

## Part Two

May 20, 1994

Fifty years ago today! Arrived with my mother, father, and sister to the notorious "Vernichtungslager" - Auschwitz. A name and a place I never heard about before, and may it be cursed forever for the blood, pain, suffering humiliation, degradation where so many millions of my fellow Jews starved, died, gassed, and burned in the ovens. And when no more room, burned out in the open.

Separated, and now only with my father, deloused, hair shaved from top to bottom, we look at each other's outfits - blue and white striped prison garb, shirt, underwear, pair of wooden Dutch clogs, gotten and thrown at us, while running naked in a circle in a huge hall. Outside we realized that nothing fits, and we exchange the items with fellow prisoners as good as we can. After two days traveling in the cattle car we are hungry, sleepy, tired, worried, and bewildered and dead scared as what is awaiting us here. The capos herding us in a barrack, a bunk for five, three of us feet down, two feet up, one blanket for all. No food the first day, since first we have to be accounted for. Not allowed in the barracks during day time, we are wandering and observing the goings on in the vicinity. I see in the distance skinny women in prison garbs, pulling on long ropes, a wagon loaded with rocks, and a capo hitting them with a stick to speed them up, and I'm thinking "Good G-d, if this is how they treat the women, what's awaiting us men?"

The second day finally we got soup, a tin utensil for four people, no spoon. One in my group, the strongest, runs off with the lot, and that takes care of that. Decided to ask questions who knows they are pros these capos and have been there some time. He points to a smoking

chimney stack. "There goes your mother - see?" Of course I don't believe him. Later, after the war, my sister told me in Belsen that he was right. She did go up in the smoke.

Every day I got beaten up at the latrine. If I asked for a pair of smaller clogs to exchange, If I didn't remove fast enough my cap, when a S.S. man passed me, my skull was always a target for their sticks. There was no work to perform in my area called Birkenau. This was a "Fernichtungslager" (extermination camp), and we just wandered around aimlessly.

Good news today. I heard you can sign up for transport out of this hell hole to an "Arbeitslager" (labor camp) some place away from here. My father agreed, and next day we embarked on a wagon for the journey. We even got each a half bread, a piece of wurst, and after one day arrived to a camp called "Wolfsberg" in lower Silezia Kreis Waldenburg, near a town called Wüstegirsdorf, not too far, about thirty kilometers from Breslau. In the middle of a field, near a narrow country road I found our new camp, surrounded with an electric fence, watch towers with floodlights, a few wooden barracks for the administration, offices, kitchen, and a first aid station.

We were housed in tents. Five tents in a row consisted a block, each tent's twenty prisoners a block elder living in the front block, in charge of 100 prisoners. On the floor we had hay and nothing else, and slept in a circle. There was also a long barrack style latrine, army style - you sat on logs. Outside the camp were several barracks for the German officers in charge, and the S.S. troops guarding us. They had their separate kitchen, barber shop, and food storage.

After two days we were all given numbers; mine was #37731, my father's #37732. It turned out to be my lucky number - it came out to 21 when adding it up individually. We were then organized in working units/commandos. My unit's name was Ackerman.

Got up 5:00 am, got some lukewarm ersatz coffee, stood in line about one hour for "apel" (counting), that how many in such and such units, the rest office workers, kitchen staff (best job), potato peelers, doctors, sick ones, all accounted for. The gates opened, the S.S. guards took up their positions and out we marched to the different projects. We were working for the O.T. "Organization TODT." This was a kind of army engineers corps, building bridges, roads, and tunnels. They wore green uniforms with a swastika arm band with the O.T. insignia. To my surprise, we were engaged in the most ridiculous, stupid, and senseless project I could imagine. This is already June, 1944, after Stalingrad and the Allied landing in Normandy, and Germany was falling apart rapidly.

We cleared first the woods, cut down the trees, laid tracks for hand-pulled and pushed wagons, and blasting huge tunnels in the Silesian Mountains for huge bombproof shelters in order that they should be able to assemble fighter planes in these bombproof shelters. We had daily casualties; inexperienced prisoners blasting off their arms and legs, huge boulders cut away with jackhammers, falling down at us, and wretched diarrhea all the time weakening us. The food was rotten; for lunch thin soup made of sugar beets, for supper a bread for four to split, potato soup, a few pieces of meat in it if it was your lucky day, piece of wurst or rotten french soft cheese, worms crawling in it. After two weeks of it (I worked a jackhammer), I got gradually weaker and every morning I got a nosebleed. I figured if this situation will continue, I won't last long, and decided to do something about it.

