

# This is All I Remember

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## FOREWORD

On several occasions in the past, it occurred to me that I ought to write about the months I spent in German concentration camps. Most recently, I considered this in 1985, when Micu Klein, a fellow inmate from Buchenwald, insistently asked me to do so. I haven't done it till now for two reasons. Most importantly, because I knew that in Romania such writings served only too well Ceaușescu's nationalist policies, aimed at instigating hatred of Hungarians. "Jews from Romania were not sent to camps because such acts do not agree with the humanism typical of Romanians. The Hungarians, by contrast, were driven to deporting the Jews by their inherent aggressiveness and inveterate xenophobia." These were the twin claims the Ceaușescu regime was trying to substantiate in Romania by maintaining total silence about the massacres perpetrated by the Romanian army in 1941 (before the Nazis' decision to exterminate the Jews!) while at the same time happily publishing every detail of the deportation of the Jews from Hungary, and especially from Northern Transylvania, a region that was taken from Romania and given to Hungary in 1941 as part of the Second Vienna Agreement. The victims of the 1941 massacres numbered several hundred thousand Jews from Bessarabia, Bucovina, Dorohoi, etc.

An equally important reason for not writing was that I felt I didn't have much to say. I went through life without paying much attention; I have always been interested in the future, not in the present. This is why it is difficult for me to write about the past. Moreover, in the camp, I deliberately tried "not to be there", not to let events get close to me, because I felt that this attitude helped survival. I've heard many people say that their life is a real novel, if only they would write it down! I have never felt this way and I have always known that I have no literary talent whatsoever.

Despite all this, I am trying to write now first of all because my daughter, Donka, mentioned that she feels I told her little about my camp experience. I think she is wrong: over the years I have told her all. But perhaps she is right in that this 'all' is not much. I will nevertheless write it down now because perhaps it will mean much to my grandson, Benny, one day.

And finally, I am writing because I think that the survivors' authentic, sincere, and unexaggerated testimony is needed.

## 1943-1944: THE LAST YEAR OF FREEDOM

It is a complete mystery to me why I didn't read newspapers or listened to radio news until after 1945. Before that my knowledge of world events was indirect and full of gaps. In 1943 my father would listen to the BBC all day long and, half asleep, he would mutter the news ahead of the announcer, news he must have already heard that day who knows how many times.<sup>1</sup> But he was not a talkative man. I hardly remember any information coming from him.

My behavior is all the more surprising since I was never 'apolitical'. I had always been interested in the question of the elimination of social misery and of ethnic and racial discrimination. I still remember how deeply touched I was by Georg Fink's book, *I am Hungry* and by all the poverty that I saw daily around me. I even dealt with these issues, but only in theory. I believed that socialism would bring about the disappearance of all that is inhuman. I became, in 1936, at age 14, an active member of the Habonim, a Zionist organization, because I agreed with the ideology of its leader, Borochoy. According to Borochoy, Diaspora Jews could not participate in bringing about the socialist revolution in their respective countries, and therefore they had to create a socialist state in Palestine. Later, like so many other young people, I read little of what Marx wrote but argued all the more about his teachings. My conversations with my friend, Pityu Roth, for instance, were endless. I remember long discussions about where the capitalists' profits will go and about what people will do, under communism, with their overabundance of free time.

I kept up my daily visits to Pityu even when, in 1944, Jew-beatings became common in the streets of our town, Kolozsvár. Once I was attacked by several men. I started running, with the little band of ruffians at my heels. A man with earlocks, dressed in a black kaftan, thought I was chasing *him*. He took off too, and disappeared behind a door. I managed to reach home and lock the gate behind me. The attackers didn't give up and tried to knock the gate down but, luckily, without success. Mother was away, visiting some neighbors and when she came home she said, all aghast: "A Jewish boy was beaten up on our own street!" "Do you know who he was?" I asked. "No. Who?" "Me", I said. "But don't worry, they didn't manage to lay their hands on me."

I wasn't willing to give up my conversations with Pityu even after this incident, although my way went past the brothels of Forduló street, and the habitués of those establishments were not particularly trust-inspiring. I had a plan. If they try to catch me I will use foul language, a characteristically non-Jewish reaction. And I had the satisfaction of experiencing how good my idea was. One evening,

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<sup>1</sup> The names of David's parents are Herman Fränkel and Gizella Fränkel, née Weisz.

on my way home from Pityu's, five thugs came out of the pub on the corner of Forduló street as I was going by. I hear one of them say: "There goes a Jew!" "Your grandmother's a Jew!" I retorted, casually. "Hm. If he mentions my grandmother, he isn't a Jew after all" said the guy, and the throbbing of my frightened heart was somewhat eased by my psychological success. With feigned composure I continued on my way but I soon heard another voice: "Perhaps he is a Jew too! Hey, you, stop!" "The devil will stop, not me! I'm going here, to the brothel. You can come look at me there, if you want", I said. I thought this will convince them for good since, obviously, a circumcised Jew wouldn't behave this way. But no, the thugs kept after me. I went in through the first door. They followed me. We were crowding a small courtyard enclosed by an iron fence and lit by a bare bulb. They turned my not exactly Aryan profile towards the light and I expected them to squelch me through the fence. But no, I was wrong this time. "Pardon us, brother", they said and tried to kiss me on the cheeks. But that, I could not tolerate.

This story reminds me of another occasion when my appearance was deemed non-Jewish. In the autumn of 1943 I traveled to Budapest from Kolozsvár. (Until the German occupation of Hungary, in 1944, Jews could travel freely there. In Romania on the other hand, already by 1941, Esther, my future wife, needed a special permit to travel from her hometown, Torda, to Temesvár, the town where she had to take her high school equivalency exams. In 1941 Jews in Romania were not permitted to attend regular high school and had to take such exams.) A young theatre student and I were standing on the corridor, in the train, engaged in trying to win a pretty girl by taking turns at reciting poetry. I was up to the task because I had passed my baccalaureate a year before and I knew about 150 poems by heart. After a while, the girl must have had enough, because she left us. My young rival whispered to me: "Did you notice how obvious it is, in this girl's case, that she is Jewish?" To which I replied, also in a whisper: "Why, in my case it isn't?" The guy was terribly embarrassed. He hemmed and hawed and excused himself, saying he didn't mean it as an insult. I assured him that if he insulted anybody, it could only have been himself. He retreated into his compartment, put on white gloves, and made the rest of the journey in silence, sitting upright next to his elegant mother.

I was going then to Budapest to take the entrance examinations at the rabbinical seminary and I was doing that because seminary students were exempt from forced labor. I had graduated from high school in 1942 and, as a 21 year old, I was supposed to go to forced labor. (In March of 1939 a law was passed in Hungary according to which untrustworthy elements of society – by which they meant primarily, the Jews – were conscripted for forced labor instead of regular military service.) My older brother, Joki [Jehoshua], had been a 'musz' for a year already and it was only with great effort that my family succeeded in

exempting him, for reasons of health, in the fall of 1943.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Mother had tried to exempt me from the service on the basis of a medical certificate too. We had turned for advice to a local cardiologist, renowned for his good will. The advice he gave was that right before the medical exam I was to do a hundred knee bends and that I should tell the doctor in great detail about the grave pleuresy which had indeed kept me bed-ridden for a whole year at 16. And I did indeed get an excellent sounding diagnosis: pericardeal adhesion and miodegeneration of the chord, in compensated state. But it did me no good whatever: when called up, I was found fit for service, which is why I turned to the rabbinical seminary. Incidentally, the diagnosis almost did me in later. After I had passed my entrance examination to the rabbinical seminary in Budapest, Mother came to visit me once. I lived on Salétrom Street, on the fourth floor. I always ran up the stairs and, of course, I got out of breath. Mother became alarmed of my breathlessness. She took me to the private office of the head physician of the Jewish Hospital. She mentioned to him my earlier diagnosis, oblivious to the circumstances under which it had been established. The head physician, a pompous ass, examined me and, pretending not to have heard the diagnosis Mother had mentioned, self-importantly declared: "Hm. We are dealing here with a pericardeal adhesion – he stressed the 'dh' – "but, luckily, the miodegeneration of the chord is compensated. Immediate hospitalization and surgery are necessary. The heart has to be separated from the pleura, to which it is now stuck." I tried to explain later to Mother that we were swindling ourselves but she insisted I had to be examined in the hospital. I soon found myself in a ten-bed ward. The head physician, who obviously thought he had stumbled on an interesting case, ordered a lot of EKGs made: under stress and without, lying on the right side and on the left, etc. The EKGs were all lined up on my night table when, during the morning rounds, the head physician, full of himself, started explaining to his army of followers, what they were to see on the various sheets, which he had not yet seen himself. He then spread them out and, to his shock, it became apparent to all present that none of his predictions was even vaguely validated. After a moment of silence he spoke: "I still think that immediate surgery is necessary." For my part, I concluded that immediate discreet departure was necessary.

The idea of the rabbinical seminary was given us by our neighbor, Uci (Tibor) Neuman. He was already in his second year at the seminary and claimed to have excellent connections which would assure acceptance even in the absence of any knowledge. Besides, he said, in my two years at the Jewish High School I must have learned some Hebrew and must have gotten some knowledge of the Bible. I could brush up on all of this during the two weeks I had till the exam. My parents were enthusiastic about this idea. For my part, I was very reluctant. On the one hand, I wanted to share the fate of the Jewish youths and go to the forced labor camps. I also disliked anything that was in the least bit connected to religion.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Musz' is an abbreviation of *munkaszolgálatos* 'person in forced labor service'.

Despite my parents' piety, atheism was my oldest and my deepest conviction. But on the other hand, I wanted to become a doctor and a stay in Budapest would perhaps allow the possibility of unofficially auditing certain courses at the Medical School.<sup>3</sup> I couldn't resist this temptation. Mother and I traveled to Nagybánya and drove in a horse carriage to the mansion of general Revicky, who gave me a deferment. I started studying for the entrance exam with my classmate, Zoltán Lustig, an excellent, intelligent and pleasant young man, whose dream was to become an engineer. The date of the entrance exam was postponed several times so the initial two weeks of preparation became six months. Now I am very sorry that I had so little interest in and so much antipathy for my studies at the time. I did acquire some factual knowledge (I knew Moses' five books so well, for instance, that I could tell where certain unusual phrases occurred), but I remained essentially unacquainted with the spirit and the content of the Bible. The study of the original text would have meant so much more than the reading of the Hungarian translation with which I occasionally spend a few hours nowadays. As to the Talmud, I managed to get through only a small part of the Beca treatise. I committed the unforgivable mistake of always looking for nonsense and contradictions in it, and didn't even try to approach it from a cultural-historical perspective. I had some 'success' with this attitude, though, because some of the questions I asked from my tutors happen to appear in the famous Talmud commentators as well, such as Rashi or Rambam. One after the other, two of the tutors my parents had engaged felt unqualified to continue instructing me. The rumor spread that young Fränkel was a Talmud *chacham* (a Talmud scholar) and chief Rabbi Glasner perhaps mentioned this to my father, who might have nourished the secret hope that, eventually, I will go on to become a Rabbi after all. In the end I was the loser because, although I managed to pass the entrance exam to the seminary on the strength of my knowledge rather than that of Uci Neuman's connections, I hardly remember anything from the Talmud today.

