



WITNESS TO AUSCHWITZ

excerpts from 18 Centropa interviews

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As the most notorious death camp set up by the Nazis, the name Auschwitz is synonymous with fear, horror, and genocide. The camp was established in 1940 in the suburbs of Oswiecim, in German-occupied Poland, and later named Auschwitz by the Germans.

Originally intended to be a concentration camp for Poles, by 1942 Auschwitz had a second function as the largest Nazi death camp and the main center for the mass extermination of Europe's Jews.

Auschwitz was made up of over 40 camps and sub-camps, with three main sections. The first main camp, Auschwitz I, was built around pre-war military barracks, and held between 15,000 and 20,000 prisoners at any time.

Birkenau – also referred to as Auschwitz II – was the largest camp, holding over 90,000 prisoners and containing most of the infrastructure required for the mass murder of the Jewish prisoners. 90 percent of Auschwitz's victims died at Birkenau, including the majority of the camp's 75,000 Polish victims. Of those that were killed in Birkenau, nine out of ten of them were Jews.

The SS also set up sub-camps designed to exploit the prisoners of Auschwitz for slave labor. The largest of these was Buna-Monowitz, which was established in 1942 on the premises of a synthetic rubber factory. It was later designated the headquarters and administrative center for all of Auschwitz's sub-camps, and re-named Auschwitz III.

All the camps were isolated from the outside world and surrounded by electrified barbed wire. Guards in watchtowers kept a vigilant lookout for potential escapees.

An estimated 1.1 million people perished in Auschwitz—one million of them Jews.

The following texts are eyewitness accounts of Centropa interviewees who – against all odds – survived Auschwitz-Birkenau.

ARTUR RADVANSKY

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Martina Marsalkova

Date of interview: October 2004

████████████████████ We were transported off to Auschwitz around 15 October 1942. There, I also got to my third selection. For this one we assembled—washed, with our hair cut, and naked—on the assembly square. Here we also got numbers and, so, lost our identities. From that time onwards we were only numbers, not people. When my turn came during the selection, and the SS officer, Entres—to this day I remember his name—asked me for my occupation, I remembered that I had always envied the workers in the prison hospitals, their larger food rations, less frequent contact with the SS, and that they didn't have to go to the assembly square. And so I said that I was a medical student at Charles University in Prague, and that I had two semesters behind me. Thanks to this I was assessed as being capable of work and was given the number 70315, which was tattooed on me by one prisoner. With a triangle, I was also designated as a Jew.

I got into Block No. 21 in the hospital. It was the surgery ward. But I got a fever due to a sinus infection. In the bed where I laid, there were three other prisoners, so none of us got any sleep. By coincidence, I found out that the *Lagerältester* [German: camp elder] was Ludvik, my friend from Buchenwald. After our joyous reunion, he also approved of the fact that I had proclaimed myself to be a medical student.

From about April 1943, I worked at the gynecological clinic for wives of the SS. The resident gynecologist was the head of the entire Auschwitz medical complex. I mopped the clinic, and cleaned the doctor's cloakroom and his office. I was also given the task of taking care of the baths of all the officers and members of the SS. Every afternoon that doctor also called together all the other doctors, who were to inform him about the results of experiments and other activities. Here I also met up with Doctor Mengele. Because I took care of the baths, I washed and massaged his back. He was always courteous to me, he never shouted at me or beat me. It was

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Artur Radvansky in Prague, Czechoslovakia, after the war.

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a complete contrast to his horrible acts and his experiments on people.

In Auschwitz, I once again met up with an unselfish member of the German medical corps. It was Maria Stromberger, an Austrian. She made very good friends with my friend, the Polish prisoner Eduard Pys. Thanks to him she crossed over completely to our side. She scrounged up medicines for us, and also tried to save our relatives and friends. Thanks to her connections with members of the SS we were able to secretly deliver the SS members' leftover food to the camp. The way we got it in was that we'd wrap it in a clean bed sheet and stick it under a pile of dirty laundry. The SS soldier that guarded the gate was afraid to check the laundry due to infections, so we could safely deliver it to the laundry. There I had a friend from Buchenwald. My friend and cohort in these deliveries, Ladislav Lukas, worked in the new laundry.

In Auschwitz, I found out that Hilda Wernerova, who had taught me German in high school, had been there. Unfortunately, I didn't find out about her presence until fourteen days after her death. I was quite saddened by it because I was a fairly influential person in the camp. I knew the doctors and if I would have said that my friend from school was there, she could have gotten into some commando where she could have survived. But I didn't know about it.

In 1943 or 1944, Maria didn't celebrate Christmas Eve with the SS, but prepared a Christmas supper for the prisoners in the infirmary. This didn't include us five Jews, who only stood watch so that we wouldn't be discovered by the SS. We did also taste the food that she cooked, as it had, after all, been us who stole part of the ingredients and brought them to the cook. Another person that helped us was named Cyrankevicz, and he worked in the typing pool. To this day, I don't know how, but he worked utter miracles with the index cards. He saved many people and, despite this, he always came out with the correct number of dead and alive.

In Auschwitz, I also met my future wife, Alzbeta [maiden name Kúrtiova], a Slovak. In the camp, she worked for the Gestapo as a typist during interrogations. The boss of that department was some Viennese man who called himself a doctor. Whether he really was one, I don't know. The fact that he used to shoot people in front of her during interrogations had a severe impact on Alzbeta's psyche. I used to see Alzbeta when they walked by the infirmary on their way to the Gestapo. But first I met her cousin, Klara Weiss. She also worked for the Gestapo, but only manual labor. When Klara did laundry for the SS, she used to go get hot water—she'd always come and say she needed it, and we'd prepare it for her. When she came with a member of the SS, we'd bribe him, usually with margarine and bread, to make sure he didn't see anything. Sister Maria would have prepared some food for the girls, so Klara would bring the girls a hamper.

On 17th January 1945 we were sent on a death march.

GABRIELA BRODSKA

Carlsbad, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Barbora Pokreis

Date of interview: August 2005

█ The trip took a week, and then we arrived. In Auschwitz, each minute had sixty seconds of horror. At that time, my brother was already in a work camp. Unfortunately, he didn't survive the war.

We arrived in Auschwitz on 13 June. I went to the left and my mother to the right. Back then, I didn't know what that meant. We were without water, there were about ninety of us in one wagon, and they gave us one pail of water. We had food with us, but didn't eat at all. Our mouths were so dry that we couldn't swallow. So everything that we had with us stayed there. I was as if stunned, I had no idea where I was, what was going on, I only heard them bellowing. I was completely out of it. I heard them bellowing, "*Alle raus! Alle raus!*" [German: "Everyone out!"] And leave everything on the train, just step off in pairs." I took my mother by the arm and we went. I was just automatically lifting my feet, because the trip had taken a week. During the day we stood still and it was hot. Horrible, no water, and ninety people in one wagon. A barred window. I had no idea at all where I was and what was happening to me.

My mother's hand trembled and she said, "Oh my God, they're splitting people up over there!" She noticed that there was a doctor standing there, a doctor, that is, that had also taken the Hippocratic oath, on one side, and, on the other, SS men and SS women... My mother noticed—I didn't even see them—that standing on the right side were young women and that older people were going off to the left. My mother wasn't old, she was 48, but her hair was completely white. She let go of me and inconspicuously nudged me. She said, "Go there, with the young people!" I just managed to kiss her hand and said to her, "Mommy, dear, be strong!" This was all as if in a dream. I stood there and realized that I'm not holding my mother by the hand. So I stood there helplessly for a while, and wanted to take a step to the left. One SS soldier jumped over to me, I was wearing a coat and skirt, and he took me by one corner of that coat and threw me over there. By doing this he actually saved my life. I then went to the camp.

I didn't know what was actually going on. We asked the block leader, "Where are the young women? Where are the children?" Those gorgeous, beautiful children. Such pretty ones—in Roznava we had several beautiful young women! The block leaders told us, in such an evasive manner—they were girls that had been there from 1942—"They're in Camp H, they've got easier work there; children there get milk and better food than here. Don't worry about it!" I was crying constantly, and my girl-



Gabriela Brodska and her fiancé, Tibor Roth. This photo was taken in Rozana, Czechoslovakia, in the late 1930s.

friends were becoming annoyed with me, saying, "Hey, we're in the same situation as you! Stop crying, you'll cry your eyes out!" I said, "I'm not crying because I'm thirsty, hungry, or because I'm sleeping on the bare ground, and that instead of a pillow I've got my clodhoppers that I wore on the trip here, but because I've got this horrible feeling that something's happened to my mother!"

About two months later I saw a former childhood friend of mine, Edita Langova. They came from Spisska Nova Ves and had Slovak citizenship. So, when the Hungarians came they deported them. But Slovakia didn't want them. For I don't know how many weeks they lived in, as it was called, *senki foldje* [Hungarian: no man's land], between Slovakia and Hungary. People they knew were bringing them food so that they would somehow survive. Then the Slovak government took mercy on them and accepted them. Well, and in 1942 they went to Auschwitz. So I saw Edita there, at that time she was already a block leader, but in a different part of the camp. I came to see her, but she didn't recognize me with my hair cut and in those horrible rags. My first question was, "Edita, please tell me, what is that Camp H?" "H, Camp *Himmel*" [German: "Camp Heaven"] [After saying these words Mrs. Brodskas lifted her hands to the heavens]. "And that's where our mothers and children are." She said, "You didn't know about it, what did you think?!" So that's how I found out about it. That's why the endless weeping and that eternal pain! I felt that my mother must have died such a horrible death!

Towards the end of October [1944] they deported us further. In the camp we were always running and hiding, whenever we knew that there was going to be a selection. We hid where we could. For example, we managed to hide in a different block. The older prisoners, well, the girls that had been there since 1942, said that there was only one road out of Auschwitz: up a chimney. There's no other way out! That's how they said it. I don't know what we were hoping for but, at the end of October, they began to deport the entire section of the camp where we were. We were the last block and there was no longer any place to run, no place to hide. We marched off and stopped in Brezinka in front of the gas chamber. It didn't look like one, there were heavy iron gates and, above it, grass, but we knew what it was. That was the longest night of my life. How long we stood there, I don't know. I was 20, 20 1/2, and I was asking myself what I had done to have to die such a horrible death at the age of twenty, while I so terribly wanted to live! We hugged and kissed each other. We promised each other that while we're still able to breathe we'll hold each other by the hand, so that we won't be so alone as we're dying. I don't know how many hours we could have been standing there, when an SS soldier drove up along the track and bellowed, "*Alle zurück!*" [German: "Everyone back!"] So we turned around and went. Auschwitz was immense; I don't know where they were leading us. They ordered us to strip, selection. At that time I already had glasses, not strong ones, weak, about one and a half diopters. One of the girls that had already been there a longer time

saw me and said to me, "Hide those glasses." I was holding some bread in my hand, which we had gotten for supper, a quarter of a loaf. I hollowed out a hole in it and stuck those glasses into it and carried that bread. I passed the selection.

During the night we were in a room, I don't know what room it was, but there were mice running around everywhere. I sat down, and suddenly I felt that something was watching me. It was a rat. I screamed and jumped up! I leaned up against a wall and that's how I slept. There were more of us, so we leaned up against each other, held each other, so that none of us would fall down. In the morning they chased us out and we stood outside all day until nightfall. Well, it was already October, not the warmest, you know. So they dressed us! I got an organza nightshirt that reached all the way to my ankles. Women's knickers, that were down to here on me [to the knees], but I didn't care, at least it protected my knees. I got some child's dress, which was coming apart at the seams, and some boy's coat. They took my shoes, because I still had my own from home. They were these solid shoes. Well, in their place I got these black high-heeled ballroom shoes. By then I had been standing outside for three or four days. So I took off my shoes outside. We also got socks, one gray and one purple. The way we were dressed wasn't fit for even a circus. In the morning of the fourth day they woke us up, and we set off by foot, on a march.

The older prisoners were saying that there were various transports, several hours, two days. The several-hour trips consisted of them loading people up and circling Auschwitz round and round, but the end station was a gas chamber. We started marching and in the distance we saw lights and then they distributed packages. There really was an SS woman standing there with two or three helpers, girls, and each one of us got a package. We got a half a loaf of bread, a slice of salami and a piece of margarine. It was only when we got on the train, and it was a passenger train, and I saw the first civilian building outside, and there was light inside and you could see into the room and in the window there was a birdcage, it was only then that we believed that we had left Auschwitz behind us. That we had gotten out of that hell after all.



Gabriela Brodskas' brother Ladislav Roth in 1930

HARRY FINK

Carlsbad, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Barbora Pokreis

Date of interview: August 2005

████████████████████ In 1943, they transported us to Auschwitz. We were the first transport to be put in trucks and not go to the gas chambers; it was the so-called December transport. When they had stripped, washed, tattooed, and dressed us, we then went to the family camp, where they separated us. Men went to the right, women to the left. I lived with my father, but could see my mother as often as I wanted. In Auschwitz, we began to recognize what was hunger and misery, and what cold was. My father worked as a *Stubenältester* [German: senior room warden] and my mother worked somewhere on the other end in this building where there were these cellophanes and various waste materials. The women were weaving something from it. I suspect that they were making fuses out of it; they'd dip it in something.

At that time, we were still all together. We were still holding on. We had a so-called *Kinderstube* [German: day nursery] there, where they even taught in some fashion. Fredy Hirsch was in charge of it. It's interesting, that the name of the cook, Libuse, has stuck in my mind. We'd always call out, "We thank Libuse a lot, for giving us soup from the pot. But if she gave us goose, she'd deserve a kiss!" We children didn't take it so hard, it was a matter of course for us.

In 1944, various selections took place; the whole camp was going to the gas. Then, after they sent us off, I managed to meet up with my father one more time. Somewhere he had organized [in Auschwitz the words steal and organize were synonymous] some short corduroy pants and somehow got into the men's camp and brought them to me. That was the last time I saw him. My father and mother stayed in the family camp for another day or two, and then went to the gas.

I'm in touch to this day with those boys, with those who are still alive, of course. To this day we study how it was and why they actually took those 97 from the family camp. It was absolutely illogical. One of them always says: "You had connections, I remember it, during the selection they waited for you. You were the last to come running over." No one knew why. In the men's camp, they moved us into a so-called *Strafkommando* [German: penal commando], to Mr. Bednar, a military criminal who, however, was terribly fond of us and didn't address us in any other fashion other than *Pepiks* [Pepik is slang for a Czech]. "Sing, *Pepiks*!"