In the evening I went to the first aid station and told a Dutch prisoner doctor about my situation, and begged him to help me somehow. He was very sympathetic and explained to me "Look at what I got", he said. Crepe paper to bandage the open wounds, bits of charcoal to cure

the diarrhea, a scissor and knife for amputation, but nothing for nosebleeds. He suggested he'd give me one day off from the work, called "shonnung" and I should pull myself together. That day saved my life.

As I was walking aimlessly in the camp, a young O.T. officer instructed me to come towards him. He then asked me if I spoke German. "Jahwohl" did I answer. He took me over to the "obersharfuhrer" (the head of the camp), and had with him a short conversation, and to my amazement, took me out from the camp. I walked with him a quarter of a mile to a huge farm with a two story house. He took me up to the second floor and told me what I'm supposed to do. Shine his boots, brush his clothes, wash the floor, dust, fetch water from the stable. In the evening he'll take me back to camp, and this will be my daily routine. With this he left, and I found myself almost like a free man again, at least for the daytime.

I started discovering the immediate surroundings. I looked out the window and saw a huge vegetable garden and fruit trees; my eyes lit up. I found out little by little that the farm belonged to a couple in their sixties with the name Donath. And all day long they are fussing in the garden. But first things first. I brushed my teeth for the first time in weeks (with my boss's toothbrush), washed my face in his china jar, and laid down on the bed for a short time. This was heaven! He would have dispatched me immediately with a bullet from his Luger if caught, but it was worth risking it.

I opened a drawer and what do I see? Bread, cheese, marmalade, tobacco. "Holy cow", I thought, and started helping myself to a little bit of this and a little bit of that so he won't notice it.

Time to get back to work. I'm going down to the stable to get the can filled with water

from the tap. This is my lucky day; two cows staring at me and a full can of milk. I never felt as thirsty as I did then. Milk for the first time in weeks. Another jackpot; a pile of discarded old newspapers, the "Volkisher Beobachter, Signal, Der Sturmer." I can read between the lines; Rome, Paris, Rumania, Bulgaria, Poland, our glorious army withdrawing according to plan... I tie up my pants on the bottom and take it to Lager Alteter, the head capo, a German Jewish Communist who has been in the camp for years. He was overjoyed having them (that was a good investment on my part; later on it paid off with dividends).

This house, all the upper rooms were requisitioned by the army and several O.T. engineers were living there. I went from room to room to snoop around, helping myself to bits of food which I smuggled in to my father who was working hard on the field. Later in the evening the officer took me back to camp for the night, and sometimes he would give me a little food from the drawer. One day I encountered Mrs. Donath in the kitchen and asked her if she would be kind enough to give me some food, so as to bring it to my father. She yelled out the window to her husband saying "Can you imagine that cursed Jew asking for food?" I really wasn't desperate for it any longer at that time; I merely wanted to test her. But, I did think after the war that if I lay my hand on her I would gladly strangle her.

Although I was free to move about in this limited area, the entire surrounding area was circled with a so-called "Soldaten Kette" since loads of foreign workers worked in the area - Italian POWs, Poles, Dutch, etc. They were free to move in the village where they were working and living. Some of these men were "gastarbeiters" (guest workers), most of them forced to come, supposedly voluntarily. They could even go to the movies or have a beer in the local pubs, but sealed off and with "Feldgendarmery" (border police) guarding the assigned areas.

Then, all of a sudden, an idea entered my mind. In the officers' rooms were civilian clothing, German marks, and I.D. papers plus a bicycle. I could give it a try, work my way to Waldenburg railroad station, and try to escape back to Sighet. I was prepared to take the chance. When I consulted my father he was horrified and told me I'd never make it. You can't board the train without a special pass, and even if I got away, they would shoot me for sure. As time passed I got bolder. One day I saw the Donaths way back in the garden, and I came down to explore the kitchen, opened the pantry door, and got dizzy of that smell; hanging there were hams, wurst, and loads of other goodies. I was cutting slices here and there daily, for myself and my father, until probably the Donaths noticed a decrease of their goodies. One morning he caught me inside the pantry, before I could help myself to something, and started yelling at me - "What was I doing inside here?" I lied, not very convincingly, that I was looking for a dusting cloth I needed. I knew right away that my career is over, and he told in the evening for my boss that he doesn't want me in his house. To my amazement the officer took me back to camp; he didn't say a word nor did he punish me. By now I would have liked to strangle both Donaths.