After I was admitted to the seminary I did indeed try to audit courses that would be useful to a medical career. Most of all I would have liked to attend dissection classes. The professor, a profoundly democratic man and a practicing Catholic, surreptitiously gave twenty Jewish youths permission to participate in his classes. But now the quota was full. I had the crazy idea of looking this professor up as a member of the rabbinical seminary, and ask for special status, in the interest of the intertwining of religion and science. It was typical of me that I did look him up, and it was typical of him that he agreed to see me. After patiently hearing me out though, he turned me down. So I audited courses in histology (I went to labs too but all I remember from that experience is that I was bored to death), chemistry, biology, physics, and mathematics.

I also went to see the famous actor Oscar Ascher. I wanted to learn from him how to recite poetry. (In the Jewish High School back in Kolozsvár I had been

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<sup>3</sup> Jews in Hungary were barred from attending most institutions of higher learning at the time.



considered one of the best at reciting poetry.) Oscar Ascher asked me to recite a few poems for him, 'but, for God's sake, don't choose 'The Insane' ', he said. I recited a poem by Attila József. "You know", Ascher said, "when they want to find out if there is somewhere underground water for a well, they make a trial dig. But one can find out whether there is indeed enough water there only after one properly digs up the area. Look, your trial dig was successful. I accept you as a pupil. But you should know that the road ahead is long and hard. What you are doing now is a strictly personal matter. You have no speech technique whatever. Put your hand on my head. Do you feel my skull resonating when I speak? Now put your hand on your own head and speak. You don't feel anything, do you? Oh well, but all this can be learned." I would have gladly studied with him but my stay in Budapest was cut short. In all it was hardly longer than three months altogether. My parents could not afford the expenses any longer. Father had stopped working for quite a while by then. His textile store was being managed by an Aryan strawman but that business must have brought us very little. I remember that after the Vienna Agreement, when Kolozsvár was given to Hungary, Mother flew to Bucharest and brought back some puplin that was ours. (The flight itself was considered a great act of courage in those turbulent times.) As far as I can tell, that was all we had. According to what I remember, in 1944, after my return from Budapest, my family lived on what I earned giving private lessons in Kolozsvár. In those times a large number of Jewish pupils studied privately and took equivalency exams at the Jewish High School. I was particularly well suited as a tutor because I was very good in all subjects – Hungarian, Latin, Hebrew, physics, mathematics – and so I could teach everything myself. It seems to me that I had a large number of private lessons but thinking back on it now it seems unlikely that my earnings alone could have covered the needs of a family of five.

Suddenly, this quiet though far from carefree life started to unravel at unbelievable speed. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the German troops occupy Hungary. After four weeks, from April 5<sup>th</sup>, we have to wear the yellow star. After six more weeks, we are thrown into the ghetto designated for us in the Irisztelep brick factory, and after ten more days we are crowded into cattle cars, and, on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 1944, we find ourselves in Auschwitz.

## BEFORE THE GHETTO

What do I remember from the last days?

Once or twice we, Jewish youths in Kolozsvár, were ordered to the railway station. We had to help the Wehrmacht unload weapons from cars. The soldiers watched us work without any interest. They didn't even rush us. "These German soldiers are ordinary simple folk", we thought.

The rumors about being put into a ghetto grew more and more insistent. The local Jewish leaders calmed people down: we'll only be taken to Transdanubia, to work. My family didn't try to do anything to escape. Once my brother Joki and I walked out on the Torda road. We probably dimly thought that we'll look around to see how one could get across the border to Romania.<sup>4</sup> It is amazing how naive, to say the least, one had to be for this. We couldn't have nursed any serious plans of escape since otherwise we would have looked more thoroughly into the possibilities of illegal crossing that I now know existed by then.

Much later, I found out from my cousin Miri<sup>5</sup> that when Margit Ganz, the Hebronim's Israeli envoy, offered to include Miri in a group bound for Budapest, Miri immediately suggested to my parents that Baba [Rozál], my younger sister, should go as well. At first, Miri says, my parents were against it. Later, they changed their minds but by that time it was too late; the quota was full.<sup>6</sup>

My father had the reputation of a very clever, well-informed man. Throughout the years a great many people sought his advice. This is why it is almost impossible for me to understand his passivity in general, and in particular, the fact that he hesitated to send my sister Baba to Budapest. I will now give the only possible explanation I can imagine.

According to the chronicler of the Hungarian Holocaust, Randolph L. Braham, it is likely that the Kastner group (whose 1685 members were taken to Switzerland, through Bergen-Belsen, for \$1000 each) was formed sometime in March.<sup>7</sup> Braham mentions somewhere that of this group, 388 members were from Kolozsvár. They were selected by the local Jewish leaders and the Zionist envoys, specifically Jozsef Fischer, Hillel Danzig, Dr. Lajos Márton, Dr. Jenő Kertész and Dr. Sándor Weisz. Most of the people selected paid the ransom money themselves. But there were exceptions too, as for instance Árpád Bihari and his family as well as the city's Orthodox chief Rabbi, Akiba Glasner, and his family.

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<sup>4</sup> After the Vienna Agreement, the Hungarian/Romanian border ran between Kolozsvár and Torda.

<sup>5</sup> Mirian Trattner, nee Stern, one of the three children of Sára Stern, nee Weisz (Aunt Sári), David's mother's sister.

<sup>6</sup> Miri reached Israel safely. She lives there now with her husband, two children and six grandchildren.

<sup>7</sup> R.L. Braham is the author of *A magyar holocaust: A népirtás politikája* [The Hungarian Holocaust: The politics of Genocide], Gondolat, Budapest, 1988.

Now my father was close to Glasner and I suppose Glasner must have reassured him that our family would be included in the group as well. This must have been why he didn't want to let Baba go. He must have changed his mind when he found out that we were not included after all. Of course, this is mere supposition but this is the only plausible explanation I can find for my father's behavior.

All we did was take one suitcase to our tailor and one to my father's straw man, leave a few things with our Gentile friends, the Dobrows, and place a lace curtain and some china with a neighbor. Obviously we had neither gold nor jewelry since otherwise I would know about it. Upon my return, I got back all of this, except for what was with the Dobrows, who fled the Russians in great panic, leaving everything behind. After the war, my cousin Özsi, Miri's brother, found some family pictures in the attic of Dobrov's house. The lace curtain, after 43 years, was hanging in Elsa's room when Esther and I fled Romania in 1987.<sup>8</sup>

Over the years I often heard the following question, phrased in various ways: "Why did you let yourselves be driven like cattle to the slaughterhouse?" I first heard it immediately after our arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, when a French speaking Polish prisoner shouted at us: "Why did you come here?" And later, when on my way home I stopped in Prague, a Russian officer confronted me with it: "Why did you let yourselves be dragged away?" We ourselves wondered about this a lot and now I have to ask the first and most important question in this connection: Why didn't we resist being herded into the ghetto?

What could we have done? 1. Organize armed resistance 2. Hide 3. Flee to Romania.

1. Armed resistance? I heard in those days that there was a Jewish man in Kolozsvár who had been a colonel in World War I and who belonged to a rightwing Zionist organization, the revisionists led by Jabotinsky. It was rumored that he considered giving Jewish youths military training in the beginning of the forties. But in 1944 most Jewish young men were in labor camps, and besides, there was no way of procuring arms. But even if there had been a few brave people and even if they had managed to find arms, it would have been suicidal to use them against the Hungarian and German armies in a country in which there were no partisans and whose population was generally wildly anti-Semitic.

2. Hide? There were kind people, to be sure, who might have helped but there were very few who accepted the deadly danger that hiding someone entailed. And let me add that one cannot blame them for it. What's more, morally, a Jew could hardly accept to put a friend in such danger.

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<sup>8</sup> Eugene Stern (Özsi), Miri's brother was taken to forced labor. He survived and later emigrated to Montreal, Canada. Elsa Brunner, nee Goro, was David's mother-in-law. She lived with the family in Temesvár from 1950 until her death, in 1981. Esther and David defected to Germany from Romania in 1987.

3. We are left then with fleeing across the border. This was a real possibility. It so happens that Esther's home, in Torda, right across the Romanian border, housed a group led by Ari Hirsch (and of which Esther was an active member) who organized the escape of more than a hundred Jews. The fugitives arrived in Bucharest and either stayed on in Romania or tried to get to Palestine. Would it have been possible to save thousands this way or through similar means? Perhaps. But such an action should have been organized by the leaders of the Jewish community who should have persuaded the people to take the risk by telling them that they were faced with a choice between life and death. The leaders of the community did exactly the opposite. They misled people and calmed them with the false story of the Transdanubian labor camp. The Reform chief Rabbi Moses Weinberger was urging his flock to stay even a few hours before he himself, together with his wife, fled over the border with the help of the Torda group. We cannot discard the possibility that the Jewish leaders lied consciously because in the interest of a smooth and quick deportation, the Gestapo had demanded no mass resistance in exchange for saving the Kasztner group. It is beyond doubt that the Jewish leaders from Kolozsvár made a serious mistake or, if the above supposition is correct, they committed an unforgivable crime.

## THE GHETTO

It sends shivers down my spine to think how smoothly we were herded into the ghetto. The brick factory was surrounded with barbed wire and guards were set up. No other measures of preparation were taken. The people, with their small luggage, were brought into the factory on carts and trucks by the Hungarian gendarmes. We slept on the bare floor, on our blankets. In the area of the ghetto, where the 12000 or so Jews of Kolozsvár were crowded there was no more than a single wooden outhouse! It was frightening to see how difficult it was to gather ten people to dig a ditch and somehow put together a common latrine. The brick drying area, where we slept, was covered. But we were not cold anyway in the pleasant May weather. Thinking now back, I am surprised at how complaint, problem and quarrel free was the way in which this huge mass of people got used to these degrading, inhuman circumstances. Perhaps this was the result of millenary inheritance, or perhaps it was due to the fact that we were being deprived, quickly and relentlessly, of our human rights and dignity.

I don't remember what I thought about, what I felt. The only thing I remember clearly is that I was keenly considering the idea of breaking out of the ghetto. I didn't want to escape; that seemed hopeless. I only wanted revenge over the guards: I wanted to kill one of them. I knew that it would amount to suicide, and, indirectly, if I thought of the reprisal, a crime as well, but there was in me a definite desire not to let ourselves be butchered without any resistance. This was a wild fantasy, devoid of any practical side, but I know that I was serious about it because I went to young man named Kupferstein, who was my elder by a few years, and who I thought was a communist, and I asked him what his own and the party's opinion was about such an action. What blessed naivety! To think the party was there! My recollection is that Kupferstein answered that he had no instructions, but I am sure he put it more evasively.