Mr. Bednar was a horrible sadist; he was a multiple murderer. It was the *Strafblock*, a penal block, and those that went in rarely came out alive, and he deserved it. We did

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all sorts of things there. We had abnormal standing—we had hair. And to have hair in the concentration camp, that was something! The whole camp loved us. They didn't call us by any other name than *Pepiks*. I myself worked mainly with the so-called *Rollwagen*. A *Rollwagen* was an ordinary hay-wagon, only that instead of horses a couple of boys pulled it along by a rope. We could drive around here and there in the camp. I was in the crematorium many times while it was still in operation because next to the crematorium there was lumber and we used to go get wood there, which we would then bring to the SS, to their *Stuben, Dienststuben* [German: offices], buildings that were at the entrance to the camp. And they built air-raid shelters there.

I got to know the crematorium while it was in operation. The 13th block was connected with the 11th, and was additionally fenced in. It was a camp within a camp because living in the 11th was the *Sonderkommando* [commando responsible for cremation and carrying the dead out of the gas chambers] from those crematoriums. I got to know them, as well. We managed to live relatively decently, thanks to the fact that we drove around with the *Rollwagen*. We had pails hanging on it, and the SS never checked their contents. When they saw us they always whistled and said *weiter* [German: "Go on!"] and we pulled and left.

We would go as far as Kanada. That was the part of the camp where they sorted things left after the transports. And when the cook wanted shoes, he'd give us potatoes for someone in Kanada. We'd go to Kanada, where we'd meet someone and say to him, "Do you want potatoes? We need shoes of such and such a size." We'd get the shoes, give him the potatoes, and bring them to the cook, who'd give us potatoes. So we got by.

Otherwise, a person remembers very little because, when I talk with my friends, we can't agree on anything. Why? I say, "I used to drive around with the *Rollwagen*." Pavel Werner says, "I also used to drive around with the *Rollwagen*!" I say that this and this happened. He says, "It wasn't this, but that!" Each one remembers something different. And when we already knew each other for a longer time, we remembered one single incident, which he began to talk about and I finished it. So I said to him, "See, we really did ride together, and we've forgotten it all." We really did forget everything.

In Auschwitz I met my uncle. He actually wasn't my uncle, but my father's cousin. We used to call him Uncle and he used to recall that he survived the concentration camp thanks to me. I don't know how I discovered him there, I only remember that I brought him a big, raw potato. For him it was a gift from heaven and he recalled that I also found him a warm sweater. Well, these are things that I don't remember at all. Some things a person remembers and other things disappear from his head.

In January [1944] they drove us out on a death march.

JIRI FRANEK

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Dagmar Greslova

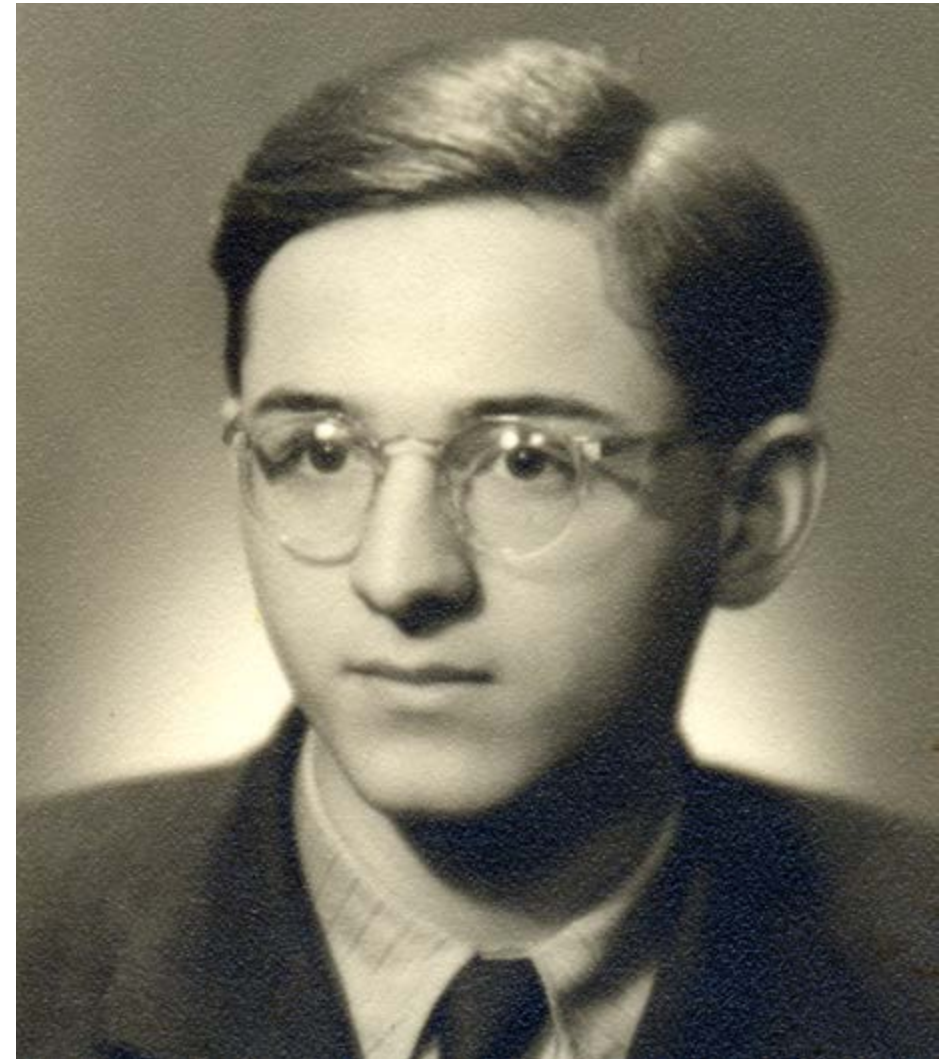
Date of interview: February 2005

I got onto the transport on 15th December 1943 and arrived in Auschwitz on 17th December. In general, I'm sure people know what it meant to arrive in Auschwitz. As soon as we got off, they confiscated our luggage, there was noise, beatings, basically everything so that we would realize that Terezin was ideal in comparison. The first few days there were quite an adventure. I am sometimes amazed at my courage then, the things that I did. But already on the way there I met Ari, the son of Jakob Edelstein, who was a so-called *Lagerältester* [German: camp elder] in Terezin. He was the Jewish mayor of Terezin who, of course, had minimal powers. But, despite that, he managed to accomplish something. His son, Ari, attended our school in L 417. Ari took a big liking to me, so he went to see Fredy Hirsch and told him that he wanted me to be his teacher again.

Fredy Hirsch was an amazing man, very intelligent and courageous, even the Germans paid attention to him because he had this direct way of staring and looked so unafraid. Later, they killed him, as well. He accomplished a real miracle, he stood his ground, and managed to wring a children's home out of them, first one, then another. He had the courage to stand up to the SS, he reasoned with them, that the children are going to get in the way during roll calls, because children also had to present themselves at roll call, that they are going to be in the way during assembly for work details, and that it would be simpler to have them all in one place somewhere and a couple of people to take care of them. So, in this way, he managed to create blocks where the children were gathered and divided up into groups.

Just for interest, my placement went via two paths because I was an organized Party member, so the Party also pressed Hirsch that he had to take on some of their members, which was lifesaving. Young Ari Edelstein did a lot for me, he was plucky and took a liking to me. He gave me some money, which got me cigarettes, and that meant food, and so on and so on. But the Edelsteins ended up badly. After a short time they led Jakob Edelstein, his wife, even little Ari, away. First they shot the son in front of his parents, then they shot the wife in front of Jakob Edelstein, and finally they shot him, too.

Hirsch said to me, "I've already heard of you, come over!" I think that one thing that also helped me was that I was "well dressed." That was very important, because he saw that, immediately after arrival, I was already capable of scaring up some decent clothing and shoes—which was no mean feat, and showed that I was probably a capable person. When we arrived, they bathed us, shaved us bald, tattooed us, and



Jiri Franek in 1941.

then we went to the sauna where they disinfected us. We stood there naked and then the *Kleidungskapto* [something like a clothing warden] threw us whatever clothing he had at hand. Luckily I got these black pants made from decent material, a shirt, and a brown light jacket. It wasn't very warm clothing, but since I then worked inside it didn't matter so much. But during roll calls I froze.

What was important, we all arrived with decent shoes. I had these beautiful high lace-up "army" boots. Even before we got through all the insane entrance proce-

dures, this boy came into our quarantine area, gave me the once-over, including my boots and said, "Give me those boots and I'll give you something decent, otherwise you'll be in wooden shoes. You won't get socks, I'll give you socks and some decent shoes." And I believed him, I don't know if it was intuition or that I had already managed to have a look around and knew that it was true. So we agreed on how we'd find each other later. I then gave him those army boots, which he then proudly wore and I would look at them with envy, and he gave me socks and shoes. Normal shoes, but decent ones, which was a real scoop there, because they stayed on your foot, a person could walk normally. In that freezing cold, normal shoes were still better than the wooden shoes that everyone froze in. And I think that that was also one moment that influenced Hirsch. He saw that in the space of one or two days I managed to get myself some shoes, which was a definite plus, when a person knew how to go about things.

Fredy said to me, "Come tomorrow, and we'll see." I went to work for only about one day and that was murderous work, almost impossible to live through without a large dose of luck. So the next day I, of course, immediately ran over to Fredy and he said, "OK, you can start." The children's block had some chairs, and that was about all. Later, they even painted it [this means that the painter Gottliebova was allowed to paint pictures on the bare walls, a very unusual story], but we weren't allowed to have any teaching aids. We were allowed to teach, but there wasn't anything to teach from. They already knew that those children were going to die, so they mercifully let us teach. They didn't really care whether we were teaching or not, while in Terezin teaching was not allowed.

We sat and around us sat the children. We sat next to each other, we had no paper, no pencils, and everything depended on how a person was able to tell stories and what he was capable of. I think that I showed that I had a broad knowledge of literature, that I could recite the history of Czech literature from memory—at that time they were interested in Czech literature, not German or Hebrew—and that I could talk about geography. I had the atlas memorized, so I could, for example, talk about how one would get to Palestine. I was able to enthrall those children for the whole half day. I had a decent knowledge of history—today I wouldn't know it like that—also something of philosophy, which was of interest to those fifteen year old boys.

I didn't know how to sing, which was a problem. But I did manage this one small miracle: I put together a collection of Czech poetry, this little textbook. That meant that first I had to scare up some paper. We were allowed to receive packages, so I had to cut the [wrapping] paper to size. In Birkenau, scissors were a rarity. To cut it up and iron out the pieces, that was a major problem. I also cut these cardboard [from packages, which were later allowed to be sent covers,] in the middle of the front cover I glued a white paper square [about 7x7 cm] and I recall that to this day.

I can't draw at all, but I did manage to draw on it some picture of a landscape with a building, probably a school. The next problem was ink. I tried to make some myself—someone advised me that it could be made out of ashes, but that didn't work for me. Finally by some miracle I managed to get a pen and some ink from somewhere, and so I began to write.

In those days I had a prodigious memory. To this day, I think about those poems that I used to know; I don't think I'd be able to recite them today. I had Bezruc almost all memorized. Of course, I also knew large portions of Macha, also Viktor Dyk, and many other poems. I also asked my colleagues, who gladly recited things from memory for me, so in the end it was a beautiful creation. Forty or fifty Czech poems, which I then lent to some of the other teachers. We read those poems, and strangely enough, it got the interest of those boys. Maybe because they saw how it came about. I don't know if children are really that interested in literature but, when I was presenting Czech poetry to them, they really did pay attention and ask questions. I knew a lot of war poetry, and that particularly interested the children, they could understand it; after all, they also had personal experiences with the war. To this day, I'm proud of that work, that I managed to put together material for that collection of Czech poetry in such difficult conditions.

When we meet today, we are finding out that the *Betreuer* [German: warden] had the highest survival rate out of everyone. Let's say that there were a hundred *Betreuer* and that thirty or forty of them survived, which is an enormous number. There were ten thousand of the others and only two hundred of them survived. It's simply a huge percentage of *Betreuer* that lived through it. The writer Primo Levi writes that everyone who survived did so at someone else's expense. [Levi, Primo (1919-1987): Jewish-Italian memoirist, novelist and poet, active in resistance during WWII, captured and taken to Auschwitz, best-known for his autobiographical trilogy *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Reawakening*, and *The Periodic Table*.] In its own way, it's true. If I hadn't been a *Betreuer*, I would have died while building some road and someone else would have been that *Betreuer* and would have survived. Primo Levi wasn't able to live with this thought, that he was alive instead of someone else. I have to say that I've been living with it for years and years with a view that it was fate.

We get together and every once in a while someone talks about where he had been a *Betreuer*. They're also people that have a clean conscience, because it's not as if they did something bad back then. If someone was a boss, a cook, and so on, that was, after all, different. We were inside where it was warm and taught children, instead of spreading gravel on a road in the freezing cold with our hands, because there were next-to-no tools. Or, if when there was widespread hunger, and some person took the piece of meat intended for the entire camp and cut off half of it for his own dinner, that's different. We didn't have to go out into the freezing cold, we

didn't have to perform hard physical labor, and we were always together. An intellectual society that constantly held together intellectually, that was why relatively many *Betreuer* survived.

My aunt Marie—my mother's cousin and the wife of my father's brother, Rudolf Frischmann—used to distribute soup. Those people were then allowed to scrape out the soup pots, so each one of them managed to scrape out at least one full canteen. It was only the leftovers at the bottom, but at least it was the thickest. My aunt ate extremely little, she was all skin and bones and I'm amazed that she managed to carry it all. Her daughter died, she went to the gas chamber. So my aunt became completely fixated on me. For her, I was a substitute for her daughter, and at the same time I was more important to her than herself. She took great care of me. Quite often, there would be soup for dinner or supper so, thanks to my aunt, I had relatively enough to eat for those conditions, I didn't suffer from that enormous hunger.

We also organized a rebellion in Auschwitz. It also had various ups and downs, though, with the realization that a rebellion would be hopeless. I was a member of the resistance in Auschwitz. A large portion of Jews and Czechs didn't trust the German-Russian agreement, they suspected some sort of fraud, and rightly so, as it turned out. At that time Jews were becoming members of the already illegal Communist Party. There was no party ID. I can't give an exact date. In fact, even before I entered the concentration camp I was surrounded by some Communists, then in the concentration camp I became a direct member of a Communist cell.

In Birkenau, my party chief came to me and told me the gas chambers are waiting for us. Not only were the Communists organized, the Zionists, members of Sokol, Czech Jews also agreed among themselves to organize an uprising. So these "troikas" [groups of three] arose. One was a Zionist, one a Czech, and one was something else. I was in a "troika" with this one guy who was already at that time a Zionist. You see, people changed a lot because they had the impression that their particular faith had let them down, so Zionists became Communists, Communists became Czech Jews, Czech Jews became Zionists, and so on. Avi Fischer, who was in my 'troika,' was a big Czech Jew and then later left for Palestine, but he was a swell guy. On the other side, I had Kurt Sonnenberg, who was a German, a Jew, of course, but otherwise German to the core. But I think that he was honest. Because he was *Vorarbeiter*—work group leader, a "preparation" master—so, after the war, they put him on trial. I had to take his side, if only because we were in that "troika" and he also prepared for the uprising.