In the meantime, as I mentioned, I got on friendly terms with the Lagerelster, since through me he found his newspaper delivery boy. An since he suffered of asthma, and in the night time he could cough a lot, he put me through a crash course what to do with him to make him feel more comfortable. I was up watching and treating him all night long, slept during the day, and had full access to the kitchen to get everything I wanted to. I took advantage in full, and was able to help out my father and friends until we were evacuated since the Russians were approaching, and we could see in the distance Breslau burning. The work on the project stopped, the rations cut; towards the end 16-17 of us shared a bread we used for four before.

Before evacuation, they assembled us on the appel place. The German officer told us that anybody sick, unable to march, can remain in the camp. My father pleaded with me to stay. He was afraid in January in the bitter cold to start marching. We didn't have the proper winter clothes the snow was so deep. Since I knew how unpredictable the Germans are, I took I took it for granted those who will remain will surely be shot after we leave. So, he gave in and came along. I wish now I would have listened to him and stayed behind since a short time later those who stayed were liberated by the Russians, and we were looking ahead for four more months of suffering and deaths during a long march to our final destination Belsen. I'll get back to the march shortly, but first I shall recall another episode, rather amusing.

The ghetto of Lodz, Poland was evacuated, and they brought to our camp a lot of these Jews; they looked more pitiful and hungrier than us. The commander of the camp decided to expand the kitchen and set up an additional huge cauldron where they cooked the soup, and a new chimney was needed on the roof of the barrack. I had the luck of being selected by a short, skinny German called the "meister", a brick layer by trade, to be his handlanger (assistant). My job was to mix the cement, lugging it up the ladder in a bucket, along with the bricks. He was a friendly chap in his forties, wore a leather jacket, and arrived in a lightweight motorcycle. After a while we became real friendly; since the gasoline was rationed he was always short of Benzine. The camp had a truck; they used to bring into camp supplies like potatoes, bread, etc. The same truck used to take out our dead bodies in a long, wooden box without a cover. They covered the naked bodies with leafy branches, and took them to Gross Rosen, a bigger camp a few miles away which had a crematorium.

To service the truck, there was also a barrel of gasoline in the back of the camp near the

coal shed. One day my "meister" told me to watch that no S.S. is in sight. He approached the barrel, produced a thin, rubber hose, stuck it into the barrel opening, and sucked out into a small container some gas which he hid under his jacket. I was glad to help out. As a reward he was entitled for two soups and a good one from the S.S. kitchen. He ate that one, the lousy soup from our kitchen he gave me to sell, and usually got three cigarettes for it (I made sure first to gulp down a few choice pieces). He kept two cigarettes, I got one, and traded it for a quart of bread. I felt real important to be a partner in our own little business! He also brought me from his own home sometimes some old cheese, a piece of onion bread. He himself was a poor schnook. Once he confided that years ago he was a member of the Social Democratic Party. One day I got a real shock when he asked me if when the Ruskies are coming, will I tell them that he was a good guy. I promised him I would speak on his behalf to protect him. In all sincerity I told him I doubt it very much if they are going to listen to me, or have some kind of an input on them, and advised him to take off if they are coming much nearer. As I mentioned, we had a ladder. I was supposed to take that damned ladder outside the camp so as not to be used for an escape attempt. One evening I felt really tired, and decided to hide the ladder under the barrack. Well, it didn't work. Later in the evening I hear on the loudspeaker "Heftling #37731 eintreten. I knew immediately I was in big trouble. There was the obershafuhrer, the undersharfuhrer, the capos, and trembling ME. After they all yelled, cursed at me a while, I told them since I need the ladder next morning again that's how far my speech went. The undersharfuhrer, a tall, blond, blue-eyed Dutch S.S. volunteer grabbed my head, stuck it between his legs, and ordered a capo to give me six to my behind. I started screaming as loudly as I could before he ever hit me. They must have had enough of my performance since after two slaps he let me loose. I ran like a rabbit. Since I