We must have spent a week in the ghetto. Our neighbors were the Bihari's. We slept huddled against one another. We didn't get any food; we ate from the provisions we had brought along. There were rumors richer Jews were cruelly being tortured to find out where they had hidden their valuables. The Hungarian authorities were trying to get at the Jewish riches before the Germans did. The rumor that we were to go to Transdanubia to work persisted. Some even knew we would work in a lumberyard. Strangely, this complete existential uncertainty did not cause any panic in me. Nor was there any mass panic. Somehow everybody kept his anxiety, his fear, locked within himself. Within the family we did not talk about what lay in store. It was reassuring that we were together and we hoped to stay together.

Nothing reached us from the outside world. Later I heard from my cousin Miri that Árpád Dobrov was brave enough to bribe a guard and so got some food to

us. I don't remember this and later, when in the seventies, I spent a lot of time with Árpád and his wife, Tilda, in Temesvár and Kolozsvár, where they came from Venezuela, they never mentioned it.

I came into contact with the outside world only on May 23rd when we were led across town to the railway station in one of the first groups. Besides my own luggage I also carried the bundles of an elderly couple, who were friends of ours. Despite my heavy load, I looked about me to observe the crowd who had gathered to stare at us from the sidewalk. I don't remember seeing any malicious smiles but what stayed with me, sharply, is that I saw no sign of compassion either.

But one cannot draw any generalization from this. Who could those people be, who came to gawk at us and why did they come? Clearly these were not the people who were shocked by the criminal decision of the Hungarian government, or who were outraged by the sadism of the Hungarian gendarmes, or who were saddened by the anti-Semitism of the Hungarian masses.

The Bulgarian people, the Bulgarian political parties, and the Bulgarian clergy were able to prevent the deportation of the Jews by organizing mass movements and protests. There is therefore historical proof that this was possible. I didn't see any citizen of Kolozsvár who would watch with sympathy, or, God forbid, outrage, this miserably winding row of people, who represented the most shameful abasement of the Hungarian people and its history.

## ON THE WAY TO AUSCHWITZ

### 6 horses, 40 people, 80 Jews<sup>9</sup>

Amid wild shouts and blows, the Hungarian gendarmes crowded us into cattle cars, 80 people and their respective bundles per car. By the time we came to our senses we found ourselves in a state that was more miserable than that of animals. There is something worse than the ghetto! The struggle for 'life space' began right away. People were not exactly fighting but they were not considerate either. Everybody thought only of themselves. I don't know how it happened but I was asked to make order. This was a task that was meant for me: to make order in a well-defined space with minimal means. (This characterization fits the research problems that I chose to work on later, in electrotechnics.) And I did indeed solve it. Kindly and quickly. Somehow everybody had room to sit eventually. The thought occurred to me for the first time, a crazy thought, that I found ridiculous myself, that here are eighty people in almost identical circumstances thus creating, for a short time, the caricature of a socialist system. This was flawed in principle, if only because everybody disposed of what they had brought along, and that was quite uneven. But I left it to chance to decide who will occupy what socio-geographic place in the car. The only thing I found important was that everybody get to sit down as quickly as possible. And then the Citroen's asked me to move away their shabbily dressed neighbors, whom they thought dirty. "I was glad to help carry your luggage", I said, "but I can't help you with this." "Now you're rubbing it in that you did something for us", they answered, insulted and insultingly. I felt they were wrong. But this experience touched me profoundly and since then, whenever I helped somebody I tried to keep silent about it. Today it also hurts me because my position wasn't completely right either. I was rigidly adhering to the principle of equality although perhaps I could have found a way of fulfilling their request without hurting others.

During the first two days of the journey we were on Hungarian soil and we were guarded by Hungarian policemen. Inhumanely. We didn't get any water. We had to do our needs in the car and they barely gave us a chance to clean it up. The treatment improved considerably when we were taken over by the SS for the last two days of the trip. They didn't shout at us. They didn't hit us. Once or twice a day we were allowed to get out and drink water and do our needs.

Everybody sank deep into their own thoughts. We didn't talk much about what was in store for us. But my father, though, must have known a lot. When, still on Hungarian soil, the train turned towards Kassa, Father turned pale as a sheet. It must have been more than just a guess as to what was to follow. But he didn't talk about it with us, 'children'.

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<sup>9</sup> During World War I, cattle cars bore signs that read: '6 horses, 40 people'

I remember vividly that I suggested to Joki, my older brother, that we should do something. Even if all we achieved was the killing of a single guard, we would nevertheless die a different death. Perhaps I myself did not take this thought too seriously since there were very few young people in the car and therefore we had no chance of success, while at the same time we knew that a single such attempt would have unforeseeable consequences for our companions. Joki discarded my suggestion immediately and decisively. I mention this, as well as the similar idea I had in the ghetto, only because it shows that I, like probably many others, did think about letting ourselves be dragged to our deaths without resistance.

Somehow, after four days, it was in the air that the end of our journey was near. We were dejectedly stuffing ourselves with the leftover food. We probably felt that we wouldn't be allowed to take it any further.

It is a bitter memory that, starting from the last afternoon of the last day, Mother and Father didn't talk to one another anymore. They had quarrelled. And I am sure I know what the cause of their argument was, although I never asked Father about it later. Aunt Sári, Mother's sister, had caught a cold and her temperature went up. My parents must have disagreed because Father must have suggested to Mother, who, at 46, was a healthy and resourceful woman, not to go with Aunt Sári and the sick in case there is a choice, but rather, to go with her fifteen year old daughter, Baba. Mother did not want this. I cannot grasp how and why, since she could hardly help Aunt Sári whereas had she gone with Baba, perhaps both would have survived. This hurts me dreadfully to this day.



## AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU - Unnatural selection

The shock of the arrival in Birkenau seemed unbearable. The train stopped at dawn, with a small jolt. Before we even had time to come to our senses the doors of the car were pulled open and the SS soldiers were already driving us out, with bestial shouts, cruel blows, and barking dogs. "Los, Los" (come on, come on) they yelled incessantly. A man in prison clothes shouts at us angrily in French: "Why did you come here? Tomorrow you'll leave there!" and he points to the smoke coming from a huge chimney. "We didn't come, we were brought", I answer and I do not believe what he says. But I see that we can't take our luggage along and that the women are separated from the men. In a matter of minutes we are there in front of Mengele: Father, a 56 year old, short, plump man, his hair all white, and Joki and I, young and in good shape. Mengele gestures: Father is to go to the left, the two of us to the right. And then, Father takes his two sons by their arms, and says, decisively, in German: "No. These are my two sons. I am going with them." This process, called selection, took place extremely quickly. There was no time for disputes. And so Father simply came along with us.

What followed lives in my memory like a hellish nightmare. We had to undress completely. They shaved us. Only our eyebrows and eyelashes were left. Afterwards we got dressed again and then we were crowded in a small room where thugs in prison clothes, like wild beasts, yelled, beat us ruthlessly, and trampled all over us. The way I remember it is that they walked on people with nail-soled shoes, and that we were pressed so as to form a compact mass, which could be stepped on. Perhaps this is just my imagination, since it is so terrible and unthinkable. But it is a fact that to this day this image is alive in me and I almost feel on my shoulders the traces of the nails of their boots.

Next came the bath. I didn't expect anything but water to come from the pipe because at the time I had not yet heard of the gas chambers disguised as shower rooms but who knows what Father must have felt. After the bath, we were only allowed to keep our shoes, and we got a shirt, underpants, a striped light prison suit and a cap (Mütze).

It was late at night when they crammed us, more than a thousand men, into a lightless barracks, which would normally barely accommodate 200 people. This night lives in me like another nightmare. We were so crowded that not only was it impossible for everybody to sit but it was difficult even to stand. Here there were fights for a sitting place; blows were flying all around.

From our apartment on 16 Eotvös Street in Kolozsvár we were lowered to the ghetto in a day; we were pressed into the cattle cars in an hour, and here we had descended into the Auschwitz-Birkenau hell in a matter of seconds. In twelve

days we had sank, from the yellow star-lit 'free' life to where life seemed unbearable. Who would have ever thought that in 12 short hours we would be nostalgic for the 'comfort' of the cattle car? I felt and I knew that their aim was to dehumanize us, that they considered us animals and that they were treating us as such. Here, in the barracks I had the painful experience to see that we did indeed behave like animals.

(Once, on a Sunday afternoon later that summer, I was sitting by myself in the camp, in Magdeburg when a middle-aged man joined me. He had been a baker in Kolozsvár, his name was Landesmann. We started talking. He commented on the ruthless, selfish way in which people fought for even the smallest privileges. "I met only one man" he said. "Somebody who, during our first night, in the crowded barracks, gave me his seat. Do you know who he was? You." I don't remember this moment, and I don't know how he could have recognized me that night, in the barracks, where the only light came from outside somewhere. But it is sure that such behavior is consistent with my inner convictions at the time. I felt it was essential to show to ourselves that we can remain human under any conditions. And the fact that this (could have) happened is the greatest satisfaction of my life.)

I was unwilling to lead this animal-like life. I suggested to Father and Joki not to accept this fate. Not with bitterness or despair but after rational consideration, objectively. Rather than this inhuman life, better a dignified freely chosen death. The electrified barbed wire surrounding the camp offered an easy solution. Father and Joki didn't want it and it is the bitter irony of fate that from the three of us, I alone survived. (In Dr. Victor Frankl's book, "...trotzdem ja zum Leben sagen" I recently read that there were very many who 'ran to the wire'. I didn't know about this. Personally, I don't know of any concrete cases, but it seems very likely to me that it happened.) By myself, I didn't have the courage to commit suicide. But I vowed to myself that I will live only as long as I will be able to stand upright, literally and figuratively.

We spent less than ten days in Auschwitz-Birkenau. We heard of the gas chambers, of the crematorium, of the open pit in which they occasionally burned people who were still alive, not only the already gassed corpses that did no longer have room in the crematorium. Little by little we started believing the unthinkable. I belonged to those who doubted for a long time. I was advised to go out at night, under the pretext of peeing, and sniff the air. At night one could see the flames and the stench of burned flesh and hair was stronger.

Did we actually see it, or did we only infer, that Mother went to the other side, with Aunt Sári? I don't know. But we were sure of it. I remember, our first barracks were separated from a women's barracks only by a narrow path. Assuming all the risk, I crossed over there once, and I ran inside everywhere desperately shouting Baba's name. I was looking only for Baba, but failed even at that.

After some days we were moved to another barracks, about the size of the first one, but equipped with stacked cots. There were only two hundred of us sleeping here, pressed like herrings, on hay sacks, under blankets. I say we slept in the barracks because during the day we roasted under the strong sun in a small yard between two barracks. In the morning we could wash in a hurry and then we got our terribly small bread and margarine or cold cut ration. The official portion was minimal enough but most of it was stolen by the *Blockälteste* (the block chiefs) and their helpers, the *kapos* and the *Stubendiensts*. As nourishment we also got a warm meal once a day. This slop-like liquid, transported in huge buckets, was called *Dorgemüse*, and we waited for it every day as if it were heavenly manna. Every ten people had one canteen in which a big spoonful of soup was poured. The ten people lined up to sip from the wish-wash. First we were entitled to three gulps each, and we watched, lynx-eyed, one another's Adam's apple to prevent cheating. If there was anything left, more gulps followed. The morning and evening *Appell*, the roll call, was the only thing worse than the daylong idleness in the great heat – there was no shade anywhere. Wretched was the one who crept back into the barracks to rest or who overslept in the morning and did not appear in time for the line up. These people were mauled by the *kapos*. The *kapos* in Birkenau were common criminals and virtually without exception they were all sadists. Every line up was accompanied by howls and blows. Then they counted us up. Then they beat us again, especially if the number wasn't right, which, with our illiterate *kapos* was quite frequent.