Our work was minimal. We were to obtain matches. You can't very well imagine what it meant to try to find matches in Auschwitz. Besides that, we were to find blankets—

those, we more or less had—and containers for water. Our plan was the following: when the time comes for us to go to the gas chambers, we'll set our straw mattresses on fire to create confusion. We'll throw wet rags (that's why the water) on the elective fence to short it out. And then we'll run towards the partisans. We even had a map, which, thanks to money from Avi Edelstein, we got from the Polack Leshek.

Money—marks found by "my" children on the road leading through the center of the camp: did someone lose it, or place it there on purpose? They didn't know what to do with it, so they brought it to me. I exchanged it "through the wires" for food, two hundred cigarettes—which were later to play a big role—and a map of Auschwitz's surroundings. I gave it to the leader of the resistance, Lengsfeld—named Lenek after the war. He gave it to Avi Fischer, who made copies. To this day, I have no idea if it was my map, or if Lengsfeld's version was correct, that the map was stolen from the SS headquarters by prisoners on cleaning duty. If it was my map they used, then to this day I don't know if it was a real map. Avi Fischer was in my "troika", and copied the map, which, of course, presented him with all sorts of problems—finding paper, pencils and so on. Avi Fischer, unfortunately, died. We were friends, but I never asked him about it, I just never got around to asking him how that map looked.

These are all, of course, terrible tragicomedies. I had gotten the map from that Polack for marks which Ari Edelstein had given me before his death. Leshek was in the camp next door, on the other side of some electrified barbed wire. It was possible to talk through the fence—it was dangerous, but possible. So Leshek says to me one day, "Listen, you better give it all back to me, those marks are counterfeit." We couldn't yell much through the wire; there were guards, after all, who could start shooting, so we couldn't talk long. So I said: "How do you want me to return cigarettes? They've all been smoked. We've eaten the food, I can't get it back. I had no idea those marks were false." And he says, "You know, it doesn't matter. You gave me counterfeit marks, I gave you a counterfeit map." Imagine the tragicomedy! I'll never know. Lenek is dead, Fischer, as well, so no one knows whether that map that they were reproducing in case of escape was real or not. That can't be ascertained any more. Or, perhaps, Lengsfeld-Lenek, who I had given my map to, really did get a map from the SS headquarters, as he claimed he did.

In any case, when the transport that had arrived before us went to the gas chambers, our "troika" became very active and we had the feeling that it was time for action. But we couldn't do anything more than keep collecting rags, matches, and water, in case the uprising came. This has led to the fact that the resistance is underrated, that we didn't accomplish much. The question is whether we should have rebelled.

We knew that those who the Germans told they were going to work, they were all murdered. One day we also found out that we were to go to work in Germany. When

we were preparing the resistance, there was a motto: "One to two percent of prisoners can be saved." It's better to save two percent than for one hundred percent to go off like sheep into the gas chambers. In the resistance, everyone couldn't know about everyone else, so that in the case of interrogation everything wouldn't be found out. Therefore, I was only supposed to know about the two men in our "troika"—Fischer and Sonnenberg. But I knew some others from the *Heim* [German: children's home] and also a few from the Party, including the "resistance head," Hugo Lengsfeld, later known as Pavel Lenek.

When they were dissolving our prison camp in Auschwitz, I had no choice but to go. We marched from the camp, ostensibly to go work in Germany. However, at first it looked like we were on our way to the gas chambers. I had a friend behind me, who I knew was also in the resistance. We weren't allowed to talk, there were SS with rifles everywhere, but a person learned to talk without it being perceivable; I don't think I'd be able to do it now. And so we said, "What's up? Are we going to the chambers? Are we still going to rebel? Or are we going to give up on this life?" And then we saw that we had begun to move and that we were going to the ramp, where the trains arrived and departed. So I finally got out of Auschwitz when Hitler found that he had too few workers, and that better than to kill people just for being Jews, is to work them to death, simply to let them work until they dropped, but so that they are doing something useful.

When there were air-raids, I twice saw an SS soldier crap himself. Once, on the other hand, I saw a brave SS soldier, who ran about with his revolver, commanding us about, so that we would pull the burning wagons apart from each other and put them out one by one so that if one exploded it wouldn't cause the others to explode. He was running about among us, and if there had been an explosion he would have been a goner along with us. I always tell people that I'm afraid when I talk about the concentration camp, that I talk about those exceptions, with regards to the SS, even some of those humorous scenes that distort the picture. Because the evil ones—the bestial ones who were, of course, full of fear for themselves—were 99 percent of them.

A big book about uprisings in concentration camps came out, and there isn't much there about our resistance movement, only a couple of lines, as if it hadn't existed. Allegedly, it wasn't resistance, when there wasn't a single shot fired and no one fell. But that isn't true! Unfortunately, a rivalry arose between the main camp at Auschwitz and us at Birkenau. The main camp truly did have a well-organized resistance, but they didn't rise up, either. In fact, we had considered cooperating with the main camp—after all, there was movement between the two. For example, locksmiths used to go from one to the other, so they could have brought over some information, provided a connection. The resistance in the main camp wasn't inter-

ested in our planned uprising, though! Here there was a real rivalry, because the main camp [Auschwitz I] said: the end of the war is approaching, and such an uprising will cost more lives than if we wait for the war to end. Even in the eventuality that departure for the gas chambers will draw near, and we rise up, they refused to join us. That doesn't make any sense any more: the end of the war is approaching, and more people will die than just waiting for the end of the war.

If I'm to talk openly, there was likely some antisemitism involved, because the main camp at Auschwitz, that wasn't really a Jewish camp, while we, Birkenau, that is BIIb, were expressly a purely Jewish camp. So, from today's viewpoint, our resistance is neglected, not acknowledged, and I think that we're being done a great injustice. Perhaps the resistance movement of the main Auschwitz camp has also done us a great injustice.

This lasts to this day—when the chairman of the Auschwitz Historical Group, Bartek, gave a lecture regarding the Auschwitz resistance, he didn't mention even a word regarding the fact that an uprising had also been planned in Birkenau. I'm a member of this Auschwitz Historical Group, so I also asked to speak, and added that Birkenau also had a highly organized resistance, of which I had been a member, that it should be taken into account. He told me that such a remark must be made in writing, so I submitted it in writing, and he nevertheless did not publicize it anywhere. So I rebelled and at the next opportunity I forcefully expressed myself, and it ended up that the group's internal magazine for historians, named *Auschwitz*, published my protest, that there had also been a resistance movement in BIIb. That's interesting, that all of a sudden it was too little for them, that we had merely been preparing for it.

Another thing that's interesting: after I came out with this, some former prisoners said this to me, orally and without witnesses: "you're telling us something here and you don't have any witnesses, no one else has written about this." And, almost as if to spite them, right at that time a book by Karel Roden, *Life Inside Out*, came out, and there he even writes that he smuggled revolvers into BIIb. He doesn't say how many, I think probably one or two, but even that shows that we were serious! Karel Roden was allowed out of the camp because he was hauling some garbage out, so he was allowed to go in and out. He didn't know me or that I existed, we had no agreement, but what he wrote furnished proof that there was organized resistance in Birkenau and that it was meant seriously.

From Auschwitz, we went to a gasoline refinery in Schwarzheide, where they made artificial gasoline from coal. It's between Dresden and Berlin. On 1 June 1944, I boarded the transport and was in Schwarzheide that same day or the next.

KURT KOTOUČ

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Pavla Neuner

Date of interview: October 2004

My brother and I were in Terezin until October 1944, until a series of transports practically wiped out the ghetto. My brother was deported at the beginning of October and my deportation ensued a few days later. I think there were seven transports and they went quickly, one after the other. We didn't know where we were going at all. First, the train headed west to Dresden but there it turned east. It probably went in a zig zag fashion because in the freight car some prisoner from the transport before us wrote in pencil "to Auschwitz." In Auschwitz-Birkenau, where 1,500 of us came to, most people went directly from the train into the gas chambers. Back then, we didn't know what it was all about, but somehow I knew that I should group myself with people who were stronger. When we came to the ramp in Auschwitz, the prison camp guards jumped into the trains and they started taking our baggage. There was a young guy among them and I refused to give him my things. And he asked me, "*Wie alt bist du?*" [German: "How old are you?"] I told him I was fifteen or sixteen. And he advised me, "*Musst sagen du bist achtzehn!*" [German: "You have to say that you are eighteen!"] When I stepped out on the ramp, no one asked me for my age, but I tried to stick to the group of prisoners who were physically stronger, who then went to the camp together.

When we entered the premise, the crematoriums were operating and the wind blew the smoke from the chimneys at us. We marched to our appointed building, which took a while because we had to go through the disinfection room where they shaved us and poured some kind of solution on us. As they led us, I saw Jirka Zappner behind the wires; he also used to be in home number one in Terezin. He waved at me when he saw me. Otherwise, I was in Birkenau by myself. When we came to our building at the camp we had our "greeting" right away. There our Kapo "greeted us" with the words: "*Damit ihr wisst, wo ihr seid. Ihr seid in Auschwitz! Bei uns stinken die Toten nicht!*" [German: "So that you know where you are, you are in Auschwitz! Here the dead don't stink!"] and at the same time he pointed at the chimneys. He was a terrible person. For Auschwitz, it was typical that the positions were filled by career criminals and after being in the camps for such a long time they deformed into sadistic beings. This creature beat a prisoner to death on the second day, under the guise that the prisoner had taken an extra portion of food. Some assistant kapos held the prisoner on a bench and he beat him with a cane, until he totally exhausted himself, he was heaving and his veins were popping out, as he gave the blows.

The days in Birkenau were indescribable. There wasn't anything to eat; it was so bad that people picked potato peels out of the mud. You couldn't sleep, because the

WITNESS TO AUSCHWITZ



Kurt Kotouč in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1941



Kurt's brother Hanus Kotouč in the late 1930s.

wooden house was so full that you had to lie on your hip. People were crammed together on each level of the bunks. If we were not going to do some kind of work we were ever on guard. Drills and commands and constantly standing on guard in the harsh, cold weather were worse than the work in Birkenau.

Near the end of 1944, it became more common to pick prisoners for labor in Birkenau. The German industry was doing so badly that they needed slaves. In one of these rounds, some civilians came: they were engineers and representatives of German factories. We were told to stand guard and all the metal trade people were ordered to identify themselves. At that point, I already knew that the only way to save myself was to get out any way that I could. But we also all knew that it was very dangerous to pretend that a person had a specific trade. If they found out it wasn't true, it cost you your life. But I had no other chance so I stepped out of the row and identified myself. The civilians accompanied by the SS walked through our row and asked each person who had stepped out to say what they were. I said that I was an electrician. One of the factory representatives looked at the other and said, "Isn't he a bit young?" The other one just waved his hand, and by miracle I got into one of the transports leaving Birkenau for work.

LADISLAV PORJES

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Dagmar Greslova

Date of interview: January 2006

I remember the arrival in Auschwitz. They dumped us out of the transport, which stopped on a spur line. I did something wrong, I don't know anymore what it was, I didn't greet a member of the SS loudly enough, or something like that. That person gave me a horrible cuff, but that wasn't the worst—the worst was that my glasses fell to the ground and broke. I was disconsolate because I needed the glasses. I remember one older prisoner, perhaps between 20 and 25, who had already been in the camp for a longer time, consoling me. He consoled me very much, was very kind to me, petted, and kissed me. It wasn't until later that I noticed that he had a pink triangle: he was a homosexual.

The selection took place as soon as we arrived. They dumped us out, and then it went quickly, left, right, left, right, left, right, around and around. The standard tattooing also took place. An SS minion tattooed me a new identity: from that moment on I was *Häftling Nummer B-14219*. I got into Camp B, so Auschwitz-Birkenau, right beside the former Gypsy [Roma] camp, which they liquidated. Auschwitz had an underground movement but I had arrived too late and was in the camp for too short a time to register the fact. Moreover, escapes which, for example, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler had managed [see *Escape from Auschwitz*], those had happened long before I arrived at the camp. The underground was founded by former French prisoners, who the Germans had transported away.

In Birkenau, about 40 of us men slept in a wooden bunkhouse; we slept under a ragged blanket. In the winter we got a little heat with a small stove. My typical day in the camp consisted of us waking up in the morning in the barracks and getting breakfast, which was made up of so-called tea, and a slice of bread, accompanied by a teaspoon of artificial honey or artificial jam. That's what the Germans called breakfast. On this miserable ration we had to work until lunch. Lunch consisted of so-called *zupa*, which was the Polish expression for *Suppe* in German, soup. It looked like a broth made from dirty socks and tasted like it, too. Chunks of rotten boiled potatoes floated in it, here and there a piece of gristle and, with it, again, a slice of bread. On that, we had to make it until supper, which was weak, almost watery, tea, a teaspoon of artificial jam, and a slice of bread. I think that it's obvious why at that time I weighed 45 kilos.

One evening it was my turn to empty the garbage pail in our bunkhouse. The sun had long since set behind the barracks, and the twilight had thoroughly thickened. I aimed



Ladislav Porjes (left) with a friend in 1942.

for a rusty barrel, into which I was supposed to dump the contents of our pail, and I noticed a half-limp sack leaning against the wall of the hovel that was called "the kitchen." When I was already returning to our bunkhouse with the empty pail, it was dark, no one could see me, so I decided to look at the contents of the sack. I hefted it and discovered that it could have been about ten kilos of potatoes which, moreover, looked more or less edible. After three months in the camp I wasn't exactly in the greatest shape, but I grabbed the sack and, after a bit of a struggle, I threw it over my shoulder. With the pail in my other hand, I carefully walked to our bunkhouse.

I was looking forward to my fellow prisoners cheering and how they'd praise me for such a scoop. But it was premature, because after a while a gang of about fifteen-year-old urchins came rushing over to me, threw me on the ground, stuffed their coat and shirt pockets with potatoes, and left me beaten on the ground. They were urchin children from burned villages in the Ukraine and Russia, who the occupants had taken from their parents, who'd been accused of sabotage and, as a warning, publicly executed. The Germans then accused these children of vagrancy and begging, and dragged them to Birkenau. They stuffed them into the barracks of the former *Gypsy* camp, whose occupants they had gassed prior to that.