hung around the camp a lot being the nurse for the Lagerelster, the obersharfuhrer became aware of my face. One day he waves me over to him and asks me "What? You are still alive?" I learned my lesson and hid when he came up on the scene. He was in his sixties, a real moron, walking around with a thick stick carved out by an inmate; a snake curling up the length of the stick, a dead skull on the top. His favorite game was chasing an inmate with that stick yelling "Hep-hep-hep." When he tried to count us was had to stay in the appel-place double time; he never got it right. Another day, in the beginning, as we entered the gate from work, five in a row, one inmate walking next to me was approached by an S.S. guard. He grabbed his cap, and threw it outside the fence. The poor guy ran to retrieve it. As he passed the gate to get outside he was shot dead by the guard. I later found out that this guard was shot in the knee and was limping. Since he was unfit for the field he got his assignment to guard us. He went home for a three week leave since this was the reward for shooting somebody while trying to escape... I promised myself after the war I'll be looking for him; he was the first on my hit list; second was the two Donaths.

These Germans were a real tricky bunch. One day an announcement came; all the old, sick, and weak inmates report to the potato peeling barrack for easy work, just sit and peel potatoes, that they did for several days, then they put them on the truck I mentioned before to Gross Rosen, their prison garbs back in about two hours. Our camp had lots of Jewish prisoners from all of Europe, Greeks from Janina and Salonica, Dutch, Polish, Rumanian, Hungarian, Yugoslavia, Slovaks, Czechs - around four thousand in all. For the winter they built us barracks, each had a stove.

Now! Back to the evacuation of the camp. We started marching in the cold snow, over

the ground, non stop until it got dark. Any inmate who collapsed or stepped out of the column was shot on the spot. At nightfall we were herded in deserted stables and slept over with orders that anybody stepping out from the barn is shot on sight. Sometimes the guards managed to bring us some soup or bread. The German army and Red Cross set up on the roads soup kitchens for the benefit of the fleeing civilian population as they ran away from the advancing Russians. Folksdeutche, German speaking people, were also evacuated from Yugoslavia, Hungary, Rumania, and the roads were clogged with their horse drawn wagons, people and children, bundles, pots and pans dangling from their wagon sides. "Lovely sight", I thought. Sometimes we found ourselves intermingled with these civilians. It would have been easy to leave the column, but we were afraid. "Where shall we go?" "Who will hide or protect us"? We were filthy, lice-ridden wrecks, some of us without shoes, the feet tied up in rags. We were marching for days (every night some of us froze to death) until days later we arrived to a station called Sonnenberg in Sudetenland in an area the Germans took over from the Czechs. As we were passing under the overpasses there, some Czechs there were throwing bread and food down at us. Finally there they put us in open railroad cars and started off, not knowing where we are heading. We rolled forward for a couple of hours to find the tracks bombed out. We then started rolling backwards, back and forth, for a day. Every morning dead bodies were lying frozen stiff on the floor. We just threw them out of the moving wagons. Finally, we arrived to our destination, and started marching. I found out on arrival we are at Belsen. By then I became hardened and nothing could shock me; dead bodies all over the camp, huge open mass graves where prisoners were dragging the naked, dead bodies by ropes attached to their hands and feet, dumping them in those graves. Went into a barrack where they had perforated pipes dispensing water to wash

ourselves. The floor was covered with water, feces, dead bodies. I actually had to step on these bodies to get to the faucet. Typhus, diarrhea, and so-called "muzelmans" (half dead) dragging themselves aimlessly. By then my father and I were covered with lice all over. I was itching and scratching the whole time, and by the end of April I removed and threw away my shirt - the only one I wore for eleven months. We slept in the barracks sitting down in long rows in each other's laps. Since we were not allowed to leave the barracks in the night, we relieved ourselves in our metal dish. And since you couldn't sit the whole night holding and smelling it, as it was dark, we just threw it and some unlucky guy got it over his head.

One day I was wandering in the barrack and noticed somebody sitting on the floor, covered totally with a blanket. He was holding onto a shankbone. It could have been from a horse or even a human. There was no meat on it, just whitish grizzle he was chewing on. I immediately started salivating, and made up a story that I was promised, later that day, a sugar beet and will gladly share it with him provided he let me chew on one side of the bone. He refused to buy my story, and was holding onto the bone. I finally lost patience with this uncooperative guy, grabbed the bone, and, after a short struggle, I got it. He got up and wanted to retrieve it, but I hit him in the head with it, and he passed out. As soon as I crawled under his blanket to start my feast, two guys jumped me and off they ran with my trophy. All that hard work for nothing; may they be cursed for robbing me!