The *Appell* was a daily torture that lasted for hours. The SS only came at the end and counted us up again. Besides filching food and the beatings, the *kapos* busied themselves with stealing from the convicts whatever valuables they might have still had hidden away. Not that there was much. But several of us had good shoes and, as we were to find out later, this was of the highest value. (In 1939, Mother bought Joki and me a pair of excellent boots each. If only she had bought one for Father too!) It was this footwear that the *kapos* were bloodthirstily hunting for. The most dangerous thing was to spend much time in the latrine. Because as one sat there, on the boards surrounding the hole, one's feet were visible from the outside. And in this position it wasn't easy to scurry away if the *kapo* were to grab at your shoes. I don't remember whether the convicts tried to steal shoes from one another. Nor do I remember in what way we defended ourselves against night shoe-robbers. The only thing I know is that both Joki and I left Birkenau in boots.

On June 5, the three of us, Father, Joki and I, left this most horrendous scene of our detention.

What I could never express, and what I haven't seen rendered even roughly anywhere in the literature, with the exception of Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich", is the atmosphere of the Birkenau days: bleak, oppressive, hopeless, pregnant with well known and unknown dangers. This is how an encaged animal must feel.



## ASCENT FROM HELL (*Buchenwald*)

It felt like a deliverance to get, fifty of us, in a cattle car, dressed in light prison clothes and supplied with a tiny bit of food. Indeed, it was as if one ascended from hell. After a trip of about twenty hours we arrived in Buchenwald at dawn, on June 6th. It was still dark.

We didn't even guess yet what great luck it was to get, of all the dispersion camps, precisely to Buchenwald. But we were immediately struck by the friendly way we were addressed by the Czech prisoner (a camp policeman) who took us over. And what he said thrilled us all: "The Allies have landed in Normandy."

What is this? Where are we? Where have we been taken?

Buchenwald, we found out later, was one of the first concentration camps in Hitler's Germany. This is where they sent, at the end of the thirties, the political prisoners, primarily the communists and the socialists but also the members of the religious sects that opposed bloodshed. A significant number of the convicts were homosexuals or common criminals: murderers and burglars. At the beginning, the SS entrusted the common criminals with the internal organization of the camp and the conditions were dreadful: the SS and the Kapo thieves tortured and worked the convicts to death. After the breakout of the war, at the end of a long struggle, the politicals took over the internal control of the camp. This suited the SS and the Gestapo too because as a result, the camp was put in order and thus, they were better able to meet the needs of the war economy by organizing external work units.

While in Auschwitz-Birkenau the kapos killed, stole and murdered, here peace and quiet reigned. Only those were punished – severely – who stole. We found out here that in Birkenau about eight tenths of the official food ration was stolen from us.

The miracle the communists were able to perform within the Nazi concentration camp was unbelievable and uplifting. I, who for years had sympathized with the communists and had tried to get in contact with them, was looking around in amazement. And I thought: How much more the communists would be able to do if they took power in a free country, if such results have been reached here! It is a bitter irony of fate that, after the war, I saw how the communists transformed the countries where they did seize power into veritable concentration camps. But in Buchenwald then I didn't see any trace of this danger. Only when, a few years ago, I read Semprun's book about Buchenwald, "Quel beau dimanche", did I realize that his Buchenwald was very different from mine. As a leading communist he enjoyed extraordinary privileges. The seeds of the Nomenklatura existed already there. But at the time, we saw and enjoyed only the advantages of a camp run internally by the communists.

They treated us like humans from the first day, when file cards were set up, containing information about us: name of father and mother, date and place of birth, shape of face, color of eyes, height, the date and reason of arrest etc. It was here that I got the number I became: 58649. From then on a small triangular yellow piece of cloth with a U on it showed that I was a Hungarian Jew; my number was displayed on a small rectangular piece of cloth. Yes, it is terrible that instead of a name I was designated by a number and any time I reported somewhere I had to say this number. But in Birkenau we had not even had this much. There I was one of the many, not a specific individual. And, crucially, here they not only numbered us, they also took account of us. Somewhere there was a trace of what 58649 designated. After liberation I found this file card and I have preserved it to this day.

It was easy to discover who the communists in a transport were. On the night of our arrival they found out who had fought in the Spanish Civil War. (In our group it was Gyuri Adorján, as far as I know). Through them they got to the other communists and it was from among the communists, or based on their recommendation, that the 'officers' were chosen: Blockälteste, kapo, Stubendienst. And here these officers were honest, law-abiding officials. This 'personnel investigation' was obviously not perfect but it was the only possible one. Of course, people's subsequent behavior was watched. But it was unavoidable that some passed as communists or as trustworthy although they were not, and that some became corrupted. Soon we experienced this on our own backs, painfully.

Buchenwald was very crowded in the summer of 1944. The convicts lived in several two storeyed brick buildings and in many wooden one storeyed barracks. We didn't get into either. For us they set up a so-called *Zeltlager* (tent camp). I seem to remember that each huge tent housed about a hundred convicts. I remember precisely that, while sitting on the latrine, I again mused about the fact that now indeed there was total equality among people, and wondered how this micro-society will behave. Of course I myself smiled sarcastically when I attributed some sort of socialist character to this state of affairs.

The daily routine was simple: reveil, the making of beds, washing up, Appell (relatively quick and blow-free), coffee and distribution of food. Idleness. Lunch, which was quite different from the next to nothing they gave us in Birkenau. Here the plateful of food was always consistent. Again leisure. Evening Appell. Those who left some food for the night could have dinner, and if you wanted to, you could wash again. Bedtime. During the day there was a special lining up in front of the 'barber' to get shaved.

I had the opportunity to observe at close range the danger of corruption. In every tent they named six Stubendiensts. Somebody must have deemed me honest because I was one of the six in our tent. Our task was to keep the tent neat and clean and to take over and distribute the daily food. The margarine and

the cold cuts were measured out. The bread on the other hand had to be broken into three. But the loaves were not of equal size. My companions suggested that we should pick the two largest loaves for ourselves. I opposed this strongly and as a result we too got our loaves at random. I knew how important this was in principle and I was pleased that I had managed to convince my five companions not to give in to the temptation of corruption. Aside from the Stubendiensts, only the barber was in a privileged situation. A scum by the name of Kupferstein from Várád enlisted as barber. (In Magdeburg he became the translator and he behaved disgracefully.) I tried to keep a close eye on him because I saw that, in exchange for food, he took people out of turn. Once, I remember, I went over to Father while he was being shaved, and from our conversation, it became obvious that I was his son. At which Kupferstein cried out: "Why didn't you say so before! Now I see you don't let me be because I don't give special treatment to your father. But this is quite easy to arrange!" He was dumbfounded when I explained that I wanted him not to give special treatment to anyone, including my father. We are equal enough in our misery; everybody should keep his turn.

From the data I obtained in 1987, (when my wife, Eszter, and I fled Romania to Germany) from the Red Cross it can be seen that they kept precise tabs on the fate of us, 'numbers', and so I know that we spent there 11 days in all. From this period I remember only a single unusual event. In the barracks that were neighboring the Zeltlager were imprisoned the members of the Copenhagen police. They wore civilian clothes and were young, springy, and disciplined. They got special food and Red Cross parcels. We were still there when they were put in Red Cross cars and transported back to life, from where they had been snatched because of failure to obey Nazi orders. Therefore their camp life could not have been longer than ten days. And still, a large number of them died. It remained a mystery to us why they "fell like flies", as was put there. They probably could not stand the atmosphere of the camp, that ungraspable something, which I cannot describe but whose oppressive, tormenting effect I still feel now when I think back.

On June 16th they organized an external work unit. Our friends advised us to try to get into it because the conditions were supposed to be very good and because the 'cadres' (Lagerälteste, kapos) sent along with the 2000 or so workers were excellent people.

All three of us were 'successful' in getting into this work kommando, which was sent to Magdeburg on June 17th. We already felt at home in the cattle cars and we were glad that, for this trip of a few hours only, we had been given several times the food rations that we had left Birkenau with.

## MAGDEBURG

The camp lay at the outskirts of the city and was surrounded by barbed wire. In the thirty wooden barracks or so, wooden stacked beds. For the first time, everybody had his own bed, hay sack, hay filled pillow and blanket. The food: in the morning, a dark slop made of ersatzcoffee, a little bread, a piece of margarine or cold cut; at lunch, a thin soup with occasional traces of meat. In the evening, the dark slop again. With this many calories one couldn't last long even staying idle. But we worked hard: clearing rubble, and building a railroad and an air raid shelter.

Reveil at 5:30am. Appell. The row of convicts, divided into work units, started at 7am on the approximately five km road leading to our place of work, a synthetic gas factory called Brabag. After 10 hours of hard labor and frequent beatings, the tortured, exhausted, drained people had to stand for Appell again, for hours. The Appell was the scene and the time of the refined torture inflicted by the SS camp commander. It was the most dreadful part of the day. It was already dark by the time we could go wash and then lie down.

Every day and every night there were air raid warnings, and often bombings as well. In the immediate vicinity of the camp anti-aircraft units were set up. They thought perhaps that the camp provided them with some measure of protection. When the bombers appeared in daytime --shiny white dots in the sky-- we were driven out running, on the fields surrounding the factory. We were driven out because the kapos and the SS were terribly frightened. During the night we trembled through the attack under our respective beds.

It soon became obvious that the 'personnel' people back in Buchenwald had made serious mistakes when choosing the cadres. The Lagerälteste was a red-squared political prisoner but he had a single aim: to gather enough money from filching food and cigarettes to engineer his own escape. (He eventually succeeded in this.) Most of the kapos were common criminals but all of them behaved like wild beasts. They didn't have to work and they had plenty of food. They defended these privileges at any cost. They struck us and beat us up to prove their effectiveness. But beyond this, a large number of them must have been sadists. Or perhaps one becomes a sadist when one rules over life and death, and the blood that irrupts after a blow inebriates instead of frightening one away.

Our life was threatened by starvation, murderous blows, and bombs, and was filled by our endless attempts at somehow defending ourselves against these dangers.

First of all we tried to get lighter, better work. Our aim was not to thereby weaken Hitler's Germany, but rather, to delay our physical decay. We had to try



to get into a 'better' work unit. The quality of a unit depended on the type of work and on who the kapo was.

