statement today, you arrived there on 29 May, and that was the second day of the Whitsun holiday?

MB:

Yes.

Judge:

And on this day you also saw Dr Capesius?

MB:

Yes. With the luggage inspection, as Doctor Capesius says: Not one of us doctors was able to carry or bring his luggage, the so-called doctor's bag or

anything like that, up to that point, up to this group. It was taken from us, and we had to pile it up there next to the carriages.

Judge:

Yes.

MB:

And it was like that word-for-word. And I wrote this in 1945 – and it was published in 1947 – that I asked to be able to go back after my diploma, to which he said: "Well, you might still need it."

Judge:

Yes. Didn't the other guards or the prisoners prevent you from running back to your luggage?

MB:

No, it wasn't far [Judge repeats: not far] 20, 30 metres, 40 metres maybe.

Judge:

Yes?

MB:

Yes.

Latenser:

Doctor Berner, in your book – I'm sure you know the contents very well – did you already mention Doctor Capesius at the time?

MB:

Not by name.

Latenser:

Not by name.

MB:

Perhaps from a false assumption or premise. And I didn't mention any other names either. Nor do I write Dr Mengele, because I did not yet know who he was. Nor do I write that I went from Marosvásárhely, from the ghetto, until liberation, and then came back, because this is what I thought: In every small town in Hungary the same thing happened, and I did not want to immortalise his name, I did not want to erect a monument to him. I did not write the name because of this perhaps false premise. [someone tries to interrupt, but he continues] But an American critic, who read my book at the time and praised my book very much, said that it should be introduced as a text at university, only found this one mistake and accused me of it: Why didn't you [unintelligible] the names of these people...

Judge:

List them.

MB:  
Yes, put them down.

Latenser:  
Doctor Berner, in response to a question, I believe from the presiding judge – please correct me if I have mistakenly recalled it – you said earlier that when you were standing at the ramp you also whispered the name of Doctor Capesius to each other.

MB:  
Yes.

Latenser:  
You can still remember that, yes?

MB:  
Yes.

Latenser:  
Then you started a sentence which I ask you to complete: “If Doctor Capesius can prove that he was not in Auschwitz on Whit Tuesday...”

MB [interrupts]:  
Whit Monday.

Latenser:  
“Wasn’t in Auschwitz on Whit Monday”- then you didn’t finish the sentence. What did you want to say?

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MB:  
That the court must decide, must examine the evidence, what was the truth.

Latenser:  
Well, Doctor Berner, you can assume that I fully understand your situation. But I would like to ask you: do you want to absolutely rule out the possibility of an error in your identifying Capesius or Klein?

MB:  
Yes.

Latenser:  
May I ask, could you perhaps – I don’t know what the court thinks about this – read us the chapter of the book dealing with this incident in German? I don’t suppose it will be very long. I don’t know, Mr. Chairman, what you think about it, but it would be a good idea now...

Judge [interrupts]:  
Is not in itself admissible, counsellor.

Latenser:  
Yes, the following is permissible: That the witness, in answer to my question, says what he wrote down in his book at the time. That’s what I’m asking. It is not to be read out as a document, but I ask

the witness: what did you write down in your book at that time? And that he then announces it to us. In my opinion that is a permissible question...

Judge [interrupts]:  
Is it not very long, what you would need to read to us?

MB:  
In my handwriting it is [counts out loud] six pages.

Judge:  
Are there any procedural objections to this? Not as far as I can tell. Yes? When he reads from his own book as his own creation. I have no objection.

Latenser:  
I have no reservations either, otherwise I would not say so, Mr. Chairman. Otherwise I wouldn’t make the motion that he should do so. Because he is not reading out a document or anything, but only what he put down at the time.

Judge:  
Yes.

Hummerich [substitute Judge]:  
Whether it is correctly translated is the question.

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Latenser:  
Well, the supplementary judge has doubts in another direction as to whether it is translated correctly. Very well, I agree. I accept it without further ado, because the witness speaks very good German.

Judge:  
So let us say, then, that in the universal agreement of all those involved in the trial, the witness is allowed to read the passage from his book – what is name of the book?