I picked myself up from the muddy ground, I was shaking with cold. I was so stunned by it that, aside from the empty pail, I was also dragging along the limp sack. I didn't think of the danger. I knew that my bunkhouse was around the corner, and the sack could come in handy as a blanket during the coming winter. Suddenly, out of the blue, around the corner, appeared a German guard, armed to the teeth. He asked me what I was doing outside. I explained to him that I had gone to empty the pail and that I had then fallen down, that's why I'm so muddy. He asked what the sack was for. I said that I had found it lying beside the garbage barrel.

He carefully took the sack into his hand, and unluckily, two forgotten potatoes rustled about in it. He wanted to know what had happened to the rest of the potatoes. I tried to explain that there had perhaps been some other ones in it, but that they had probably fallen out when I had fallen. He began to shout that, knowing Jews, I probably wanted to sell them somewhere, that I no doubt have some deal arranged. He ordered me: "About left, ten steps forward, stop, about face, close your eyes!" So I did an about left, measured out ten steps, did an about face and again stood face to face with a machine gun. The SS soldier stood astride, aimed and fired a shot. It was a fragment of eternity. I managed to hear the shot, see the flash, feel a burning pain in my face, and find out that I'm alive. The SS soldier lowered his machine gun, aimed his flashlight's beam at my face, cursed and bellowed, "*Hau ab!*" [German: "Get lost!"] I was in shock. I had obeyed the order. He didn't fire a second time but, just to be sure; I left the sack lying on the ground. In the bunkhouse everyone wanted to know what had happened, they'd been frightened by the shot. They treated the

wound on my neck, which had by only a little missed my jugular.

I worked in a commando that went outside of the camp, and we built so-called cowsheds. I dragged long, heavy beams on my shoulders. One day the cowshed was built, the next day we tore it down—so this "work" of ours was pure and utter bullying. I got sores on the back of my neck from carrying the beams, I had a vitamin deficiency, and got into the infirmary. Some young German doctor with a war cross was working as the commander of the infirmary. Also working there was a very noted former Jewish professor from Prague. He treated me with several kinds of liniments; he gathered various herbs among the weeds, from which he then manufactured the liniments. He consoled me, that I won't go to the gas from the infirmary, because I was afraid that as a cripple who they don't need, they'll send me into the gas. This professor didn't return to Czechoslovakia after the war, I think that he left for America, because he was probably afraid, because in Auschwitz he helped Mengele with experiments. Mengele likely forced him to do it under threat. Otherwise, though, he was a really esteemed and very capable specialist.

It was, on the whole, pleasant to lie in the *Krankenrevier* [German: sick bay] for a couple of days. The infirmary may have been infested by insects but one knew that the crematorium wasn't an immediate threat. It was warmer there, the soup was thicker, and occasionally one even found a piece of half-rotten potato in it instead of the obligatory peels. I could take a rest from the horrible toil, from the huge logs that we dragged around on our backs every day. I could stretch out under a not-too-clean, ragged blanket.

On the bed next to me lay a *musulman*, a living skeleton that I couldn't tear my eyes away from. The poor wretch was constantly spewing blood. He was being given a morphine substitute, because real morphine was reserved only for the SS elites. In the gloom, I could make out the number on his forearm—it had three digits, which means that he must have been in the camp for at least three years. The professor's efforts were futile: death was looking out of that poor wretch's eyes. *Exitus* was a question of, at most, several hours. The Latin word *exitus* has remained in my memory—I heard it for the first time from the professor in the infirmary. Today it doesn't sound so terrible to me but, back then, when the professor pronounced it in front of the head doctor, a cold sweat broke out on my forehead. There must be something very dignified in that word, because with its pronunciation even the SS-men themselves became quiet.

In the evening, the attending supervisor used to come by, and it was time for a checkup. The German doctor usually examined the patients' bare feet, and when they weren't perfectly clean the patient didn't get any supper. When the doctor approached my bed, I noticed that it was a new doctor, who I didn't know. I stuck my

feet out from underneath the blanket. At that moment, something rolled out onto the dirt floor. Inwardly, I cursed myself for being so careless. Fear constricted my throat. For onto the floor had fallen several of my chessmen, which I'd made from bread dough. I did it to kill time in the infirmary. But, of course, it was forbidden. Absolutely everything was forbidden in Birkenau.

The SS doctor bent down and examined the figures with interest. He asked me whether I knew how to play chess. When I nodded yes, he wanted to know if I played well. Finally, he said that if I was able to walk, I should get dressed and come with him. I went to his quarters. His batman stared in surprise, that the new doctor is bringing a kid to his place, what's more, a Jewish *Häftling* [German: prisoner]. The doctor took out a waxed canvas, unrolled it, and took out some figures. He told me to sit down and put a pack of cigarettes beside me. They were gold-tipped "Egyptians." I took a drag from the cigarette and my head began to spin, so I put it down on the edge of the ashtray, so as not to dirty the carpet.

The game began. I opened very well, but the whole time I was asking myself: what will happen if I win. The doctor made a bad move and the game was from that moment decided in my favor. I said to myself that he looks easygoing, that there's something decent in his eyes. But, I said to myself, weren't his party colleagues also smiling? Weren't they smiling during the selections? Weren't they even smiling when they were sending people to the gas chambers? Now the doctor wasn't even smiling any more. In his look there was something chilling. Is it worth irritating him? It wouldn't have been bad to show him what a bungler he is, it wouldn't have been bad to relish the feeling of victory, to show him that even an insignificant Jew-boy could defeat a member of the *Herrenvolk* [German: master race].

But I knew that that sort of victory could have a very bitter aftertaste. And I wanted to survive. So, I purposely made a bad move. The doctor breathed a sigh of relief. I could still have saved the game, pulled my castle back for defense, I was even already reaching for it, but at the last moment I changed my mind, after all. Instead, I pulled back my queen and placed it so that the SS-man could develop an offensive. I let him win. He was delighted and declared that it hadn't been a bad game. In the end, he gave me something wrapped up in newspaper. Outside I unwrapped the package. In it was a can of pork and ten cigarettes. Back at the infirmary I hid everything under my mattress. A few days later, as the professor had predicted, my sores really did disappear, and I was healthy again.

Miklos Feldmann, who I knew, was also in Birkenau. His parents had a clothing store in Michalovce. His parents didn't have any musical talent so it's a mystery who Miklos inherited it from. He learned to play the violin wonderfully: he played at Jewish birthdays, weddings, or other merry—and also sad—occasions. They brought him to

Birkenau in a cattle wagon a year before me. When I met him there he was 36, so 13 years older than me. He looked to be in good health and, as opposed to me, who wore prison rags, he wore a relatively decent civilian suit. Of course, he had a yellow square sewn on his back.

I wondered at it all, and he told me that it was all due to his violin, which he had taken with him on the transport. Mengele, who loved music had, with foresight, let him keep it on the ramp. From that time on, Miklos played for the SS and officers. He played everything, from the classics to *Lili Marlene*. [The song *Lili Marlene* was recorded by Marlene Dietrich (1901–1992), the German actress and chanteuse]. Everyone was thrilled and they promoted him—he became a Kapo [concentration camp inmate appointed by the SS to be in charge of a work gang]. However, he never hurt anyone and, really, no one wanted it of him, either. His only duty was playing music.

After some time they brought him two *Häftlinge*, to accompany Miklos's playing with singing. To increase their own fun, the SS truly picked them out cleverly: for they looked like Pat and Patachon. [Pat and Patachon: a comic Danish silent film duo.] Tall and skinny Ojzer had once been cantor in a Vilna synagogue. Short and stocky Lajb was from some Polish *shtetl* [Yiddish: village]. These two singers complemented each other well while singing, but otherwise didn't have much love for each other. The swore at each other, Lajb abused Ojzer for being religious and for observing religious regulations, even in the camp, and that he ate only a slice of bread and potatoes baked on a stove. Lajb called Ojzer *meshugge* [Yiddish: crazy] and *amhoretz* [Yiddish: ignoramus]. Ojzer, on the other hand, called Lajb a *shabesgoy* [Yiddish: non-Jewish person who helped Jewish families heat their food on the Sabbath; hear, used as an insult] or *mamzer* [Yiddish: bastard]. The SS made them the butt of jokes and riddles like, "Do you know, you Jew-boys, why you've always been inferior? Because they cut a piece off of you right after birth!" Or, "Farmers pulled a woman's naked, drowned corpse from the Vistula. We immediately recognized that she was a Jewess. How did you know? She smelled!" But, otherwise, they treated them relatively well and didn't even beat them.

One day, Miklos appeared before his audience alone, and waited for Lajb and Ojzer to appear. But the officers were requesting a song about a prostitute who fell in love with a soldier, for the popular hit by the Swedish-German Nazi star Zarah Leander [Swedish actress (1907–1981)]. Miklos summoned the courage to ask whether they didn't want to wait for his colleagues, that, after all, the song would sound better with singing. "Go ahead and play it yourself, Paganini [Italian violinist and composer (1782–1840)]. From now on you'll always be playing solo! Your friends went up the chimney. There were punished for preparing to steal a loaf of bread." The violin dropped from Miklos's hands and tears welled up in his eyes. A German consoled him, "Don't be sorry, your favorite didn't end as badly." Miklos summoned his last hopes and asked him whether thus little Lajb had remained alive. The SS sol-

dier laughed, "No, not that, but the tall guy burned for a lot longer!" This was what Birkenau 'humor' was like. The virtuoso Miklos Feldmann survived the Holocaust, and after the war immigrated to the USA, where he died.

In November 1944, word spread throughout the camp that an evacuation of the camp was being prepared—people whispered it while building the cowsheds, it was talked about quietly at meetings in the latrine and, more loudly, in the barracks. It was no secret, and our *Blockältester* [German: person in charge of one barrack] Willy tolerated these debates. The Russian army was already damned close and cannon fire could even be heard, although still only occasionally and dimly, during assemblies on the *Appellplatz* [German: roll call area]. Moreover, there were substantially more heavy freight trucks with carefully covered beds leaving the camp daily.

One *Häftling*, a clerk from the *Schreibstube* [German: camp office], brought allegedly guaranteed information that, in the near future, they were preparing to evacuate the entire camp from Auschwitz to Gleiwitz. This news evoked agitation and fear among the inmates. It was clear to us that they wouldn't be moving us by car or by rail, but that we'd have to go on foot in the bitter, freezing cold for dozens of kilometers in worn-out boots and wooden shoes and summer camp rags. Prior to that, as a cover-up, they tore down two crematoria, which was supposed to fool the awaited visit of the International Red Cross—so we could hope that they wouldn't shoot us *en masse*, as it would have cost too much work and ammunition, and the orphaned ovens of the last crematorium could scarcely have sufficed to do away with the evidence of mass murder.

Into this atmosphere came an unexpected roll-call of a surprising nature—instead of the routine bullying on the frozen terrain, came an unusual request by the SS *Scharführer* [German: squad leader] for all prisoners up to the age of 40 who have some manual trade qualification to report. The first reaction was overall silence. We recalled similar requests in the past, which ended with the cleaning of latrines or SS barracks. But then, almost telepathically, a hope prevailed that these masters of our destiny—face to face with the transfer of experienced tradesmen to the Russian front—could mean it seriously this time. And, so, the first arms started to be shyly raised, among them mine and that of my friend Honza Buxbaum. For both of us, thanks to Tiso's Slovak State, had been prevented from continuing our studies, and so we were forced to become tradesmen, Honza became a tinsmith, I apprenticed as a locksmith. Roughly fifty of us reported. When we found out that we were truly to be driven away on trucks to a German munitions factory somewhere near Gleiwitz, Honza and I agreed on possible escape scenarios for all eventualities.

Early one November evening, all adepts of the motorized transfer were issued a half-kilo can of meat from the army supplies and a loaf of bread of the same

weight. They even entrusted each one of us with a tin spoon and, with typically German attention to detail, added a miniscule can opener. Only drinking water was forgotten, despite their diligence. Or was it caused by a shortage of bottles? God knows. They were in a hurry; they didn't even test our alleged specializations. When it got dark, they brought over two trucks with their beds covered with heavy waterproof canvas. "Los, los" [German: "Come on, let's get moving!"]—the SS on the left and the kapos on the right, they drove us up ladders towards an uncertain future. Inside were long wooden benches on both sides of the truck bed. Honza and I quickly agreed that we'd be among the last to get on the second truck. When we climbed up and sat down, we found ourselves face to face with an SS-man with a hand reflector and a machine gun on his lap. We then waited for another hour in the utter darkness, and then both trucks set off on their nighttime journey.



Ladislav Porjes' identification card, given to him in February 1945 after his escape from Birkenau

The drivers turned on only the parking lights, as they were afraid of Russian fighter plane scouts. Due to camouflage, our guard also turned his hand reflector on only occasionally, mutedly, and briefly. After a long, jarring ride, hope began to dawn—our guard began to doze off. In suspense, we watched the intervals of the SS-man's slumber increasing. Already we could count it in seconds. Finally Honza, who was sitting right at the edge of the truck bed, nudged me with his elbow and jumped out. I let myself down a little more carefully, right after him. Though the sound of us hitting the ground was muffled by the roar of the exhaust, it was enough for our guard to finally wake up. He immediately began shooting blindly and even turned on his searchlight. We laid down to blend in with the nighttime terrain. The SS-man was probably afraid that if he stopped and began searching the surroundings, more prisoners would escape. After a while the shooting stopped and the reflector shut off. For the time being our escape was a success.

LUDMILA RUTAROVA

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Dagmar Greslova

Date of interview: February 2007

I was in Terezin from April 1942 until May 1944, when I left with my brother for Auschwitz. My mother and father left on the first May transport for the so-called family camp, and my brother and I left on the third one in May 1944. When my brother and I were boarding the train, Haindl came walking along, and when he saw Pepik and me, he was surprised that we were leaving, and asked why we hadn't come to tell him we'd been included in a transport, that he could have gotten us off it. To that, Pepik told him that our parents were already in Auschwitz, and that we had to leave to join them.

When the train stopped in Auschwitz, it was already dark, and we could hear them bellowing, "Raus, raus!" [German: Get out, get out!] We got out and were ordered to leave all our bags there; they told us that we'd get them later. Of course, we never saw our bags again. The only thing we were left with was what we were wearing and what was in our hands. I had some sardines, a flashlight, and about a hundred marks on me. My cousin Inka, who was already in Auschwitz, worked as a housekeeper for some German who worked in the *Kleiderkammer* [the place where clothing that had been confiscated from incoming transports was sorted, searched for hidden valuables, and then shipped to Germany for distribution]. Although at the time we arrived at the camp there was a *Lagersperre* [German: camp closure] on, and no one was allowed out, some could be out, Inka being one of them. She noticed me and called out to me, "Throw me everything you've got!" So I threw my things to her and, thanks to this, they were saved.