One of the jobs was the clearing of rubble: for 10 hours we had to clear away the remains of reinforced concrete walls, using drills and pickaxes. This work was both hard and dangerous. Its only advantage was that the kapo and the Todt Vorarbeiter (the work leader) kept a respectable distance, from which they could yell but they couldn't hit. I remember that I was entrusted with the responsibility of leading the work of a small group. After a few minutes I realized, to my horror, that I was paying attention to the efficiency of the work process rather than to how to save our strengths. I immediately changed the 'style'. Today this episode reminds me of the 'Kohn from the Gestapo' joke.<sup>10</sup>

Another job was the building of a railroad. We had to carry, at a quick pace, the rails and ties, and we had to pickaxe the gravel under the ties. The pace was killing and the blows terrible. After liberation, I saw the well-fed German workers build a railroad between Buchenwald and Weimar. The rail, which three of us used to carry with our bare hands and running, was carried by six of them, at a comfortable pace. They were holding it with some special pincers, wearing gloves. Luckily Father had to carry only ties. Both of us were carrying them but so as to have all the weight on me.

We also built reinforced concrete air raid shelters: digging ditches, mixing casting cement etc. Connected to this there was a small unit that worked on a tugboat transporting sand and gravel on the Elba canal. The sand was taken out of the boat by a crane and the job was to shovel the sand in its way. There were eight to ten people in this group, which was too small to have a kapo or an SS guard and anyway, the work rhythm was dictated by the crane. This was an ideal work place also because occasionally one got to chat with the sailor on the boat. (I will never forget one such conversation. The sailor asked me why we were held prisoners. When, in answer to his question, I told him the story of our deportation he was filled with such intense anger as I have never seen before. Shaking his fist and trembling with rage he said: "We will show this butcher a thing or two!" It felt very good. From this spontaneous reaction one can conclude that there must have been many who were not aware of the liquidation of the Jews if this man, who had been working by our side for weeks, had no idea about it.) Joki managed to place himself into this unit from the first days. A further advantage of this unit was that it was relatively stable, that is, it was made up by the same people, and so one didn't have to strive every day to get into it. And, furthermore, it was at the head of the column marching to work. Joki insisted that I should go there too. But Father was not able to 'position' himself as easily as we were. For that you had to be particularly on the ball and very mobile. And I had decided to stay with Father at any cost, to help whenever possible. And

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<sup>10</sup> Kohn is taken in to the Gestapo and is beaten up dreadfully. He is left alone in the room in a pool of blood. The phone starts ringing. He manages to get to it, picks it up, and says, with authority: "Hello! Kohn from the Gestapo speaking."

sometimes I was indeed able to. The greatest help was the exchange of shoes. He put on my boots and I wore his worn-out walking shoes. (This is why, when a rail fell on my right heel it caused a serious bruise that healed only after liberation.) Father and I switched work units daily until he was taken back to Buchenwald, completely exhausted and barely able to walk on his swollen feet.

The memory of our parting is excruciatingly painful. We are lined up. Father is standing in front of me. He has lost weight and I can see, looking at his child-like neck and shrunken shoulders, that he is sobbing. I saw Father cry only once before. He was wiping tears from his eyes when Uncle Jozsi, my cousins' father, died. Now here he is sobbing, in front of me. What is he thinking about? That he will never see us again? That perhaps he is taken to Auschwitz and not to Buchenwald? (Although with this particular group there were no such rumors.) Or perhaps, in his religious soul, the question that he asked repeatedly in the camp rings out painfully again: "God Almighty, why are you striking the good?" Father is crying; his whole body is shaking with sobs he is unable to hold back. Tears are streaming from his eyes. I have seen him again only in my dreams. But, oh, how vividly! When, in September, we got back to Buchenwald I found out that our hope of his getting into the Revier (hospital) did not come true. (It was because of this hope that we had switched back our footwear before he left.) Father worked in a quarry, and, when English bombers attacked the area around Buchenwald on August 24, 1944 (they must have known that V2 parts were being manufactured there), a bomb fell on that quarry. Father was hit by a flying stone. He died of his injuries. Perhaps death was a deliverance to him. Who knows how much more suffering would he have had to endure? Perhaps. But it is also possible that he could have somehow come along with me later to Niederorschel. I cannot forgive myself for letting him go away in his walking shoes. Perhaps if he is wearing boots he is able to run and is not hit by the flying stone? There is so much in my life that causes me pain; things I did though I shouldn't have, and things I didn't do though I should have. Those boots that ended up on my feet again and not on his are hurting my heart today. Would his life have been saved, would I have perished? Who knows? But the thought hurts me. It hurts me very much and very often.

After Father's departure Joki insisted more energetically that I should join his unusually good work unit. To this day I smile ironically, though with sympathy, at my answer: "I would commit a grave injustice if I were always in this good unit because this would mean that somebody else is never in it." I am looking back at myself with sympathy because there, where everybody fought hard for minimal privileges, I was able to turn down, on matters of principle, such a life-saving offer for several days. The irony is there because of the fact that I was able to do this only for a few days. Luckily. Because surely it was to my advantage that I worked there for almost two months, but it is unquestionable that without my presence Joki would not have lived to be liberated. He became sick with tubercular pleurisy after I joined him, and his health grew progressively worse. One had to report to the Revier in the evening, after work, and, to his bad luck,

at that time he had no fever. Without a fever he was slapped rather than put to bed by the doctor. But in the mornings his fever was high; he couldn't even walk by himself. This is why it was divine luck that we were together. At the beginning I could support him on our way to work and later I literally carried him. Once at the boat, we laid him down and did his share of work too until, at the beginning of September, he had a fever in the evening as well and so could finally get into the Revier. (The Revier started out as a small area in one of the wooden barracks but later the number of the sick grew so much that they had to put up several tents for them.)

And then, we tried to get some extra food though there was hardly any opportunity for that. Very rarely it happened that we got our cigarette portion. Then we could exchange it for bread with the outside workers. Joki and I did that. There was another faint hope: if, during an air raid, we were taken to an agricultural land, we sometimes chanced upon a potato or a turnip. But this was a very rare occurrence. Once --and how vividly I remember it!--the sailor on one of the boats gave me a tomato. Even today I feel its unearthly marvelous taste. Again, just like when, in Buchenwald, I ate the first lentil dish breakfast the morning after our arrival, I almost fainted. But Joki and I stumbled upon a stable source of food that was probably life-saving. There worked in the kitchen a handsome, red cheeked young man, who was always in a good mood. We called him Lipi. This 'saving angel' often materialized in the evenings and, from under his apron, he conjured up potatoes; boiled potatoes. It was like a fairy tale. He didn't steal from the prisoners but from the SS kitchen. He risked enormously. If he had been caught he would have been mauled, or perhaps even killed. But in any event they would have thrown him out of the kitchen, which would have been his end anyway, because he was sick. (In the fall of 1945 I ran into him on the main square in Kolozsvár. He invited me to his place, in Regen, if I remember correctly, where he practiced dentistry, so that I could study in peace and quiet for the entrance exam to the Engineering School. In 1988 I visited Israel. He heard about it and looked me up. He looked very well and things seemed to be going wonderfully for him. I asked him what made him risk that much for us, whom he didn't even know from before. He said that it was us who took the risk when we distributed the potatoes to others, whom he named. I don't remember having done that. I also don't remember how substantial the portion we received from him was. But whatever it was, I am not exaggerating when I consider it life-saving. Lipót Baumzweig is the name of this excellent man.

The miracle that happened to Dr. Ernő Ligeti (the composer, György Ligeti's father) has no equal: he received a food parcel from a German acquaintance. How he managed to let that person know where he was, how this acquaintance dared to send a parcel, and how this parcel got to him, all this is a mystery. And it wasn't envy that stirred up the atmosphere of the camp when the news reached us; it was the whiff of civilian life that people were struck by.

Finally, we did everything to avoid being hit. The beatings could mean immediate death: the wretched prisoner was struck with sticks, or the specially trained bloodhounds were unleashed on him, until he died then and there. Or they 'only' maimed you. There were beatings that merely caused physical pain. But beyond, and perhaps above, everything else, the mere fact that anytime they could kick or slap you while you had to endure it helplessly, whining in silence, was unbearably humiliating. They beat you if, worn out, you overslept and did not show up at the Appell, they beat you if, back from work, they found as much as a single potato on you. They beat you to line you up in lines of ten (although it was precisely the fear of beatings that made the lining up more difficult), and then they just beat away at you for no reason at all.

To avoid being beaten you had to have a good nose, and you had to be circumspect, precautious, quick at making decisions and very mobile. And if you were successful the satisfaction that you had outwitted the brutes was the most important thing. I was pretty good at it. I was 'caught' only once. The slap I got from the kapo sent me down into the meter and a half deep ditch I was standing near. The cause of the affair was semantic. There were two of us working at carrying away the dirt dug up from the ditch. I was shoveling the dirt into the mine wagon and my companion pushed it several hundred meters away. Till he came back I stood idle, waiting. In one of these idle moments the kapo materialized at my side and barked at me asking why I wasn't working. I answered in German, saying that it was he who had organized the work in such a way that the shoveler had to wait till the mine wagon was pushed back. There would have been no problem if, instead of the German word for 'mine wagon' (Lore), I hadn't used the Hungarian word (csille). If one's German was broken one could easily get one's neck broken as well. I was amazingly lucky not to get injured then.

(Let me mention here that I had another such lucky fall. I was already working on the tugboat then. When it was filled with sand it sank deeply into the water and so we had to climb up to the shore about three meters on an iron ladder. Now I happened to be in the lucky and happy position of possessing a liter bottle in which I could bring water along. This was an invaluable treasure that I took better care of than of myself. I was holding it between my index and my thumb, grasping the rungs of the iron ladder with the other three fingers. I had reached the last rung when I missed and plunged, back forward, onto the ship. Joki, who was just about to start his climb behind me, hardly had time to jump aside. Later he told me he had thought that the SS guard was throwing a cement sack on him. The bottom of the 'sack' hit first the crossbeam of the little ship and from there, head first, into the sand. I then got up, felt no pain, and climbed back up the ladder. Only my heart hurt because of the broken bottle.)

Usually, it was the kapos who did the beating but the SS were not idle either. Father spoke perfect, beautiful German. I don't know how it happened but he struck up a conversation once with a brutish SS sergeant. I don't even know

what they said to one another. But from then on the SS struck and beat my father any time he saw him. I remember, we were digging the very ditch I fell into later. Father was shoveling the earth from the bottom of the ditch and I was pick axing it a few steps above. The SS soldier was standing by Father, beating him. There was a moment that lives in me vividly, when my arm was about to swing to split the SS's head into two with my pick axe. Why didn't I do it? My cowardice must have been stronger than this impulse. Luckily we soon were taken out of the sight of this particular SS soldier.

The evening beatings were the most dreadful. In front of the people gathered for the Appell, they unleashed bloodhounds on the prisoners they had caught, for hours on end. They searched us on our way back from work at random and it was enough to be found with a single potato to be declared guilty. The 2000 people were lined up there and watched and heard how the SS unleashed the bloodhounds and the prisoner, amid demented shouts, lit by searchlights, fought in death's throes. There was a particularly horrible evening. It followed the night during which Allied bombers wrought enormous damage on Magdeburg. (When, at the beginning of the seventies, I was in Magdeburg on an official visit at the Engineering School, this bombing was still often brought up in conversation.) Next evening, when we came back from work, we were presented with an exhibit: hammers and knives were displayed on tables. Shoemakers and tailors, who knows by what sacrifices and ingenuity, had managed to acquire these indispensable tools. The SS camp commander was running up and down like a madman, shouting that what we were seeing were the weapons of a planned revolt. The 'culprits' were dragged out and then a massacre started that lasted till dawn.