MB:  
“Oh mein Auserwähltes Volk” [Oh, my chosen people!].

Judge:  
...and it deals with the arrival of the witness on the ramp, right?

Latenser:  
Yes. Judge, may I make another suggestion?

Judge:  
Yes.

Latenser:  
Can the copy in Hungarian be given to us so that Dr Capesius can read in Hungarian.

Speaker [unidentified]: No.

Laternser:  
Well why not? I mean, why shouldn't that happen? I don't understand.

Grossmann [Lead Prosecutor]:  
I must object. Then I would request that an interpreter be called in for the proceedings.

Judge:  
Oh, no, let's have it read out like this. I trust the witness enough to read us what's in the book, and no loose ends. No, I'll let you read it. Read out what you have translated for us.

MB:  
[Proceeds to read from "Oh my chosen people" in German.  
[pause, absolute silence in the courtroom].

Judge: Are there any other statements, or questions?

Hummeric:  
A question for the defendant Capesius. You said earlier that the very fact that the doctor on the ramp had asked Dr. Mengele shows that it could not have been you, because there was a difference in rank between Dr. Klein and Dr.

Mengele, but not between you and Dr. Mengele. You did not have to ask him. Is it fair to conclude that you could have decided yourself without asking Doctor Mengele?

Capesius:  
I didn't get into the situation, but in any case, as an officer of the same rank, as far as I know, I didn't have to ask anyone else about something. But that thing didn't happen. In fact, he wrote in his book, for which I am very grateful, that he referred to the fact that he is a doctor. Would he have had to refer to the fact that he is a doctor to me? No. He told that to Dr. Klein. That is absolutely, unambiguously Dr. Klein.

Judge:  
I don't fully understand your logic, Dr Capesius.

Laternser:  
If you knew each other, then Capesius knew that he was a doctor, then he did not need to tell him. When two acquaintances meet there. Mr. Capesius just says, "If he has to tell me," at least according to the book, that 'I'm a doctor'. He wouldn't have needed to do that if it had been me he was telling about this."

Judge:  
Doctor Laternser, he didn't have to do it at all. First of all, he had the Red Cross band on his arm, and secondly, he was already in the group of doctors, so he didn't have to refer to it. If the man said it anyway – God, what does one say in all that tumult.

MB:  
[pause] May I still answer Dr Laternser?

Judge:  
Yes, go ahead.

MB:  
Yes. Although I knew Doctor Capesius, he knew me too. But he did not give any sign that he knew us or that he treated us as friends. So I turned to him as a German officer and told him and repeated to him that I was a doctor and so on, as a reason. But not because I believed that he did not know who I was or that I was a doctor.

Judge:  
Rather because he didn't seem to recognise you...

MB [interrupts]:  
Yes, yes, of course, he didn't treat us as acquaintances.

Judge:  
Quite.

MB:  
He knew everyone from Transylvania, all the doctors and pharmacists.

Judge:  
Yes.

Steinacker: [Counsel for Defence]  
I have one final question.

Judge:  
Go ahead.

Steinacker :  
Mr. Witness, did I understand you correctly when you described the first officer as a "tall, handsome, young-looking man"?

MB:  
Yes.

Judge:  
Yes, he said that.

Steinacker:  
Is that true?

MB:  
Yes, that was Dr Mengele.

Steinacker:  
That was Dr Mengele?

MB:  
Yes.

Steinacker:  
And in your book you spoke of a “tall man”, yes? In the book when you were reading, you mentioned the “tall man”. Earlier in the testimony, you spoke of a “tall, handsome, young looking man”, yes? Is that correct?

MB:  
...who did the selection.

Steinacker:  
Who did the selection.

MB:  
Yes. Tall. He was tall.

Steinacker:  
Was big? Big?

MB:  
Mengele, in my view, was big. He was taller than me, so for me he was big, quite tall, yes.

Steinacker:  
Quite tall. Thank you.

Kügler [Prosecuting]:  
One more final question: Dr Berner, can you remember the colour of the uniform that Dr Capesius had on?