The Poles were very cruel, and beat us with sticks. We lined up five abreast, walked along and saw the sign, *Arbeit macht frei* [German: work shall set (you) free—this is the infamous sign hanging over the main gate into Auschwitz] above our heads. Some Pole walked along with us, and told us that if any of us knew how to write well we'd have it good in Auschwitz. Several girls worked as so-called *Schreiber*, as office assistants, and each block had one *Schreiber*.

In Auschwitz, they tattooed us and I got No. A 4603 I'd counted the line as it walked in front of me, and positioned myself so that the sum of my number was 13. I'm superstitious, and I said to myself that if the sum of my number's digits would be unlucky 13, I'd survive the war.

Then they assigned us to blocks. Then the block leader yelled at us that we were all to go outside and leave everything inside. I'd noticed that the block leader had been



Ludmila Rutarova (right) and her cousin, Frantiska Weinerova, called Inka by her family.

This picture was taken on 28 December 1941.

talking to a friend of mine with whom I'd worked in the *Landwirtschaft* in Terezin, Dina Gottliebova, who'd arrived on the first September transport. I had absolutely no idea of Dina's status in the camp. I went over to Dina and told her that the block leader had ordered us to leave all our things inside—Dina told me to go back and take everything with me. The block leader noticed it, but didn't object because she knew that Dina had privileged status.

Dina was the lover of *Lagerältester* [German: camp elder] Willy, thanks to which she saved herself and her mother from the gas. Dina was a swell girl; before the war she'd attended art school in Brno, and could draw beautifully. Mengele hired her to draw Roma in the *Gypsy* [Roma] camp for his "research." Dina also drew for the children in the children's block. It was from Dina Gottliebova that I found out that the Nazis were murdering people in gas chambers in Auschwitz. She told me that she was sure of it, because she'd gotten to see the gas chambers, which she'd also drawn. When I found

out about the gas, I cried for three days. I saw huge flames flaring, two meters high.

I lived in a different block than my mother, as she'd already been in Auschwitz for some time. But we were able to see each other, as well as with my brother, father, Auntie Zofie, and my cousin Inka. I tried to go for visits to see Auntie Zofie. She was in a bad way, as she was over sixty and she had a bunk that she had a hard time getting to. I tried to bring her some food occasionally.

I was working in a block with the smallest children, about three or four years old. I played with them, told them poems, and sang with them. When the weather was nice, I'd also go play with them outside in front of the block. Across from us were wire fences, the inner ones not electrified and the outer ones electrified. I gave the children lunches and in the evening I'd bring them rations to their block, where they were living with their mothers. Children got somewhat better food than the others, somewhat thicker milky soup and milk.

Packages would arrive in Auschwitz, intended for prisoners, many of whom were already dead when the packages arrived. We were given what remained of the packages, and picked out things for the children—for example, remnants of cookies that had broken along the way, and other things.

None of these small children, of whom I was responsible for about twenty, survived. Only several older ones survived, boys of about fifteen who walked around Auschwitz during the day and called out various pieces of information—for example, they called out in German, "bread" or "soup" when food was being distributed. These boys passed the selection prior to the destruction of the family camp, and were transported from Auschwitz to other concentration camps, thanks to which they lived to see freedom.

Pepik worked in the *Rollwagenkommando*—men were harnessed instead of animals, and dragged heavy loads behind them. They had a wagon on which they transported corpses out of the camp, and would bring bread or other things back on the wagon. In the *Rollwagenkommando*, Pepik also got to the ramp where the trains arrived. Occasionally, there were things lying on the ramp left by people arriving in Auschwitz, so from time to time Pepik managed to pick something up. Once he found, for example, a small canister with warm goose fat, and he poured a bit into each of our cups.

In Auschwitz, I also met Fischer the executioner, whose original occupation had been a butcher, and who'd worked as the executioner in Terezin. In Auschwitz, he worked as a *Kapo* [concentration camp inmate appointed by the SS to be in charge of a work gang]. Through Haindl, Fischer knew my brother Pepik. Once, when I was

returning from roll call, I met him. Right away he greeted me and asked how I was, and where in the camp I was working, and whether I didn't need anything. He promised that if I needed anything, I should come see him, and he'd arrange it. But I never went to see him.

For six months, prisoners in the family camp had so-called *Sonderbehandlung*, or "special treatment"—families weren't split up, they didn't shave our hair off, and they isolated us in camp BIIb. However, *Sonderbehandlung* was planned for only six months, followed by death in the gas chambers. The first transport was gassed without prior selection during the night of the 8th to 9th of March 1944, on President Masaryk's birthday. [Tomas Masaryk (1850–1937), first president of Czechoslovakia after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918.] Prisoners from the second transport were afraid that, six months after their arrival passed, they'd also be murdered. My cousin Inka had arrived on the second transport, she was afraid and said that now it was their turn. However, the Nazis decided not to murder all of them, organized a selection, and picked some of the prisoners from the second and third transport for slave labor outside the camp.



Ludmila Rutarova's brother, Josef Pepik Weiner, around the age of 19, out for a walk in Prague, Czechoslovakia

I was in the FKL—*Frauen-Konzentrationslager* [German: women's concentration camp] where they shaved our entire bodies, but left me my hair. We also went through several selections there. The conditions in the *Frauen-Konzentrationslager* were horrible, tons of bedbugs. We'd, for example, go to the latrines, and as soon as we sat down, we'd be showered with cold water, sprayed at us by Polish women, who were horrible. When we arrived in the FKL, my cousin Inka said that their transport would go to the gas for sure. But the Germans changed their minds and decided that they'd rather use us for work. First, the men left for work in Schwarzheide.

We went for a selection—the barracks had so-called chimneys in the middle, along which we had to walk, and Mengele would be sitting there, and pointing, left, right. Mengele needed to pick out a thousand women. Older women and mothers with children remained in the camp, and the younger ones he picked. He'd picked out some women, but he was still missing a certain number of the thousand. My mother wasn't in the selection, because she was already 48, and seemed to be too old for them. However, when they still didn't have the required number of women, they ordered all women up to 48 to present themselves. Finally, Mengele also picked my mother for work.

We had to undergo a gynecological examination—I was so skinny, though, that there was no way anyone could've thought I was pregnant, so I avoided the exam. They sent us to go bathe; we were, of course, afraid that, instead of water, gas would come out of the showers but, in the end, it really was water. When we went to go bathe, I was wearing an Omega wristwatch, and thought it would be a shame to damage it, so I said to myself that I'd hide it somewhere. A pile of coal caught my eye, so I hid it in there, intending to retrieve it after washing. But then we all exited out the other side, so I never saw the watch again.

We had to take everything off, and they told us that we'd pick our things up after washing. I had a silver ring with garnets, so I tied it to a shoelace and hid it in my shoes. But I never saw those shoes again because they took everything from us. Instead of our own things, we were issued horrible rags, and high-heel shoes! So I left for work in Hamburg in high-heel shoes! We also got a piece of bread and a piece of salami, so that we'd have something for the trip. I ate my ration right away and my mother saved hers for me, in case I got hungry.

My brother left Auschwitz to go work in Schwarzheide. We ran to the end of the camp to watch them leave on the train. Because my dad was already 65, they didn't take him for work in Schwarzheide. When my mom and I left for Hamburg in July 1944, my dad stayed in Auschwitz. Saying goodbye to Dad and Auntie Zofie from Nadejkov was awful because I already suspected how it would end. Dad was calming me down, and said: "I've got my life behind me, you've got yours ahead of you. I'm glad that you're going with Mom." My father didn't survive; he went into the gas that same year, 1944.



Ludmila Rutarova's father, Alfred Weiner, in Prague in the 1930s.

PAVEL WERNER

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Dagmar Greslova

Date of interview: November 2005

One day, in March 1944, we received a definitive summons for the trip to Auschwitz. We had been summoned to the transport once already but, at the time, I had a middle ear infection so we were exempted from the transport, because acutely ill people weren't transported to the East. Of course, the second time we didn't manage to avoid the transport again. I remember the trip very well; this time it was quite cruel, they transported us in these cattle wagons. The wagons were overfilled, there were a horrible lot of us, and there was only one pail for bodily functions for everyone together. I don't remember all the details any more, but this I remember very well: what a terrible problem it was with one single pail, all the more when there were so many people crowded around.

We arrived in Auschwitz at night, and that was some experience. I can still see it before my eyes. For one, there were lights everywhere, because everything had to be horribly lit up. Then there were electrical wire fences everywhere that separated the individual camps. I remember the horrible light and bellowing on the ramp. The prisoners from the commando that was disembarking us were bellowing, the Germans were bellowing, a person felt like he had landed in a different world.

We got into the family camp. I lived with my father; my mother lived somewhere else. For some reason unknown to me, I wasn't placed in the *Kinderblock* [German: children's block] with the other children. Maybe I looked older, I had always looked older. So, this way, I also avoided the secret classes that were held in the *Kinderblock*—of course, classes were held only while the family camp existed. So I practiced by myself. I found a piece of pencil and a cigarette package—at the time Polish *papirosy* had a package made from hard paper—and I wrote on the blank side, counted, multiplied, divided. I was afraid that I'd forget these basic mathematical functions.

Auschwitz was cruel; there, a person experienced something. I remember the shouting, our *Lagerkapo*, the former Terezin executioner Fischer, who was always on a rampage. [A *Kapo* was a concentration camp inmate appointed by the SS to be in charge of a work gang; a *Lagerkapo* was in charge of a whole camp.] Once he even hit my father with a cane, I don't even remember why any more. Fischer was the only executioner in Terezin; he performed the one or two executions that took place in Terezin. Before the war, he'd been a butcher and then worked in an autopsy room. Fischer was a deformed person, both physically and mentally. He was hunchbacked,



Pavels Werners' parents on their wedding day.

he walked around hunched over, his face also looked horrible—he was this monster. Perhaps in reality he was actually this wretch that was compensating for his complexes. However, he was a human monster. In Terezin, he worked as an executioner; in Auschwitz he became the *Lagerkapo*. He was constantly walking about with a stick and beating someone, bellowing and flying furiously about the camp. He inspired fear, and I was constantly afraid of him, especially after he hit my father. Fischer the Executioner had a lot of power in the camp—he was actually the second in command after the camp commander. He nearly had greater power over the prisoners than some SS officer, because he was in constant touch with them; whenever, and with no reason, he could kill any prisoner; and he didn't have to justify it to anyone.

In Auschwitz, my mother carried barrels of soup. Now, when I picture it, it seems unbelievable to me because our mother had a somewhat weaker constitution—she had scoliosis of the spine—but in the concentration camp she did such heavy physical labor. She, who had never before worked physically; before the war she had been a housewife and took care of the children. Two women always dragged along a huge wooden barrel of soup. They had specially made handles on the barrels, they carried this harness, one in the front and one in the back, and dragged that unimaginably heavy barrel about, so that they could then scrape out the dregs of the soup. My father and I would always go there, and we'd get a little more of the soup scraped from the bottom of the barrel for our canteens. My father was physically quite badly off, he was completely down and out.

You could see planes flying above the camp, whole squadrons of bombers at a great height; we saw how they were shooting at them. Only later did it occur to me that the Allies knew exactly how things were in Auschwitz, and didn't do anything, didn't hit anything. Of course, bombing the camp wouldn't have solved anything, that would have been absurd, but they could have much earlier on bombed the train tracks, so that the transports couldn't reach it. Thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people wouldn't have reached there, who went straight into the gas. If they would have bombed the tracks, although by this time not a lot of Czech Jews, but a lot of Hungarian ones would have been saved, many of whom died towards the end of the war. They knew very well what was going on there, the Americans knew, the Church in Rome knew it, but everyone acted as if nothing was happening, as if they weren't exterminating people there.

We saw the flames from the crematoriums and the smoke, we smelled the stench of burned corpses, but in the beginning I didn't perceive it as mortal danger. I was eleven, twelve years old, so I didn't grasp that in the end I could also one day end up there. But for my parents, for the older ones in general, that must have been something terrible, the knowledge that next time it could be our turn—because it was known that the March transport, which had been in the family camp before us,

went completely into the gas. My parents already knew it; they were only waiting to see what would happen. And then the selection came.

The selection was in July 1944, when they were liquidating the family camp. I went to the selection with my father because, for some reason, I was with my father the entire time. I wasn't like most of the other boys in the children's block. I didn't know anything about my mother; naturally, the women's selection took place separately. We all stood naked in a horribly long queue in front of Dr. Mengele, who organized it all. While we were still standing in the queue, my father, who probably sensed that we wouldn't be together, told me what I should do in case I should, by chance return home earlier than he. By the way he said it, I know that he hoped that he would return, too, he didn't want to believe that he wouldn't return. He said to me, "Listen, whoever returns home first, if you get there first, you know where in the shed our tomcat Mourek used to sleep. Dig in that corner there, you'll find some things there, OK?" So, that I naturally remembered.

I went first, stepped in front of Mengele. He was this nice-looking young man, he looked at me, didn't say anything, the prisoner that was sitting beside him just wrote down my tattooed number with a pencil on a piece of paper. And Mengele just pointed that I should go to one side. [What the interviewee means is that Mengele selected them himself. This is a frequent statement, although they did not know anything about Mengele at the time, and it is not even sure that it was him.] They didn't write down my father and showed him that he should go to the other side. We were just a little ways away from each other. In this way, gradually both sides were slowly filled up. The side that I was on, there were very few of us, we were all young boys. The other side was already quite full.

Suddenly, I noticed that my father had separated himself from that group that was already through the selection, and somehow managed to again get to the back of the queue. They couldn't find out that he had already been there once, because the queue was terribly long, those people were going one after another. I didn't even see him in the back, but I was watching when he again got in front of Mengele. It was a short distance away from me, so I saw and heard everything well. My father told them in German that he'd like to go to that side, because his son was there. And Mengele told him, "You won't be together, anyways," and again sent him to the other side. Nothing, not like he beat him or something like that, not that, but he simply said "You won't be together, anyways." After some time, both groups parted ways.

My group, where there were a few of us boys, joined up with another group, so all together there were about 90 young boys and we relocated to Camp D, the so-called men's camp. The next day we found out that across Camp C, across the wires, you could see into Camp B. We saw wires and the silhouettes of those that still remained

in Camp B—about 90% of the people from the selection remained there. They sent us 90 boys to Camp D, and only a small percentage of those that Mengele chose for work went to Camp A. All of us boys immediately pressed as close as possible to those electrically charged wires. It was possible to get within about a half meter, because everywhere there were signs in German and Polish "danger of death," everywhere there were signs with a skull and crossbones. When someone approached the wires, they shot at them.