These killings in front of the lined up population of the camp were more than just demoralizing and frightening. One felt as if every blow struck oneself, as if the dogs' every bite was into one's own flesh, as if the victims' blood-curdling shrieks were coming out of one's own throat. I realized quite early what their shrewd purpose was: they didn't only want to set up an example. Their aim was to strike down with one blow on two thousand people. I decided not to go along. I am not there, I thought, I don't see or hear anything. No, this wasn't at all the apathy, the disinterestedness, which, according to Frankl's book, took hold of many prisoners. This was a conscious defensive maneuver that required intense concentration. And I was often able to carry it through.

I remember that the morning after this massacre, when Joki and I were marching at the edge of the first line, a Wehrmacht guard stepped close to us and said indignantly: "We saw everything. You can rest assured. We will take care of this SS Sturmbahnführer." They couldn't do anything, of course, but it nevertheless felt good that they thought of it.

There was no defense against the bombings, of course. The day after our arrival we had to clear away the last traces of a previous bombing so that

production could be resumed in a few days. The prisoners were working on a well delimited small area when a massive bomb attack reduced the factory to rubble in a matter of minutes. The prisoners were under carpet bombing but the SS guards and the kapos did not let them into the shelter. There were many dead and injured. Joki jumped into a ditch, landing on the people already in there; others jumped on him. The one below him and the one above died on the spot. He escaped unharmed but from then on he felt such terrible fear each time there was an air raid that his whole body shook. I was amazingly lucky. As an 'electrician' I had stayed behind in the camp that day to finish putting the voltage into the barbed wire. I didn't live through that terrible experience and so I didn't become terrified by bombings. Quite the contrary. I mentioned already that there was some anti-aircraft near our barracks. These were shooting at the bombers every night, making the barracks shake and the windows vibrate; the majority of the prisoners hid under the beds for part of the night. I did not wake up a single night. Luckily, I had an unusually good autonomous nervous system. There were air raids during the day as well. Once we ran out into the fields with a kapo famous for his nose. We settled under a spreading oak tree. (It was here that I found a scrap of newspaper from which I learned that Romania had turned against the Germans.) After a few minutes, the kapo jumped to his feet and led us away at breakneck speed. When we came back the oak was no longer there; we only saw its remnants deep in a bomb crater. "You scamper, you are scared, you wretched lot!" I said to myself, thinking of the kapos and the SS guards. I was not afraid. Perhaps also because I didn't have the slightest desire to live that life. If we were not on plow-land, where we searched for food, I lay down, covered my head with my canteen, and fell instantly asleep. It happened that bombs were falling close to us and I was snoozing away. Luckily, I never woke up to find out that one of them had fallen on me.

I must mention something else which helped us a lot. Every evening, without exception, Joki and I went into the empty lavatory after the Appell, late at night, and washed from head to toe.

Obviously we were still in good enough shape to have energy for this but the opposite is also true: this ritual act contributed to our physical and spiritual well-being.

This was so because this regular and thorough washing was the only thing that connected us to our former free life. Apart from occasional glimpses of a tram. How unreal it seemed, and what painful nostalgia it caused! Aside from this there are only two moments in my memory that brought back something from civilian existence. It is night. We are working on bunkers by the Elba canal. I am shoveling. My Slovakian fellow convict is teaching me arias under the star-lit sky: "Le ciel était plein d'étoiles ...". The other: after work, on my way home, I see the wheat fields undulating in the evening breeze. This is all, and I am filled with an exceptional, sweet feeling.

One evening the camp was filled with excitement. The rumor spread that the Lagerälteste had escaped. Soon afterwards, the brutish SS camp commander disappeared as well. (When I got back to Buchenwald I was given the amazing satisfaction of seeing him there, with the other SS, on the daily walk allowed to the SS condemned to concentration camp].) I never learned what had happened. He probably stole together with the Lagerälteste and he was punished because he thereby contributed to the latter's escape. The new camp commander was a retired air force officer and we were stunned to see that he came into the barracks, talked to the prisoners and heard out their complaints.

I don't know what happened later in Magdeburg. The population of the camp had shrunk to half and 300 people were laying in the Revier unable to work. Joki among them. Dr. Béla Neufeld, a famous Hungarian psychiatrist from Prague, who examined Joki, told me that his case was hopeless. The rumor spread that the 300 people will be taken to the gas chambers of AuSchwitz, by way of Buchenwald. Without hesitation I tried to get in among them and I succeeded. Everybody tried to dissuade me vehemently but I couldn't leave Joki alone.

This is how we got back to Buchenwald on September 28th, and there the news of our father's death reached us.

## BUCHENWALD REVISITED

Upon our arrival in Buchenwald I was approached by Gabi Hirsch (after the war he held a high position in Bucharest under the name of Gabriel Muresan). He reprimanded me for having 'dealt in' bread, as he put it, in Magdeburg. I, for one, didn't see what harm there was in exchanging those few cigarettes I got for bread but I was already in that strange frame of mind which made me blame myself anytime I did not agree with what the communists said and I believed Gabi to be one of them. The memory of my successful fight against corruption in the Zeltlager must have been still fresh, so I was pardoned and entrusted with the task of translator. I was told that our group was being sent to Auschwitz and my orders were to personally let everybody know this and to do my best to persuade people to declare themselves fit for work, and try to somehow pass the medical exam and enlist for any work unit being organized, because the alternative is death. Those were the most dreadful nine days of my camp life. We were crowded into one of the barracks near the Zeltlager, one of those in which, three months before, the policemen from Copenhagen died at such incomprehensible speed. What was horrible was that I could not persuade people to report for work. Few believed that they were indeed being sent to Auschwitz but even those who did said (and to this day it is terrible to remember their paralyzed indifference): "It's all the same to me. Whatever happens, I can't work any longer." The image of one man in particular stays with me with cruel clarity. Formerly he was the *shames* (attendant) of the conservative temple in Kolozsvár. Only his head was recognizable now. His otherwise tiny body had shrunk to nothing but skin and bones. By now he could only crawl on the barracks floor and he imploringly asked everybody not for bread, no, but for cigarettes.

I learned later that the group did not make it to Auschwitz. They piled people on top of one another in open cars. They pulled the cars back and forth between Buchenwald and Weimar till they all froze or starved.

Joki and I reported for work. Joki was in terrible shape but he made it through the medical exam nonetheless thanks to his robustness. We were both assigned to the same transport, bound for Niederorschel. This was rumored to be very good. But hadn't they said the same thing about Magdeburg as well? Meanwhile Béla Neufeld explained to me that Joki won't even survive the trip; he has to be gotten into the Revier. It was common knowledge that the Revier in Buchenwald was a real hospital. I started running around like a madman but we were separated from the Revier by an iron fence. I don't know how it happened but eventually I managed to speak, through the fence, to a French doctor who was very well-intentioned, and Joki was taken into the Revier. He won't survive there either, Dr. Neufeld prophesized, but for him this is the best solution anyway. I set out for Niederorschel alone, convinced that I had said good-bye to Joki forever.



## NIEDERORSCHEL

There is no such animal<sup>11</sup>. I have heard of many labor camps from survivors but all were incomparably worse than the one I got into in Niederorschel. Those former inmates to whom I talked about it listened to me dumbfounded, almost incredulous.

Everything was extraordinary here: the brick building of the airplane wing factory in which we worked was three minutes away from the brick building in which we lived, each in his own bed, and there was warm and cold water in the lavatory. The only kapo (a German communist) defended the rights of the prisoners steadfastly, with admirable courage, and quite successfully, and he never struck anybody. We got the full portion of food and cigarettes and the dishes produced by the ingenious Czech cook were tasty. His main number was the Grenadiermarsch. The Appell took place in a civilized fashion and was over in 5 to 10 minutes. Most of the prisoners were Hungarian Jews but there were quite a few French maquisards, Czech resistance fighters and Russian war prisoners as well. Using pneumatic hammers, we had to rivet together the pre-cut aluminum plates needed for the wings (this was the hardest job), and to equip the feet and wings with electric installations (this could be done relatively comfortably). The work rhythm was not exaggerated and, on top of it, the frequent power cuts and the not infrequent air-raids provided extra breaks. (The air-raid, if it came before noon, was a positively happy event for me: I had no faith whatsoever in my survival, of course, but as a preventive measure against stomach ulcers, I always saved half the morning bread ration for lunch, and when the sirens went on, I quickly ate it; it is not healthy, you see, to die on an empty stomach.) The French doctor treated the patients ably and conscientiously and occasionally he even disposed of some medication. An SS dentist came monthly from Buchenwald, and he treated the teeth of the prisoners as well.

True, the food was barely enough to keep us alive and we were tormented by continuous hunger; the ten hour work day went beyond the powers of many of us and some work leaders were rude; despite the daily washing, nobody could avoid the endless fight against lice. But the fact that very few of us died during those 6 months is due to the good conditions in this camp.

I worked on the electric fitting of airplane wings. Leaning into the wing from above or from below I installed condensers, small signaling lights and electric wires. My only tool was a screwdriver. I didn't find the work trying in the least. And I was sometimes positively sorry that the walk to the factory was so short. The snow was creaking under my boots that were still in good condition, and a paper bag under my prison jacket shielded me from the bitter cold. I enjoyed

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<sup>11</sup> Two peasants from an isolated village come to the capital and go to visit the Zoo. In front of the cage holding the zebra, one of them shakes his head and says to the other: "There is no such animal."

this short walk the way I did, long before, in Magdeburg, the undulating wheat fields.

Everybody had a hobby. I don't remember by what miracle, I lay hands on pencil and paper. I immersed myself in 'work' in two areas: I wrote down every poem I could remember, but mostly, I solved math problems. I had a French movie director colleague who translated into French my literal renditions of the poems by Attila József. He lasted only for a short while. The movie director stole food and that was punished severely. He disappeared; perhaps he was sent back to Buchenwald. With math, I was more successful. I did more than just solve problems. For instance I 'discovered' --and I was very proud of this (groundlessly, by the way)-- that the analytic geometry I knew from high school is generalizable to the space as well (which is common knowledge for a mathematician). I even had some direct advantage from doing mathematics. Once I noticed, frightened, that my rude work leader, a wounded air force officer who made everybody tremble, was standing behind me, watching how I pretend to be working, bent over the airplane wing, while in fact I busy myself with some calculations, and all this was undeniably proven by my scrap of paper. "What are you doing here?", he barked at me angrily. "Höhere Mathematik (higher mathematics)", I answered and savored the unexpected effect. He looked into my notes and said nothing but from then on I could do whatever I wanted; he never again had any hard words with me. And I took full advantage of this freedom. I had for instance a companion, a friend, by the name of Andor Havas. One of his legs was crippled from birth and he could walk, limping, only with the help of some device. He himself didn't know by what miracle he managed to preserve this device through Birkenau. Before, he had planned to be an engineer. None of us believed that we will live to be liberated but we often talked, masochistically, of his engineering and my medical dreams. During power breaks we would climb on two adjacent ladders --the work leader let me away with this too-- and we would plan our futures. We laughed with pity at ourselves, as we stood there in the dark and, from our even darker souls, we projected unattainable, luminous images. And then, a new miracle occurred. Around December a group of Hungarian Jews arrived in the camp, some of those who had been driven on foot from Budapest to Germany. Among them was the former chief engineer of the MAV [Hungarian Railroads], a middle-aged, excellently trained man, of steely constitution. He offered to teach us higher mathematics in the evenings. Andor and I seized the opportunity happily, and so, after dinner, with empty stomachs, defending ourselves from the piercing cold with blankets secretly hidden under our prison jackets, we followed with great attention the elegant lectures of our teacher, and tried to solve the problems he gave us, in the empty meeting room. Did this state that drove away hunger, shivering and hopelessness last weeks or months? I do not remember when it was that our teacher died. I don't even know his name. Although it was he who lifted us to him, to the human level of existence and beyond!