MB:  
It's difficult...I believe...how do you say it, greyish-blueish.

Kügler:  
Yes. Thank you very much.

MB:  
You're welcome.

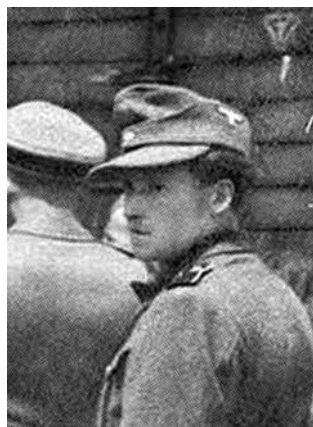
Judge:  
Yes, what else? Yes please, ask.

Baretzki [Accused] :  
Doctor, you say you were in the clothing chamber, yes?

MB:  
Yes.

Baretzki:  
As a prisoner.

MB:  
Yes.



*SS guard Stefan Baretzki at the selection ramp, Auschwitz.*

Baretzki:  
Can you perhaps remember a Block Führer Baretzki?

MB:  
Yes.

Baretzki:  
Do you know me?

MB:  
Because of the gloom I can't see. Can I go closer?

Judge:  
Come forwards, come forwards.

MB:  
Perhaps I can go closer, or Mr Baretzki should come closer.

Judge:  
Yes, go ahead. Yes, of course, yes.

Baretzki:  
Can you say something about me?

Judge:  
The accused is asking if you know him?

MB:  
Yes, by sight. I believe I can remember that it was him. His name was quite dreaded by us because he beat people, he beat people hard. But I had nothing else to do with

him. Only from...

Judge [interrupts]:  
Did you ever experience that he beat people to death?

MB:  
No, I only have that from hear-say.

Judge:  
And what do you have from hear-say?

MB:  
That he beats people terribly.

Judge:  
That he beats people terribly.

MB:  
Beats them, yes.

Judge:  
Did you also hear something about him having a special way of beating people, with which he could beat people to death with one blow?

MB:  
No, only with the fist somewhere [unintelligible] with the fist, I believe.

Judge:  
Yes. And did you hear that prisoners died from these blows?

MB:  
If I want to be sincere, and I want to be sincere and I don't want to incriminate him, he has a very bad name there, a bad reputation. And everybody was afraid of him, but I didn't know details about him.

Judge:  
Any further questions?

Baretzki:  
No.

MB:  
But...[exhales]

Judge:  
Yes? Do you want to say something?

MB:  
...since Doctor Capesius states that he had nothing to do at the ramp or had not worked, not selected, on the ramp, I would like to inform the High Court of the following, which I did not experience but heard. About three and a half months ago a woman came to me in Jerusalem as a patient in the health insurance company where I work, as a sick person. I examined her, and while I was writing her the prescription, she told me: "I hear, Doctor, that you are

going to [hesitates, Judge says "Frankfurt"] Frankfurt, as a witness at the SS [hesitates] trial. Do you know that I also knew Doctor Capesius, personally? I lived with him in the same house in Bucharest. I know his wife well too." I think she's already come forward as a witness. This woman claims that she was deported from Bistritz along with 4,000 other Jews, and that night Doctor Capesius made the selection alone. Doctor Mengele was not at the ramp at all. I do not wish to forestall the court. I just want to bring it to your attention. I believe this woman has come forward as a witness?

Judge:  
Yes. Is already known here as a witness and has already been invited here on October 2 at 10.30 am. [breathes in] Mr Witness, if you can swear in good conscience to what you have told us, then you must now take the oath.

## Verdicts

Victor Capesius was sentenced to 9 years imprisonment. He served only 8 years and was released on January 1968. He died from natural causes at his home at Göppingen, West Germany on 20th March 1985. He was unrepentant until his death.