So we saw those silhouettes of people in Camp B. Even though it was hard to see, you couldn't see faces, because it was quite far. And, suddenly, I saw my parents. I recognized them by their silhouettes, that it was them, especially when they were standing beside each other. They recognized me, as well. Both my mother and father were there, we began waving at each other. For a while we stood there like that and then we had to leave again. The next day we again came to the wire and again we saw each other, recognized each other and waved at each other. And the third day there was no one there. We didn't know exactly what had happened. Someone said that they sent them into the gas, but no one wanted to believe that. We didn't believe it, we weren't in a situation where we could say to ourselves, well, and now they're gone. Up until the end of the war I wasn't convinced that they had died there. A person still hoped. None of us believed it. Everyone hoped, even when they returned home, that perhaps their parents would still return.

In Auschwitz, at first I worked in a so-called clothing warehouse, in the *Kleiderkammer*, which was an amazing score. It was excellent because, for one, I was working indoors, where I sorted all sorts of things and clothing and, for another, I could pick out for myself some clothes that fit, winter clothes, a winter coat. Of course, the most important thing was that I could pick out shoes—excellent shoes that lasted me the whole death march; I walked all the way home in them. Thanks to that, I didn't have to walk around barefoot or in wooden shoes. Naturally, I couldn't take anything extra, so that, for example, I'd have some extra underwear to change into, a spare shirt, socks. Nothing, that didn't exist, a person could have only what he had on him. We didn't even have a place to put it, because we slept in berths, and it wasn't even certain where exactly a person would sleep, he didn't have an exact spot. The biggest problem were shoes, because you weren't allowed to take your shoes up with you. I slept in the bunks up on the second tier, there were loads of us there, and when someone had nice shoes and left them below, in the morning they were gone, someone would undoubtedly steal them. We weren't allowed to take things up with us, but we did it. Otherwise, we would have lost everything. Luckily no one found out that I was hiding them under my straw mattress, so I didn't have anything confiscated; otherwise, I would have gotten a beating. Because this was checked on by this one Ukrainian, Marian, but there were six hundred of us sleeping in the building, so he couldn't check everything.



Pavel Werner with his friend Ludvik Klacer (right) in a park in Pardubice, Czechoslovakia, before the war.

So, working in the *Kleiderkammer* commando was excellent; occasionally, I managed to steal something, though it wasn't called "steal," but rather "organize." So, here and there, I organized, for example, some ladies' stockings; back then there weren't nylons, but silk stockings, luxury goods. I then passed the goods over to one friend, Ludvik Klacer, who I knew from childhood, from Pardubice, a very clever kid who was three years older than I. Ludek then, in some fashion, offered it to some fat cats and, in exchange, got from them perhaps a piece of bread, a bit of margarine, or other things. Ludek and I had a so-called commune, which meant that I found him something, he organized it further along, and the end result we split fairly between ourselves. Ludek always cleverly organized something, whereas I wasn't as capable, so he always gave me hell, that I hadn't stolen anything. However, once in the *Kleiderkammer* something bigger disappeared, this one Greek stole it. It must have been something big because they found out about it. It wasn't some stockings like I sometimes carried out. At that time, I had been working there for a relatively short time and that Greek blamed it on me. So, first they gave me a sound beating, and then they threw me out of that swell job.

They put me into another work commando, into the so-called *Rollwagenkommando*, where there were thirteen of us boys hitched to these village wagons, which had earlier been pulled by horses or cows. The wagons had wooden wheels clad with iron, no rubber tires. Some boys had the harness; others, I was among them, pushed in the back, and the strongest stood in the front, by the carriage beam, and steered. We transport-

ed all sorts of materials; we even drove out, outside the camp. Always some Kapo would come with us, some highly placed prisoner, who knew what was supposed to be done, where something was to be taken. In this fashion, we also got into the crematoria.

Towards the end of 1944, the Germans had already blown up the crematoria, because the gassing had stopped, the transports had stopped. Before I had only had the opportunity to see the crematoria from afar. We saw from the camp, as it was only a ways away, the wagons approaching on the tracks, we saw people getting out and going in single file in the direction of the crematoria. A little while later, the chimneys began to smoke, you could see flames. However, with the *Rollwagenkommando* I had the opportunity to get inside. The crematoria may have been destroyed, demolished, but the rubble hadn't been cleared away, it had all just been blown up. We crawled down, dragged out various things that had remained there, clothes, wood, various remnants. We carried it all onto our wagons and carted it away. Now we knew very well what it looked like there—before that, we, of course, didn't have a look there because whoever had a look never returned. So we had the opportunity to nicely look it all over.

After the selection, I lived with about ninety boys in our block. Today we call ourselves the "Birkenau Boys." It's a group of those that survived; today 34 of us are alive and, of those, six are in the Czech Republic. One of us, a very clever guy by the name of Johnny Freund, who lives in Toronto, took it upon himself to find and contact everyone that survived. A whole book was published, in two editions already, where each of us has a photo and a short article. The book is named *After Those Fifty Years*, because after fifty years, in the year 1995, we met here in Prague at the Community. Not everyone showed up, but a lot of the boys came with their wives. For the most part we didn't recognize each other after those fifty years. When I think about it, I think it was due to the fact that the experiences from the camps were so intense that they drowned out everything else.

I remembered two boys, one of them, Goldberger, who's not alive any more, him I remembered vividly, that we were sitting together in the camp at Melk and were peeling potatoes. And he, for example, didn't remember me at all. It seemed to me that he still looked exactly the same, he had been this very nice-looking boy, he looked a little like a girl. And, indeed, the higher-up men in the camp were after him. Overall, I can say that homosexuality very much flourished in the camps. A person didn't even have to be homosexual by nature, but there were simply no women. When we came to Camp D after the selection, we were the center of attention of the block leaders, the elite. Those Kapos simply looked us over and, at that time, they picked out several boys that they moved in with them as helpers. Of course, they were helpers in bed. Back then I was frightfully disappointed that no one had picked me out; I was inexperienced and naive and had no clue what it entailed. But I have to admit, that those boys had it great: they got food from the block leaders.

The block leaders in Birkenau weren't Jews, mostly this work was done by Poles who had red triangles, political prisoners who had joined up with the Germans; they used to call them *Volksdeutsche* [Polish people who identified as ethnically German during the war]. The block leaders used to steal from us; they got food for the entire block and were supposed to distribute it among us. They distributed food in such a fashion that an absolute minimum of food reached us—the daily ration was half a slice of dark bread and half a slice of bloody salami. The block leaders divided up the rest amongst themselves. There were always a few loaves of bread and some salami left over for them, and in the camps that was a huge fortune, because bread could be traded for cigarettes, for example. The same thing was done with all food, with margarine, salami.

So, thanks to this, the block leaders also looked the way they did—our block leader was the Pole, Bednarek, he had this shaved jailbird mug, he was horribly bloated, and walked around in a striped prison uniform. We walked around in normal civilian clothing, just that we had a red stripe painted on our backs with paint that couldn't be washed off. Similarly, our pants had a red stripe running their whole length on the side. This was in case someone managed to escape, so that they'd be recognizable at first sight. In the beginning, when I was still working in the *Kleiderkammer*, some clothing was being set aside exactly for this purpose. Earlier, normal clothing had had an opening cut into the back, into which striped prison material was sewn, but as that was too time-consuming, it was abandoned and they simply painted red stripes onto civilian clothing.

In January 1945, the liquidation of Auschwitz came. We could already hear the booming of cannons, that the Russians were coming. And those German idiots dragged the whole camp, all of Auschwitz-Birkenau, westward. They simply didn't want the Russians to take over the camp. So, in January 1945, they chased us out on a death march. It was just in time for my thirteenth birthday. And, I've got to say, it was cruel, it was punishing. We walked for three days and two nights, we walked non-stop in the cold and snow. We were aiming for some station in Silesia.

I remember that when Auschwitz was being liquidated, our *Rapportführer* [German: report leader] said that we shouldn't go on the death march, that we were really still children, that we should stay in the camp, because the trip would be extremely hard. But we shouted, "We're strong, we'll go," because we were afraid to stay in the camp with the old, weak, and sick—we already knew that it smelled of something unpleasant. We were afraid that they'd kill us on the spot, though the gas chambers weren't working any more, but that they would shoot us or get rid of us in some other fashion. So it was decided that we'd go. Which was, when I look back at it, a big mistake, because we wouldn't have had to undertake that difficult death march, and for another thing, within about ten days, the Russians arrived at the camp.

RUTH GOETZOVA

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Pavla Neuner

Date of interview: October 2004

My mother, sister, and I were transported to Auschwitz in December of 1943, and were put into the family camp. Each one of us was put into a different block, though. At first I carried rocks; it was typical work, so that people would be hungry. One day we carried a rock off somewhere, and the next day we carried it back. Then we worked directly in the block, where we sat on stools and manufactured rifle slings out of some coarse plastic. Although we had to work there all day, we had the advantage that we sat under a roof. I don't think that my mother worked anywhere. My sister lived in a little girls' block.

I had an unusual experience in Auschwitz, connected to a German prisoner named Willy, a former sailor, who was in jail for murder. He delivered bread to the camps, and somehow he found out that we were in the family camp. And one day this Willy called us over, and when we came we found that he had brought my stepfather, who was with the others in the main camp, and left us to talk to him for about a quarter of an hour. That was something unexpected and, from that time onwards, my mother absolutely believed that we would survive. While still in Terezin she had had her cards read by a fortune teller, who had predicted that she would leave Terezin in the winter, that it would be snowing, that she'd go to a different country, to a different camp, where she would meet her husband and that we would all return home.

For me the hardest times began when the September transport went to the gas chambers, in March 1944. Then some transports arrived, from Hungary, I think. The crematoriums couldn't keep up, so they burned people in piles soaked with gasoline. I'll always be able to see those horrible, huge greasy ashes that sometimes flew all the way to our camp. It was the most horrible feeling that I can remember. And throughout it all, my mother kept repeating: "I'll return, I'll survive, I'll return."

My mother was young, a bit over forty, but of course looked horrible. I didn't believe in survival, and now I was terrified that, after the September transport, we were next — which, at that time, we all thought. And then the selection came. I belonged in it both by age and appearance, because in Auschwitz I had more or less sat and made straps, so I wasn't so ruined. While working, we talked about food all day, so maybe I even got some sustenance from that. It's interesting that the time we passed along the most recipes to each other was in Auschwitz.

Only I was selected, neither my mother nor my sister was of the right age. And, at that moment, another extraordinary thing happened. In the girls' block, where my sister

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lived — at that time she was a skinny thirteen-year-old little girl — there also lived one girl who was older and incredibly beautiful, and her surname was very similar to my sister's. The block leader at the time was some Polish woman, who had taken a great liking to my sister. And when the SS soldier came to do the selection, he was looking the girls over; he put [aside] the pretty one's card separately and then kept on picking out other girls. The block leader tried something, and took my sister's card and also put it on that pile. When the SS soldier was leaving, he said "What's this card?" And she said, "Mr. *Hauptsturmführer* [equivalent of captain], that's the girl that you picked." — and he took it. And so my sister got onto the transport.

Then we found out from a girl who was also with her mother in the family camp, that from the people that had been selected, two or three women had died, in the meantime. We got up the courage to ask the camp typist: we heard about the deaths of the selected women, and would he put our mothers' names in their place? He was an older man, neither a Czech nor a German, and he did it. When we were leaving the camp, they were reading out numbers, and one of them belonged to my mother.



Ruth Goetzova (left), her mother Hilda Lasova (center), holding her stepsister Vera (right). This photo was taken in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1931.

But that wasn't the end of it. Before departure, they gathered us in another prison camp, the women's camp, where the selection continued anew. I passed through normally and, as if it were yesterday, I can see my sister and mother, as they are going naked to the selection. A skinny child and my mother with skin hanging loose, because before Terezin she had weighed about 80 kg, and had lost a lot of weight. They stood there along with Hanka Heitlerova, who was a friend of my sister's, a year or two older than she was. She was from the September transport, and was saved by the fact that during that March of 1944, she had been sick. Then she came to my sister's block and they became friends.

When I saw them there like that, I said to myself that this couldn't end well. I don't know who was making the selection, if it was Mengele himself, but when their turn came, the SS soldier was at that moment lighting a cigarette. And so that Hanka began to run around him, to the front of the line, and my mother and sister ran after her. He was lighting a cigarette, and some three Jewesses weren't worth his while to interrupt that. So, a complete coincidence gave them the chance to get out of Auschwitz and save their lives.

EVA VARI

Budapest, Hungary

Interviewer: Dora Sardi

Date of interview: January 2004

Then, not long afterwards, at the end of May, beginning of June, 1944, they collected up those in the ghetto and took us to the brick factory. There we were in terrible conditions, all on top of each other. There were gendarmes there and they packed us into wagons and took us to Auschwitz. They took us in cattle trucks packed together. I was with my grandparents and mother. If I recall correctly, we took poppyseed rolls with us and we had to ration out the food.

Well, when we got to Birkenau, they took us out and we had to leave everything we had saved—food, everything. And Mengele was there, he selected us and waved us left and right. [Historians generally agree that since more than 450,000 Hungarian Jews were sent through Auschwitz in a three month period, it is highly unlikely that Josef Mengele himself divided up tens of thousands of Jews each day.] They sent my grandfather right first. My last image of him is as he turned back and said, "Look after your mother." And then I was there with my mother and grandmother. Then my grandmother was sent to the right and that was the last time I saw her.

Then they herded us into a big space—it was June already, the sun shined beautifully, I remember—and they shaved everyone's head, and shaved us everywhere. And I remember my mother and I exchanged glances, and we started to laugh in our terror because we looked awful. Then we had to strip naked and they took us to the baths. We didn't know then that it could be the baths or the gas. There were special baths then. And there was no towel, no nothing. We went in single file, there was a big pile of rags called clothes, and you took what came.

We entered the Auschwitz camp, the extermination camp, people didn't really go to work from there. That's why I have no tattoo. I was with my mother till the end, everywhere. If she hadn't been there I wouldn't have returned home. I was very impractical. As I said, it was an extermination camp, there were no bunks. There were barracks and about 1000-1200 people were in a barrack, and nothing else, only the bare earth, no blanket, nothing. You could only lie down if the feet of the person in the opposite line were next to your shoulders, and your feet were next to theirs. And if someone wanted to turn over then the whole line had to, as there was not even enough space for that.

I spent three and a half months in this place, from the end of June until about mid-October. Sometimes they came to look at us, because news was that they took the prettier women to brothels. When they came and one saw there would be a



Eva Vari in Miskolc, Hungary in 1945, after coming home from the deportation.

selection, then one had to hide, not be seen. And sometimes they took people for work. And I always stood in line with my mother standing at least four or five behind me, so that if they did not choose me, she would sneak out and if they did and not her then she would swap with me.