One day my father's body started swelling up; his feet and face are all blown up. Next day he became incoherent and wouldn't get up for the count; that meant he'd be counted as dead, and that would have meant the end of him after the count. I tried to prop him up to hold him upright, but he kept falling down. I slapped him across the face to force him to stand erect. The

next day he was dead. We dragged his body and dumped him in the mass grave. I'm ashamed to say I felt relieved not to carry an additional burden that I was unable to cope with. That was the eve of Passover, 1945.

Two or three weeks before liberation I was occasionally able to get some soup or bread by volunteering to drag the dead bodies to the graves. I still had some fat left on me, thanks to my good fortune from the past activities I wrote about.

One morning the S.S. guards disappeared. Instead, Hungarian soldiers, stationed nearby, took over the watch - a real bunch of cut throats and sadists. They were shooting, point blank, at everybody moving their way. I kept out of their sight, even though I was tempted to approach and speak Hungarian to them, since I speak the language fluently.

My luck started to run out now. I had contracted Typhus, and on top of that, diarrhea from the polluted water. I was losing weight rapidly and got real weak. I started to give up, just laying still on the floor to conserve energy. There were many others in the same situation around me. And then one morning what do you know? A lot of noise, screaming, running. The British had arrived. I was laying, still unconscious, on top of a dead body, and noticed two Brits coming into the barrack, leave the stretcher near me, and are off to get one of us. I crawled on my hands and knees, and laid on the stretcher. "Surprise, Surprise!" they must have thought, but they left me on it, and carried me outside to an ambulance. They took me to a huge tent, placed me on a table, and German nurses started working to clean me up. They washed my hair real hard; it was covered with lice. My boots had to be cut off of my feet, piece by piece since my feet were swollen up in them and I couldn't remove them otherwise.

They took me from there to a German hospital in nearby Bergen. It was run by British

army nurses; the German POWS were the orderlies, all with white bands on their arms. They did the manual work, carry the stretchers, clean up the place, etc. A British doctor examined me and discovered I had also contracted Tuberculosis with water in the left lung.

They fed me light at first - a soft-boiled egg, cereal , milk, and gradually I came to myself. My weight was seventy pounds then, and I was so wobbly and weak that if I got out of the bed I didn't have the strength to crawl back. Next bed to me was laying a Belgian P.O.W. in a coma. He was very still, didn't bother anybody. One morning, two Belgian nuns, in full regalia, arrived to visit him. They placed a bar of chocolate under his pillow, lit a candle, knelt down, their faces buried in the bedding, and prayed. I think of my diarrhea, that chocolate could work wonders. I convinced myself to sneak off the bed. My hand slips under his pillow, back to the bed, the sheet over my head, and just as I'm ready to start my feast a liberated Russian across my bed in the hall, jumps me, taking hold of the chocolate from my hands. And what a holy mess under the sheet, all the melted chocolate. The poor Belgian died shortly thereafter, so I didn't feel all that bad.

One morning some uniformed people arrived; I didn't understand their language at all. They asked me if I would go to Sweden for treatment. I made up my mind immediately, and figured if they want me I'll go; what's there to lose? I didn't even know then if Sighet was still Hungary or Rumania again. I can go home later if I don't like it there.

In a few days we traveled by train to Lubeck, a Baltic port city. In the wagon I have for company a British soldier. We pass through Hamburg. What a lovely sight - every building in ruins, the streets dead still; both me and the Brit are very happy. At Lubeck station they place me in a wheelchair, and a German soldier is taking me to the boat. He feels so sorry for himself,

and tells me how lucky I am to go to a neutral country - no war, plenty of food, and peace. He wishes he could come along, but he is a prisoner now. "How old are you?" he asks me. I say twenty. He then takes out his wallet and shows me his daughter, the same age, blond, blue eyes, a pony tail, all dressed up in a uniform of the "Bund die Deutsche Madels." I felt like throwing up. The nerve of him - they still didn't get it.

They placed me on a dangling hammock on the deck of the ship, and I was getting confused; a blue flag with a yellow cross. "Where am I going?" The Swiss flag is red with a white cross - that I know. Then it really hits me. How the heck will we land in Switzerland since they haven't got even a sea - only two lakes?

A navy officer is passing by me. I ask him "What is going on here? What ship is this, and where are we heading?" He calmly, patiently, tells me "Nope Switzerland, Suecia. Sweden, you know Denmark, Norway, Finland." I look bewildered and think "for me it's all the same..."

Those seven years in Sweden were the best years of my life.