As it happened, Andor was liberated too. We met again in the fall of 1945 in Kolozsvár and traveled together to Temesvár to take the university entrance examinations: he to the medical school, because he had meanwhile realized that engineering was not for him, and I to Engineering School, because I had realized that I was not cut out for the medical profession.

I would like to tell now a few stories about our kapo.

For instance: On the first working day we came home from the factory on our lunch break to get our canteenful of warm food. The distribution of the food lasted longer than the break. The SS camp commander, an elderly angry captain, roared to the kapo when the break was over, to immediately send everybody back to the factory. The kapo, in his strong, melodious voice (it was obvious that he himself enjoyed listening to it) answered in a way that did not allow for contradiction: "No, only those are going back who have already eaten; the others will be a little late." The captain, whose face grew crimson, said nothing. From that day on, the conflict was solved by having us eat the warm meal in the evening, sitting comfortably by the long wooden table in the dormitory.

Or: I mentioned already that the Appell was over very quickly: in two minutes we were lined up, in another two minutes the kapo counted us, the captain showed up, and then came the kapo's shrill shout: "Stillenstand! Mützen ab. Ich melde gehörsam 800 Häftlinge angetreten." (Attention! Caps off! I respectfully report that 800 prisoners are lined up.) The captain counted us for two more minutes after which we were dismissed by the kapo. It is impossible to say what a deliverance this was. Well, in the first week of November it became chilly. At the usual evening Appell we heard, amazed, the kapo's melodious voice: "Stillenstand. Ich melde gehörsam..." The SS captain, beside himself, interrupts, shouting: "Mützen ab", at which the kapo answers, in a stentorial tone: "Nein. Es ist Winter." (No. It is winter.) And we didn't take our caps off. From the next day on the Appell was held in the inner corridor of the building.

Or: It must have happened that occasionally a prisoner was hit by his work leader. (Perhaps this is why I was so scared when mine found me doing mathematics.) The factory lay under a single high ceiling; the inner separating walls were low. (The structure of the building where we lived was the same.) The kapo didn't work and didn't come to the factory with us. This is why we were so surprised when, suddenly, we hear his voice filling the entire hall: "It has come to my knowledge that work leaders dared strike my prisoners. I warn you that if this is ever repeated, no prisoner will step in here again. Is it understood?" And it was understood.

Or: In March it was already warm spring weather. The kapo and several of us were in the large yard separating the factory from the building where we lived. The people of the village, mainly women, ventured as far as the iron fence and were staring at us with curiosity. The kapo was walking back and forth with springy steps, his well-built, fine figure remarkably attractive. All of a sudden he

says: "You would like it, won't you, if there were among you such fine fellows as these? Have a little patience! We'll soon be coming."

Or: On March 31st, in the evening, we heard cannon shots. We were guessing, with excitement: What's happening? Is the front line getting near? How far can it be? And then the kapo spoke up: "What you are hearing is the noise of the front, at about 30 kilometers away."

I don't know for sure, but it is likely that the kapo played a large part in the covering up of the large scale sabotage action probably organized by the Russian prisoners. One evening we finished a whole series of airplane wings, there must have been about 30. The next morning we found the whole electric wiring -- two weeks' worth of work-- cut to pieces. The Gestapo people, the SS bigwigs, came to the camp. There was much ado and at the end, nothing happened, the culprits were not discovered and no one was harmed.

It was rumored about this excellent kapo that he was an anti semite. I don't believe it. The characterization probably originated with Gabi Hirsch, who was Stubendienst. This was the same Gabi Hirsch who reprimanded me for having exchanged cigarettes for bread in Magdeburg. He, Joska Farkas, and his brother, Jenö, and about four more people constituted a collective, that is, a support group whose main function was to share the extra food they managed to get. The only one I knew better was Gabi so I thought it was all right if I gave him my weekly 20 cigarettes for the collective. With these cigarettes I could have gotten several kilos of bread a week, or more margarine or cold cuts, from the SS or from the German workers. Gabi, who often had a second helping at dinner, once, only once, told me that I could eat his leftover soup, after he had already eaten the consistent part. (I was already in bed.) I remember how happily I fell asleep afterwards. Around midnight Gabi woke me up and put me to wash his canteen. Well, after liberation I found out from Joska Farkas that the collective had split after a while because the opinion of the majority was that the cigarettes had to be swapped for food after all. I also found out that they never saw any of my cigarettes. I only guess that Gabi did not smoke all the 500 cigarettes that he got from me during those six months; he must have gotten food with some of it. The soup he gave me was worth one cigarette butt.

Later, a three member collective got formed around me as well. The others were two simple but extremely decent fellows, who were younger than me. (Unfortunately I forget their names.) We were able to help each other only very little.

During these six months I was tormented, all day long, by hunger but especially, even in my dreams, I was tortured by the images of my parents' agony. I believed Baba to be alive but the thought of her sufferings was almost unbearable. Above all, I was preoccupied by Joki's fate. A miracle occurred: the SS dentist agreed to take letters between Buchenwald and Niederorschel. I wrote every month but never got any answer. The comrades were comforting me

saying that Joki was alive and well but did not have the possibility to write. Of course, I didn't believe it. So I went on writing my letters to the brother I thought long dead.

Thinking back on the Niederorschel camp I keep asking the question, over and over again: How was such a concentration camp possible? I think the answer can be inferred from two pieces of information. First, from November 17th Hitler stopped the gas chambers and crematoria; the Auschwitz-Birkenau plant didn't have to be fed by half-dead prisoners anymore. Second, the war industry had more and more difficulty because of the lack of manpower, while the expectations were continually rising. It was more important to squeeze work out of the prisoners, than their life. But it is beyond doubt that in Niederorschel kapo Otto's personal merit is inestimable.

## MY LAST JOURNEY TO BUCHENWALD

On the night of April 1st, our camp was evacuated. We set out for Buchenwald after midnight. Before leaving, the kapo distributed food, and got hold of a cart and horse. He filled the cart with food.

After the first one hundred meters I felt I was unable to go a step further. That was the first of six days during which we left a hundred kilometers behind us. We rested during the night and the kapo had bread baked for us. We marched during the day. The roads were machine-gunned by the Allies from airplanes. They split us up in smaller groups and left large gaps in between to minimize the danger. I knew about a few of my companions that they were planning to escape. I asked them to let me know about it because I wanted to join them. They promised they would. And now, here was the right moment. Our group was in the bend of the road, unguarded, and the guards of the preceding and following groups could not see us. My fleeing companions were already far away when I noticed them. I made up my mind quickly and ran after them. My little collective's two other members came along as well. We came across a "free" Czech worker, who asked us, with suspicious insistence, what we were up to. We didn't mind him much and hurried to catch up with our companions, who were still in sight and were taking a short rest. When we caught up with them they reproached me for having endangered their escape by following them. And indeed, in the distance, we noticed an armed guard, who must have been informed by the Czech worker, coming in our direction. I saw only one way out: the three of us will go back. True, this could be fatal, but the Czech worker saw only us three and therefore the guard could only know of us, and so we wouldn't be endangering the escape of our companions; on the contrary, we would be covering it. We turned back. When we got close to the guard I told him quickly that we were not escaping, as he could see for himself, since we were coming back of our own will, but only got scared of the shooting planes. The guard, luckily an older Wehrmacht soldier, took his gun off his shoulder but not to shoot at us but just to hit us with it. We started running and since we were faster than he was, we got to our group before him. We did not get hit. A few days after liberation I found out, to my sorrow, that the six wonderful young men managed to hide in a haystack but next day they were discovered by a member of the civilian guard (armed war cripples), and they were shot.

We kept marching on. When we were four kilometers from Buchenwald, we stopped. It was rumored that the camp was being evacuated. They were starting with the Jews and the people in the transports were killed on the way. The kapo installed us in an abandoned factory building and sent word to Buchenwald that, because of the danger of infectious disease, the doctor had ordered a few days of quarantine. The kapo had won SS first lieutenant Adam on his side (the captain had not come with us) by promising him his protection after liberation. This is how we managed to stay four days in the factory building, where we found all

kinds of treasures. I stumbled upon a knapsack filled with potatoes, which we boiled and the three of us had such a feast that we were close to being sick. Which was unlucky. Because next day the bread kapo Otto had them bake was even better than before and we couldn't even touch it. Meanwhile, and this was also Otto's work, they threw all kinds of little cloth squares in the yard. We didn't need much instruction. We quickly took off the Hungarian Jew sign from our breasts and we each chose some square and sewed it on. I chose a red one with an F in it, that is, I became a French political prisoner.

On April 10 in the evening -- obviously things couldn't be dragged on any longer -- we walked up to Buchenwald. Here the stray rumors were confirmed. Most of the Jews had been already dragged away. They housed us in the second floor of a brick building (now there was plenty of room) and I was wandering aimlessly on the morning of the 11th on the alleys of Buchenwald. Suddenly, from behind a fence, I am addressed by a prisoner shrunk to skin and bones, in whom I recognized, I don't even know how, the religious Jew from Mármaros, who, in Magdeburg, would not eat the traces of pork in the soup, in spite of the Rabbi's dispensation. He recognized me too. He asked me about my brother. "My brother?" I answered with bitterness, "He must be dead for months now." "What do you mean?", he answered. "I saw him here only yesterday." For a moment I stood there as if struck by lightning and then I started running all over the camp, and after half an hour I spotted Joki's still athletic figure. I embraced him crying but he pushed me away, scared. He had been a Frenchman for months by then and was frightened that a Hungarian Jew was compromising him thus. But, pointing to my little square I calmed him down quickly: "Don't worry, I am French too. After all, we are brothers." It must have been around 10am. The air siren sounded in an unusual way. Joki came with me into the brick building. Our French doctor, his face beaming, observed: "Das ist nicht Fliegealarm, das ist Feindalarm." (This is not an air-raid alarm; it is enemy alarm.) From the watchtowers surrounding the camp the guards kept on shooting for a few more minutes (they shot into our room too), and then, suddenly, we saw armed prisoners breaking out of the camp and we noticed that the guards had disappeared from the towers. Around twelve o'clock Buchenwald was free.