This was my last selection, there were not many in the camp by then. I remember it was the first day of Rosh Hashanah. And they chose us. And my mother said, "It's awful here but we've got used to it. Shouldn't we stay here?" And I said, "Mom, they haven't chosen us yet, now they have, so let's go." Not one of those who remained behind came home.

They took us to Bergen-Belsen, which was a holiday compared to Auschwitz, because there were tents, straw or something strewn on the floor, and everyone got two blankets. It was very cold by then. Four or five of us laid down a blanket and huddled together and put the remaining blankets over ourselves. In Auschwitz, the food was not food, it was like cut field grass cooked up with nothing else. So Bergen-Belsen was more normal.

FERENC LEICHT

Budapest, Hungary

Interviewer: Judit Rez

Date of interview: June–November 2004

On 2 May, before the train stopped, we could see through the holes that people in striped clothes were disassembling the wrecks of airplanes, but we had no idea that we would ever have to do anything like that. Then they opened the cars and gentlemen in striped clothes started shouting, that everyone should leave everything in the cars, the women should leave their purses, too, and immediately get off the train. And they got on the train to make us hurry.

One of them asked me in Yiddish how old I was. I understood this, because it is very similar to German. I said 15. Then he told me, "Say that you're 17." I didn't know Yiddish but, fortunately, I understood this. Then they got us off the train, and we had to line up five by five. I held my mother's hand from one side, my aunt's hand from the other, and on that side was my aunt's husband, and someone else, but I don't remember who it was anymore. I know that we went in rows of five. We walked along nice and slowly. They didn't really make us hurry, but there were wolf dogs, SS, so it was a threatening situation, but nobody said a loud word. They didn't yell, didn't threaten us. And then we arrived in front of an elegant German officer.

As it turned out, that was Mengele. [Historians generally agree that since more than 450,000 Hungarian Jews were sent through Auschwitz in a three month period, it is highly unlikely that Josef Mengele himself divided up tens of thousands of Jews each day.] Interestingly, he was very polite. He told my mother very politely: "*Gnädige Frau, können Sie laufen?*" [German: "Dear lady, can you run?"] My mother didn't understand a word in German, I used to pull her leg by saying that if the Hungarian language didn't exist she would have to bark like a puppy. And, of course, she didn't understand the question. She asked me, "What is he saying? What is he saying? What did he ask?" I translated it for her.

Then he said we had to part temporarily. "Ladies, please step to the left, men please step to the right." They separated us, and I never saw my mother and my grandmother again, until they came back from the deportation. I went with my aunt's husband, with that certain stationer Eisinger, and they assigned us both to work. As I later found out, they assigned my mother and her sister to work, too.

We were in Birkenau. Birkenau was huge, two square kilometers. Next to the camp there was a huge IG Farben factory. [The IG Farbenindustrie-concern. They built the Buna-Werke Synthetic Tire and Petrol Factory near Auschwitz, where many prison-



Ferenc Leicht (third from the right, back row) with his graduating class of 1939 at the Nagykanizsa Jewish elementary school.

ers worked.] They only assigned to work a third of the approximately 4,000 people who arrived with the train I also came with; they gassed the rest immediately, which was an "excellent rate," so to speak, because later there were transports 100% of which were gassed. There wasn't enough room in the *Lager* [German: camp], and they gassed them. Usually, only four to five percent went to work, and ninety-five to ninety-six percent went to the gas chambers immediately.

But our company seemed suitable for work. And they put four hundred or four hundred fifty of us, I don't remember exactly, on trucks, and took us to the camp, which was five kilometers away and belonged to the IG. They called the main road in the middle of the camp *Lagerstrasse* [German: camp street], and lined us up there five by five, and we took off to the other end of the camp across the gate, where the disinfecting room was.

As we were walking there, the old prisoners shouted to throw them everything we had in our pocket because they were going to take it from us, anyway. We didn't do it, we had no idea whether they would take it or not. We didn't know what to think. But I didn't have anything valuable on me. And when we got there they took off everyone's clothes. I was wearing a winter coat and a nice pair of ski boots, even though I never knew how to ski. I was dressed properly, not elegantly, but the way the farmers from Zala dress: with boots, trousers, and a sleeve-waistcoat. I had a pair of mittens, but the point is that they took everything, shirt, underwear, socks.

I still had the Bocskai hat on my head, and they wanted to take it by force, aggressively. And I opposed them, I didn't want them to take it, because it was my school

cap and it wouldn't hurt anyone if I had it. I realized afterwards why I was so attached to it: because that gave me my identity, that I belonged to that school, to Nagykanizsa, and to Hungary, after all. But then they took it by force. And then they said "every Jew was made of a piece of shit," and then I started bawling.

I realized then that I wasn't Hungarian, after all, even though I felt so, I thought so. Then I realized that the way I lived and thought wasn't real, and that I had to face that I belonged to another ethnic group. My original environment didn't love me, they handed me over to the Germans who stripped me of my clothes, cut my hair bald, they even cut off me what was barely there, because at the age of 15 there wasn't much to cut. I didn't even shave at that time.

They took us to a shower, where there was water for about two and a half seconds; everyone had to wash quickly. They gave us soap with the inscription R.I.F. I found out later that it stood for *Reines Jüdisches Fett* [German: pure Jewish fat]. It was made out of pure Jewish fat, so it was cooked out of humans. [According to our present information, soap made of human fat is a legend based on misinterpretation. In the Polish ghettos the German occupiers distributed bars of soap with the inscription "RIF." The Jews in the ghetto interpreted it as *Rein jüdisches Fett*, namely, "pure Jewish fat," and that's how the belief that the Germans made soap out of Jewish bodies spread. In reality, RIF means *Reichsstelle für Industrielle Fettversorgung*, that is, "National Center for Industrial Fat Provisioning."]

Then, cold water for a couple moments, then running across the free ground, to the supplier barrack, where they gave us each a pair of underwear, a shirt, as it came with striped pants and striped jacket. Nothing else. We didn't get any shoes. But they did take ours. They lined up everyone, 400 of us stood there barefoot. The SS came and asked, "Where are your shoes?" It turned out that they had forgotten to order wooden shoes for this many people, they had only ordered the clothes. He beat up the prisoner who was responsible for this in front of us, and then he said that everyone should put on his own shoes.

My former schoolmate, a certain Gyuri Nandor took my ski boots under my nose. I was very angry about this but I got a pair a little bit smaller, brand new boots. There were all kinds of shoes, good ones, bad ones, boots and high legged shoes and normal shoes, and everyone took whatever he could lay his hands on. I hung on to the boots, and the leather shoes were life saving, because the wooden shoe was something cruel. Those whose leather shoes wore out got wooden shoes, and very few of them survived.

In the bath we got a tattoo, as well. The prisoners tattooed us, the old prisoners. By the time we got the striped clothes we were already tattooed. I got number 186889.

So I don't have an A-B number because after 15 May they recorded every Jew with A or B. They started with one and numbered until 20,000. And when there were 20,000 "A"s they started the "B"s until 20,000 as well. But they didn't get to 20,000 because, in the meantime, January came and they evacuated us. I got very exasperated—I am not a cow, after all, to get marked. But the one who tattooed me told me that I shouldn't regret this, because it was almost life insurance. Those who weren't tattooed got to the gas chamber more often than those who were tattooed because the tattoo meant they worked somewhere.

We lined up again, and they took us to the quarantine block, which was block number 44. There were 56 blocks, and the auxiliary buildings, the showers and toilet. In block 44 there wasn't any bathroom or toilet. During the two weeks of quarantine they didn't do anything but teach us how to line up for the roll call. And they also taught us that if we saw a German we had to take off our cap five steps before meeting him, and after five steps we had to walk past him in stand-to, however faint we felt. And that at the counting there was a line-up that lasted for a long time because there were about 10,000 people and, until they had counted all of them, none of the blocks could move. Everyone had to stand.

They were obsessed with continual roll call. And with the way we had to eat the food. The instructor, the *Blockältester* [German: person in charge of one barrack, or "block"] happened to be a German criminal; on his clothes there was a green triangle pointing down, which was usually the mark of the criminals. In our block, he had such power, that he almost had the power of life and death over us. His, and all block commanders' superior, was the *Lagerältester* [German: camp elder], who was also a German criminal, and always wore nice polished boots.

There weren't any knives; there wasn't any cutlery. They told us that everyone was supposed to get a quarter of a loaf of bread every day, half a loaf, which was oblong, twice a week. They made it out of sawdust, bran, and who knows what. It was terrible, but, when someone was hungry, it was good. They also said that we would only get the *Zulage*, the additional food, if we worked. This meant a spoonful of "Hitler bacon," that is, marmalade. If not marmalade, then black pudding, and if not black pudding, then margarine. The margarine, and everything else was the size of a sugar cube. They gave these out in the morning, one ate it or not. That was everyone's own business.

They gave us half a liter of coffee, made of caffeine substitute, of course, and I think it was full with bromide. [There is no factual evidence of administering sedatives (bromide), though many from different places affirmed that the prisoners were given bromide. It is probable that bromide wasn't even needed: the small amount of food, the beating, the cold or the heat, the little sleep, and the terrible work exhausted the prisoners very quickly and wore down their resistance.] Nobody felt any lust, so

to speak. And they strictly forbid drinking water. We were allowed to wash, but not to drink. It was written on huge placards that "a sip of water could cost your life."

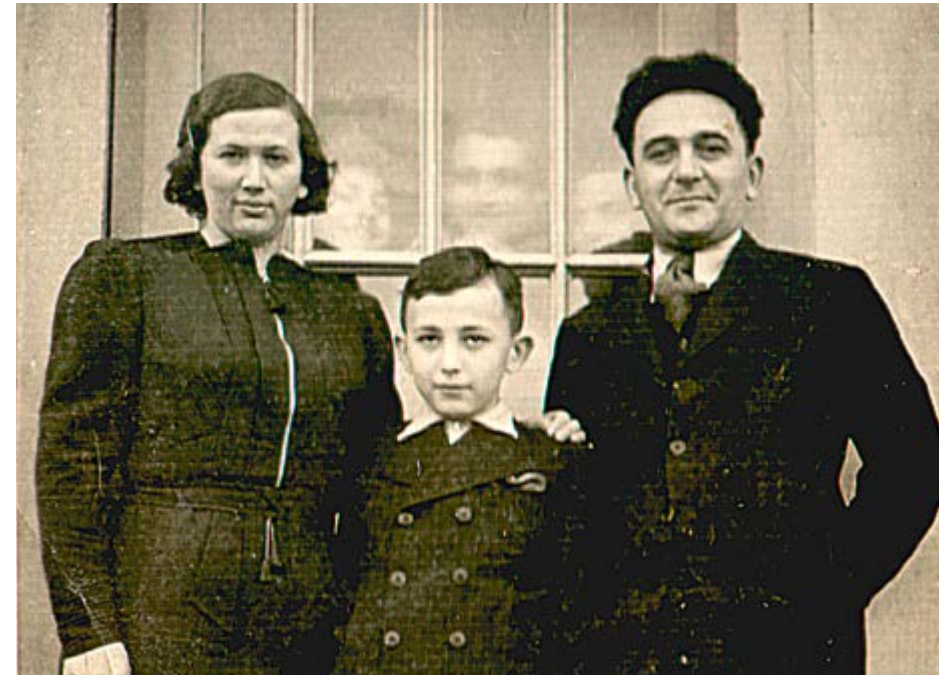
They made all the Hungarian Jews who arrived to Auschwitz write a letter, a pre-printed German postcard. It was written on it, "I am in Waldsee,"—this was a resort in Switzerland—"I am fine, greetings to everyone," and we could sign it, address it, and send it home. [They required of the deported Jews, many of whom they gassed immediately, to write home that they were doing well, indicating a made up place-name, Waldsee.] Those who ended up in the gas chamber five minutes later also wrote it. But they gave one to everyone so that we would let people know that we were alive.

In the *Lager* where I was they also distributed the Waldsee cards, and I wrote one to one of my neighbors who lived in Nagykanizsa, next to our bakery. And my mother also wrote from where she was, from the women's camp. At that time they had taken her with her commando to the *Stammlager*, she went to work from there. [*Stammlager*: Auschwitz I, because the Hungarian deportees didn't arrive to Auschwitz but to Birkenau.] And the neighbors got these cards. They knew my father's address on forced labor, and they sent him both in an envelope. Unfortunately, I don't have either one of them because at that time nobody thought about keeping them. They would be historical relics now.

And my father wrote a reply addressed to Waldsee, because when the neighbors got the cards they were told that if someone wanted to reply he should write in German, put it in an envelope, and send it to the address of the Budapest Jewish community. Because these cards were brought to Hungary with a German military van to the Jewish leaders appointed by the Germans, and they had to send them out. And they sent them out and collected the replies, which arrived. When the German car brought cards again, they grabbed the replies, put them in the car and took them.

In the Auschwitz *Stammlager* [German: main camp] they brought out these letters one day at roll call and distributed them after the list. My mother got the reply. I don't know of anyone else besides her who got a reply. Because most of them had been killed by that time. In the letter it was written that everything was all right, etc., and my father wrote in German that Feri [the interviewee] had also written. From this my mother found out that I was alive somewhere, she didn't know where but she knew I was alive. She knew this already sometime at the end of June, beginning of July.

But from the end of August I also knew that my mother was there somewhere, because even though it was strictly forbidden to send word from one camp to the other, and they sentenced to death and hung those who did it, news still spread. They



Ferenc Leicht with his parents, Geza and Terezia in Nagykanizsa, Hungary, at the entrance of their bakery on Tavas Street in 1939.

took the women prisoners from Auschwitz to work somewhere by truck in the morning, and brought them back in the evening, and that was to the east of our camp, too.

So the women knew that there was a men's camp. And the route on which we went to work crossed the Kraków-Auschwitz main road. A brave woman dropped a paper ball at the crossroad, and an even braver man bent down and picked it up. And he took the paper to the *Lager* and it went round. It was written in Hungarian, and, among many other names, it was written, I recognized my aunt's handwriting, that Erzsebet Eisinger and Terez Leicht were looking for Jenő Eisinger and Ferenc Leicht. We knew from this that they were alive. But the fact that someone was alive in August didn't mean anything in those circumstances.

When they assigned me to work they transferred me to barrack 30; those who lived there worked in commando no. 90, in a group of workers. They assigned many young men there, because they thought that it was easy to make skilled laborers, or at least trained men, out of the young students. They called us *Umschüler* [from the German *Umschulung*, meaning "retraining"]. I happened to become a *Schlosser*, so I got locksmith re-training, which practically meant a huge closed workshop, and everyone

worked there—German civilians, English and American airmen prisoners of war, Polish volunteers, French volunteers, and civilians who had been brought there by force.