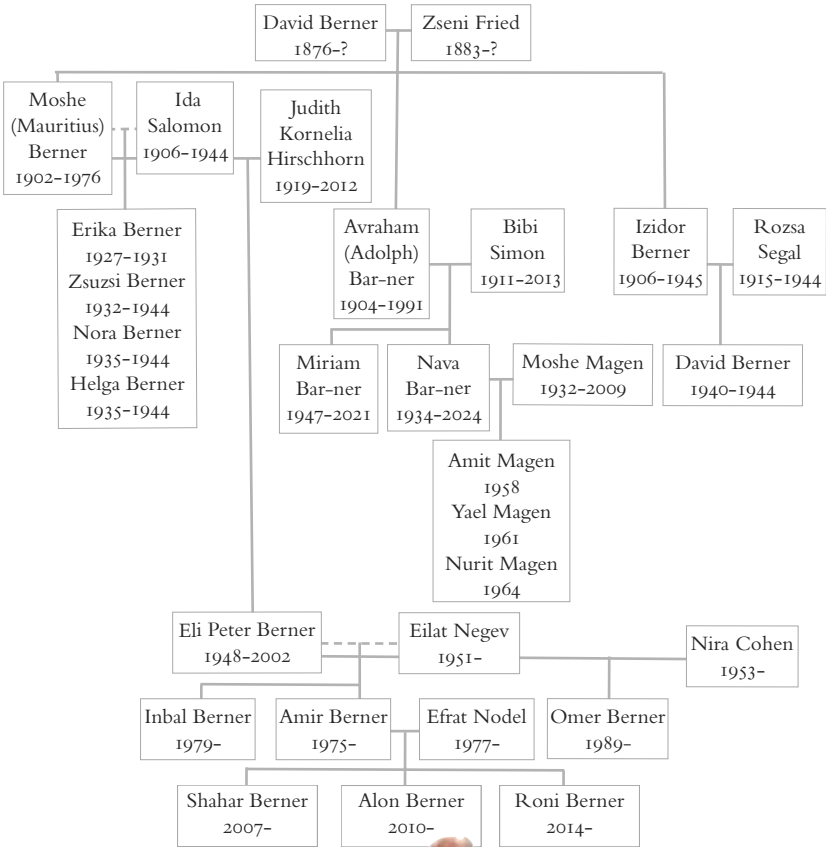
Stefan Baretzki was sentenced to life imprisonment. He committed suicide on 21st June 1988 at Bad Nauheim, West Germany.

Link to Hessischer Rundfunk documentary, 1993. *The Auschwitz Trials, 1963-65*:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4ECSiQ28\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4ECSiQ28_Y)



*Survivors of the Hirschhorn family, Ernest, Schoma, Kornelia (Judith) and Amalia, in mourning for their sister Irma. Târgu Mures, c.1945.*



*The Berner family, Jerusalem, Rosh Hashannah, 2022.  
From left: Inbal, Roni, Eilat, Alon, Efrat, Amir, Shahar, Nira.  
In front, Omer - like his grandfather, a doctor!*

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה לְעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה  
הִנֵּה אֲנִי מְבִיא בָכֶם רוּחַ וְחַיִּיתֶם:

Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones;  
Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you,  
and ye shall live:



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INBAL BERNER is the granddaughter of Dr. Mauritius Berner, the author of *Oh, my chosen people!*. Her zealous guardianship of her grandfather's legacy has enabled the translation of this book from the original Hungarian and subsequent Hebrew versions into English. Her comprehensive research from archival sources, adds invaluable to our understanding of the Holocaust.



*Inbal Berner with her niece, Roni.*

MARTIN BAKER is a writer and children's book Illustrator. These include, *Wellington the Tin Soldier*, *Rhymes with Berti*, *Girls in Front*, *The Pie-Eyed Piper*, *Parodies Lost*, and *The daring aerobat*. He contributed features on classical music, poetry and art history, to the BBC, The Times, and also many academic publications in the UK and USA. For



many years he worked for the classical record company, Deutsche Grammophon, researching and writing musicological texts.

*My father from China* is his disingenuous justification for living a colourful life.



*The sisters wearing costumes to celebrate Shavuot - the holiday to celebrate the coming of Spring, where the tradition is to decorate homes with plants and flowers.  
Târgu Mures, 1940s.*