## AFTER LIBERATION

Victor Frankl writes in his book that at the moment of liberation most prisoners were so indifferent that they did not feel any joy. *I did.* I was very happy. I could embrace again my resurrected dearly loved brother. Joki had gotten all my letters and knew everything about me, including the fact that I was close by for the last four days. It was only that he had no way of writing back.

In the camp I was not afraid of death and I did not cling to life. But now that we had found each other in the hour of freedom, now I wanted to live. (And I got very scared indeed when, one afternoon, during a lonely stroll on the hillside, I was shot at from a low-flying German plane.)

The Lagerälteste gave a short speech, broadcasted by the loudspeakers. "We are free. Everybody should stay in place and order should be kept. We will assure the nourishment of the population of the camp until the return home will be organized. We advise everybody to refrain from suddenly eating too much and from eating food that is too fat." And indeed we were fed excellently. The food cooked in the kitchens was plentiful and relatively tasty. It was difficult though to organize its distribution. Before liberation the convicts scrambled for the job of distributing food because then they could get the best part, and sometimes even seconds. Joki and I enlisted among the few who were now willing to perform this difficult task. And this did us a lot of good. Because of the physical exercise and the good nutrition we gained strength quickly. First we lived in the barracks of the camp but soon we moved into the abandoned lodgings of the SS, a five storeyed building situated outside the camp. We were about 2000 Hungarians. Dolcsi Herskovics and Lajko Roth were the 'doctors' (they had once been medical students), and they found that practically everybody was sick. Those who were in better shape, among them Joki and me, enlisted as orderlies. I never did harder work, even in the camp, than when we carried iron beds up the stairs to set up the four to six bed 'wards'. Finally no one was sleeping on stacked beds anymore. I was contented, because I could help. And I liked it, that people received undifferentiated treatment. It is possible, after all, to have socialist fairness. But after two days I found out that for Hillel Kohn (who had been the secretary of the illegal [communist] party of Transylvania, and had been dreadfully tortured during interrogations and then sentenced to many years in prison), luxurious quarters had been set up, with Persian carpets, where he lived by himself and got special food. This outraged me. I mentioned it to one, Odi, a young man from Budapest who played the 'personnel man' part among the communist leaders. I don't remember what his answer was, but I remember full well that his tone aroused a very oppressive, bad feeling in me.

Most people, whether healthy or sick, immediately started out to 'organize', that is, to obtain stuff. It seemed that one could discern national traits in the



nature of what different people were after. The Russians looked mostly for alcohol. (It was rumored that they found a car full of ethyl alcohol and many died from drinking of it.) The specialty of the French was leather clothes, that of the Poles was food and so on. There was one person who struck me, among the scurrying people. He was in no hurry, he couldn't possibly have been, this young man of average height, on his toothpick-like legs, because in his arms (two bent toothpicks) he was carrying stacks of fine art albums. This was Ernő Gál, whom I met then.<sup>12</sup>

My contentment didn't last long. Very many died because they ate food that was too fat. But even from among those who were on the 'menu' that came from the kitchen, prepared according to medical advice, more and more got typhoid fever. Among them, Joki. But thanks to good care and his robust constitution he was soon on his feet again. But towards the end of May his temperature went up. Dolcsi suspected TB. Somehow I managed to transport him to Jena where he was examined in a hospital and where he was diagnosed with miliary tuberculosis.

The medical exam lasted two days and I had to sleep somewhere. I went to the bushy-haired, well-meaning mayor, who helped me obtain food tickets, but he couldn't find me any lodgings. A former prisoner, whom I ran into on the street (we easily recognized one another by our strange clothes), seeing my helplessness offered to share his room with me; he had an extra bed. He told me he lived in the local asylum, where he and someone else had a private room. I accepted the invitation. In the morning I woke up from a deep sleep to find two men in white coats squeezing my upper arm with a rubber strap while another was about to give me an injection. "Ich bin nicht verrückt" (I am not crazy), I shouted. Sure, sure, I was not crazy, they assured me, but I saw on their faces that they considered what I was saying as the typical reaction of crazy people. Luckily, my young host stepped in in time, otherwise who knows ...

I came back with Joki to Buchenwald filled with anxiety and I immediately showed Dolcsi the diagnosis. "Bad luck", he said, and I sighed, relieved. If this is just 'bad luck' it cannot be too serious. Next day I searched the surrounding SS leaders' villas until I found a "Neue deutsche Klinik" from where I learned the death sentence. The course of Joki's illness followed exactly what the book described. After six weeks, on July 15th, he died in the hospital of Blankenheim. I dug his grave, I buried him, sobbing all the while. When, in the seventies, the university sent me to the GDR, I visited the cemetery of Blankenheim as part of the cultural program. I recognized the road leading there, the cemetery itself, but there was no trace of the grave, not even in the records.

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<sup>12</sup> Ernő Gál returned to Kolozsvár where he was, for many turbulent years, the chief editor of *Korunk*, a Hungarian cultural publication. He and David stayed friends and exchanged postcards on April 11th throughout their lives.

After Joki's death I had only one hope left: to find my sister, Baba, alive. This is why I wanted to go home. But I also wanted to go home because I saw in socialism the only social form which can assure equality and freedom and which, at one blow, puts an end to ethnic discrimination, and therefore solves the Jewish question as well. Again and again I imagined how wonderful a socialist society must be if the communists were able to perform the miracles I witnessed even under the conditions of the concentration camp. I was disturbed by what I had seen regarding Hillel Kohn, I was appalled by Odi's tone and I was not enthusiastic about Lajko Roth's raptuous words and communist songs. But I considered socialism the only acceptable form of life. Joki, however, did not. He would have liked to go to Israel, and, had he survived, perhaps we would have emigrated there.

And the political battles raged on. The American authorities and the officials of the UNRA did all they could to prevent the return home of the young people. First, the only way one could set out for home was to pretend to be Russian. Later we organized a big demonstration and that proved effective. There were fewer and fewer Hungarian Jews and they were leaving, some for home, some to the West. We organized a Hungarian children's hospital. I was entrusted with its leadership. UNRA officials tried repeatedly to take the 14-16 year old children to the West. I remember an UNRA lady captain who asked me sternly to gather the children, whom we had sent out of the hospital on purpose before her arrival. "They have to be given a bath!" she said, energetically. I answered that I had no way of gathering them and besides, we had learned from the SS what those baths meant. But if she promised me that the children could go where they wanted, they would all be there in ten minutes. At which the red-haired, heavily rouged UNRA lady captain cried out: Didn't I know that the Russians were 'eating children'? Their propaganda was just as stupid and false as ours. We tried to dissuade people from going West by telling them of Swiss concentration camps and we frightened them by telling them they would be thrown on the frontline, to fight against the Japanese.

It's a great pity that I was persuasive. One fine day a bus stopped there. Eighteen Hungarian women were heading West, among them Noemi Albert and Juci Schlinger, both of whom I knew well from the Jewish High School, back in Kolozsvár. I helped them in everything, and especially in dissuading them from the 'folly' of going West, when at home socialist paradise was awaiting them. And I was successful. I never felt so sorry, in retrospect, for a success.

Eventually, there were only four Hungarians left in Buchenwald: Dr. Béla Neufeld, who was not transportable because he had suffered a hear attack, Lajko, who had stayed behind to treat him, Joki, and I. The Americans weren't of much help. True, once a jeep stopped before the SS hospital where we were staying, and brought us cans of sardines and ground meat by the hundreds but when I asked the American commander to allow me to buy fruit for Joki, who craved it very much, he turned down my request. I was obliged to steal.

The American authorities had an excellent idea. Immediately after the liberation of the camp, American soldiers escorted the adult civilian population of Weimar up to Buchenwald. At the time we had not yet managed to bury the numberless corpses. The scene people were faced with was apocalyptic: beings reduced to skin and bones were hovering over the piles of skeleton-like corpses. There was hardly any difference between most of those still alive and the dead. The people of Weimar looked around, numb with shock and several hundred collapsed.

When later we occasionally went down to Weimar (I visited Goethe's half destroyed house, and Schiller's, which was still standing) the civilians, when hearing where we were from, reacted with a standard cry: "Aus Buchenwald?! Aber glauben Sie, davon haben wir nichts gewusst!" (From Buchenwald?! Rest assured, we knew nothing of all that!) I believed it then and I believe it today that they could not have known the horrific details of what went on in the concentration camps.

We were very happy when we heard that Buchenwald will be in the Russian zone. The Russians are coming, we thought enthusiastically. And they appeared. The Russian major ordered us to leave the building within the hour. Our argument, that obeying the order may cost the life of the communist Béla Neufeld, was without effect. There was no appeal. We somehow got hold of an ambulance, which took us to the hospital in Blankenheim.

After Joki's death I stayed on in Blankenheim for another month until the opportunity arose to take Béla Neufeld to a hospital in Prague in a Yugoslav car. After a few days in Prague I traveled to Budapest in a train transporting former prisoners. I went to the rabbinical seminary hoping that perhaps I will find there some of my papers. I didn't find anything. The Rector asked me: "Fränkel, did you want to become a doctor and Lusztig an engineer, or was it the other way around?"

I arrived in Kolozsvár on August 31st. My cousin, Özsi, back from labor camp, was already waiting for me. "Don't worry, all's well" he said. "I own two shirts and four underpants. Half of this is yours." "Thanks", I answered, touched, and, from the knapsack my friend Misi Almási was holding, and in which I had stuffed everything that Joki and I had gathered as orderlies, I took out thirty shirts, forty underpants, and forty pairs of socks and I said, here, half of this is yours.

I soon went to Temesvar because there was no engineering school in Kolozsvár. The admission exam involved seven written tests. There were ten of us, former concentration camp inmates, but none of us took advantage of the law that allowed us to register without going through the exam. Out of 540 candidates, 200 were admitted. All ten of us were among them. I was placed the 30th and for this I felt particularly grateful to my mathematics teacher from Niederorschel. The classes started. They were interesting and I studied with joy and success.

But life seemed dreadfully empty. From my many relatives who had lived in Hungary before the war, only two were still alive: Özsi, who was studying medicine, and Dr. Miksa Fränkel (Mackó<sup>13</sup>, an attorney). Both were back from labor camp.

I was waiting for my sister, Baba, and Mackó for his adored wife, whose nickname was also Baba.

In my imagination I saw Baba suffering all kinds of horrendous torments, one more horrific than the other. (I found out only in 1985 that, aged 14, she had been in Birkenau throughout. She managed to avoid many block selections but eventually she ended in the gaz chamber. I don't even dare to think about how terrible the constant fear of selections must have been, and her last journey. Mother only suspected, but Baba knew exactly what awaited her.)

My life became unbearable not only because of the extent of my family's destruction but also because of the way it happened. I was drawn to the void left behind by their absence with a force I could not resist. I cut my veins. With a razor blade. I tried in three places. Without success. (Pretty pathetic, this, from someone who planned to be a doctor.) Mackó did the same thing when, half a year later, he found out from an eye witness that he was waiting for his wife in vain. He succeeded.

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<sup>13</sup> Mackó means Teddy bear and Baba means doll in Hungarian.