It's difficult to imagine the chaos that was there. But during work everyone was equal. They assigned me next to a German lather, who called me Franz. I don't remember anymore what his name was, Herr something, but he never hurt me, I never had any problems with him. When the toe-cap and the heels of my boots started to wear out, he showed me where I could find an iron plate, and taught me how to use the drill, and let me make iron toe-caps on my heels, and he even got hold of some nails, so that I could nail it up on the toe-cap, too, so that my shoes wouldn't wear out. I couldn't learn lathing because I am left-handed and the lathes were all right-handed. He told me to bring this material, he gave me a caliper square, bring this many and this kind of poles, take them here and here. So I was a kind of "do this and do that man." And I was assigned to this man.

There were 500 men in the commando who worked in different buildings on the factory compound; they were building the IG Farben factory. The IG Farben was building an extremely big chemical factory, and all 10,000 people worked there. [The IG Farben didn't only operate one factory, it's possible that this one was built by 500 men. In the biggest IG Farben factory, in Monowitz (Auschwitz III), about 10,000 people worked in January 1945.]

And I worked in this workshop with a couple of my acquaintances, friends, in commando no. 90. Commando no. 90 had a Kapo [concentration camp inmate appointed by the SS to be in charge of a work gang], a German criminal, and if someone asks me whether the German criminals were good or bad people, I can say it depends.

Once the master didn't give me anything to do and I was slacking about, so to speak. And he sneaked up behind me, and beat me up with a thatch. He knew me by name, and said, "Franz, you know why you got this, don't you?" I said, "I know, because I wasn't working." He said, "No, not because of that. But because you weren't working and you didn't notice that I was coming. What would have happened if an SS had come instead of me? What would have happened to you? What do you think?" And, otherwise, he could have beaten me with an oaken cane, because he had one of those, too. He could have broken my arms and legs, because we were completely defenseless. But he told me this. What was I supposed to say?

If someone did a good job in principle but, in reality, was friends with the Kapos, he got a voucher to the *Lager* mess, where one could buy cigarettes, Majorca tobacco, pickled cabbage—which was vitamins—and mustard. Nothing else, perhaps. Out of the 500 people in commando no. 90, nobody ever got a voucher like this. The main Kapo kept all the vouchers for himself, then he bought cigarettes in the mess of the

Lager and exchanged it with the English prisoners of war, who didn't have enough cigarettes, for the soup that they got at noon.

We also got soup, it was called *buna* soup, turnip-tops, nettles cooked in water, it was warm, and very bad, it was tasteless, but we ate it with our leftover bread. And after a while we didn't get *buna* soup, because the Kapo regularly exchanged the cigarettes with the prisoners of war for the much thicker and better soup that they got, so we got that so-called *Engländer-Suppe*, namely the English soup.

This Kapo was a German criminal, who, when the SS saw him, beat barbarously everyone he could reach. At the same time, he didn't distribute the vouchers, though he could have done it, but exchanged them for soup for us. Otherwise, they treated the prisoners of war much better than us. There were Americans, English, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans whose airplanes were shot down. They were in a POW camp two kilometers away, and they worked at the same place we did, only their food and the way the Germans handled them was different.

So, at noon we got that soup and in the evening when we went back to the camp we got the so-called *Abend-Suppe* [German: evening soup], which was perhaps a little bit better, because sometimes there was some potato in it, too, which was a luxury otherwise. And this was the food. They calculated that this was enough for about four months, if someone worked regularly, but after four months he became skin and bones. The Germans called those who became skinny "Muslims."

Occasionally, there was a selection. This meant that we had to march next to a strong lamp, naked, past the SS *Lager* head physician, who was called Doctor König. Fortunately, Mengele wasn't a *Lagerarzt* [German: camp doctor] at our camp. They drove the men to one end of the barrack, we had to take off our clothes, and march past the *Lagerarzt* naked and tell him our number. He had a list. We were registered by the number tattooed on our arm, and he ticked off how many we were.

Jeno Eisinger, my aunt's husband, was in quite bad shape already, and it was to be feared that they would select him. He hid under a bed and I went past the *Lagerarzt* and told his number, which was different from mine. Then, naked as I was, I jumped out the window of the barrack, I ran back on my hunkers, climbed back in, and marched past again and told them my own number. It was typical, the barrack commander knew this but he didn't mind. Many protected their own father this way. While I was in that barrack I got my aunt's husband through the selection twice this way. He was also in commando no. 90, but he was a pipe man. The steam pipes, water pipes ran in the open air on huge stands. These were serious, thick pipes with a big diameter, and they were very heavy. This was a very difficult job, and those who did this became Muslims very quickly.

At dawn, when it was still dark, there was a bell with which they woke everyone up, and the first thing was to make the beds. Everyone got the top, middle, or lower bunk of a three-tiered bunk bed. There were about 240 people in a barrack. I think there were about 80 bunk beds. And there was a straw mattress, a pillow filled with straw, and a blanket for every bed. It rarely happened that there were so many people in the barrack that we had to sleep double; usually everyone had his own bed.

This was a labor camp, in fact, and compared to the conditions in Auschwitz it was good. The IG Farben had a huge thermal station, and the *Lager* got its used water for heating. Every barrack had central heating, which was very good in the winter, but unfortunately the bedbugs liked it very much, too, and the barracks were extremely buggy summer and winter.

When we were finished with making the beds, shoe polishing was next. For rather enigmatical reasons, the wooden shoes and the other shoes, too, had to be smeared with cart-grease, and there were three or four boxes of cart-grease that everyone snatched away from each other. Of course, there weren't any handkerchiefs or rags. Some smeared it with the bottom of their shirt; I smeared it with my hat, with the side of the hat. The hat was a quite useful thing, because one could use it for everything. There wasn't any toilet paper, either, and people tore off a little bit from the bottom of their shirts, then threw it away. Over time, the long shirt became very short.

Next to our barrack, separated with a wire fence, there was the brothel of the Germans. There they took Aryan Polish and Czech political prisoner women, pretty and young ones, and forced them into prostitution. They didn't get anything for this, only food. But they got enough of that. And the popular Kapos and the SS, and some prominent prisoners, strictly Germans, could go to them.

Well, in different novels it was written that they forced the Jewish girls into prostitution. Not a word of this was true in Auschwitz because just as it was forbidden for a Jewish man to mess about with a *goy* [Hebrew/Yiddish: non-Jewish person] woman, just like in Hungary, it was the same the other way around, too. The Germans weren't allowed to mess about with Jewish women because they considered the Jews as if someone would have had intercourse with an animal. They simply didn't consider the Jews human. And there was one German who had intercourse with a pretty Jewish girl by accident. It happened in Birkenau, I found out afterwards. A German sergeant started an affair with a Jewish girl, and they hung the Jewish girl, and they shot the German. And that was it. So they didn't consider even the most beautiful Jewish girl a woman.

Otherwise, the Germans had a sense of humor. I found out from my mother later that, when they separated the women and assigned them to work, they said that 400 young, possibly pretty girls should step forward, but only those who were vir-

gins. Everyone was scared to death that they were going to be taken to the brothel, of course, because there wasn't any information. The humor of the Germans: they took them to Gleiwitz, to the soot factory, to some of the most difficult physical work. They took there expressly pretty, young, virgin girls.

In our camp, when we had been there already for several months, they once said that those who had gardener training should step forward. The son of our rabbi, the rabbi from Nagykanizsa, who was one year older than I and worked at a horticulture place every summer, stepped forward saying that he was a gardener. He wanted to work outdoors, to be a gardener. About 30 of them stepped forward and they took them to the coal mine in Jaworzno. [Jaworzno: town 20-30 kilometers southeast of Katowice, today in Poland.] This was German humor. And the rabbi's son died, the poor thing; he didn't come back.

In the *Lager* there was no typhus, not even petechial typhus, because there was delousing every week. And, generally, they didn't bring in epidemics. They did bring in scabies, but there wasn't any among us. There was bathing monthly but every morning we had to wash with cold water down to our waist. One couldn't exist without that, because it was obligatory. So the scabies spread, and a disease called *ukrainska*, because that came from the Ukrainians. That was like choleric diarrhea.

Diarrhea came out of one just like water or coffee. One couldn't hold it back; every-one crapped himself. I did, too, when I got it. There simply wasn't enough time not only to go to the toilet but to take off one's trousers. Everything came out of us. One could get dehydrated because of this, it was very dangerous, but the old prisoners told us that there was one way to get better. Otherwise, most people died of it: namely, to not eat and drink at all for 24 hours. A complete Yom Kippur [Jewish Day of Atonement, when Jews fast from sundown to sundown].

The Germans were very afraid of petechial typhus. Every Saturday afternoon there was lice control, and they gave us new shirts and underwear. One couldn't get wonderful shirts or underwear, but only some old one. It wasn't always clean, but it had been disinfected. They brought them from the disinfecting room, the smell of the chlorine could still be felt on them, and we could rip off pieces of them safely, because after a while we got another one. We learned it from the old prisoners, that that was the way to solve the lack of toilet paper and handkerchiefs. The handkerchief was the inside of my cap, and the external part was my shoe polisher.

After cleaning our shoes, we got breakfast. We had to go to the *Blockstube*, or to the *Tagesraum*—that's what they called the three by eight meter small room which was separated in the front of the barrack, where the barrack commander and the *Stubendienst* [literally 'barrack room duty' - inmates responsible for the order of the

block] lived, and there the room servants stood on two sides: one gave me a piece of bread, the other one put that small thing on it, a third one poured half a liter of coffee into my mess-tin. We weren't allowed to drink water. We drank coffee, and the next time soup.

When everyone got his food then there was roll call right away because, before marching out, they counted everyone in front of the barrack. And, at the gate again. When they counted us, we had to stand there with smeared shoes, and eaten breakfast. Those who couldn't eat their food, that was their problem, or they had to put it away. There was no pocket on our clothes, was there? One had to position it so that it wouldn't fall. We either ate the marmalade, or cut the bread and put the marmalade between the two pieces and held the bread with our shirt, pressing it with the sleeve of our jacket.

We lined up in front of the barrack, and the Kapo counted and checked who was missing. It was forbidden to stay in the barrack, because they beat up those who did, but if someone was ill or had some problem he could go to the doctor. The only person who was a doctor at the hospital officially was Doctor König [Edmund König], he was an SS doctor, he didn't stay there. But the ex-director of the medical clinic in Vienna, and Doctor Vass from Kolozsvár [today Romania], the director of the dental clinic were there as prisoners; the most excellent doctors were there under the pretext of being hospital attendants, who could treat us as best they could and with what they had.

There was no penicillin yet at that time. Those who had some kind of disease got Ultraseptil, and they either got better, or they didn't. And, for example, in case of injury there were four kinds of ointments: boric Vaseline, zinc Vaseline and that black ointment that smelled like tar, called Ichtiol, and there was a brown one, which smelled a little bit like chocolate called Pellidol. At the hospital, there wasn't selection once a month but once a week. And if someone spent two weeks at the hospital, in whatever shape he was, even if he would have gotten better the next day, he was gassed.

After they counted us, as many as we were out of the 500, with the exception of the sick ones, we set off, walking in step, in rows of five, because the SS counted us again at the gate. And, so that we would walk in step, there was a band, a brass band, I think with eight or ten musicians, who happened to be *Gypsies*, [Roma] and the band was called Music Kapo. They played the best light opera tunes, and there was a small stand inside the gate, and they stood there and played until everyone marched out, and they always marched out the last, and marched in the first. They worked just like everyone else, but they were careful so that their fingers wouldn't get hurt. There was a trumpet player, a cymbalist, a small drummer, a big drummer, but it was a brass band and it functioned.

On the way the *Vorarbeiter*, that is, the foremen, who were the alternates of the Kapos, kept running next to us and in front of us and they kept shouting "in straight lines." This meant that we had to align ourselves with the one in front of us, because they could only count the people easily by fives. Because the *Lager* was on the other side of the road in comparison to the factory, they simply blocked the Kraków-Auschwitz main road with a chain of guards while we marched in and out. The chain of guards was made of two rows of guards with a rifle or a submachine-gun, and dogs; they stood there about 100 meters long, at five meters from each other.

At noon we got a half hour lunch break, I think, perhaps at 1 pm, I don't remember anymore. And we worked until dusk. The workday wasn't determined in hours, but it depended on the daylight because by the time it got dark even the last person had to be in the camp. So, in the winter the workday was shorter than in the summer. And we set off later, because in the dark, until daybreak none of the prisoners was allowed to leave the *Lager*. And when we marched in, we marched the same way back, with music.

In the *Lager*, we talked very much about food at first, about what we were going to eat at home. Then we got out of this habit. The truth is, that after I had had a good cry when they took my cap, and after I had experienced what my life in the camp was like, from then on I focused on starving the least possible, on not being very cold and to be beaten rarely. It didn't matter to me anymore whether I would be liberated or would die, what happened to my family. Because, how should I put it, one couldn't do anything with these thoughts.

I feel ashamed forever, and I will never forgive the Germans for this, that during these two months they made me accept it as an order. I mean that if I would have tried and survived for a couple years, then I would have become a *Vorarbeiter* or a *Stubendienst*. I imagined a *Lager* career for myself, and nothing else outside the *Lager*, apart from the fact that I could have died any time. How should I say it? That wasn't a topic in itself. Who lives, lives; whoever died, died.

We had a regular loss, and the selection was ordered by the IG each month because most of the people, usually 10 percent, were in poor health. And they usually selected 1000 people each month. Those who were selected were gassed, and after that they brought another 1000, so the people shifted about continually. Until 20 August, I was in this so-called *Werkstatt* [German: workshop].

The schedule was so that we worked until noon on Saturdays, and we got the afternoons off, so we were in the *Lager*. Louse control, cleaning, straw mattress filling, such activities. And among the Sundays there were so-called free Sundays, but then

we couldn't live a social life, but rested in the barrack and were happy that we were alive. On the other Sundays all the *Lager* had to go to work. Well, the 20th of August was a free Sunday, and the Americans, who had never bombed either Birkenau or the rails, attacked the IG Farben factory, and they plastered with bombs the workshop where I had worked; nothing remained of it.

I was desperate that they would send me somewhere to work. I thought I was going to commit suicide, and I said that I would rather run against the wire fence instead of struggling with the cable commando, here and there, outdoors. Because laying cable was very difficult work, it was the most difficult. At that time, there were only leaden cables, and one meter of that weighed 120 kilograms. First, that had to be pulled out, unrolled from the drum and, before that, the cable trench had to be dug. When they dug the cable trench the cable commando was happy, because that was an easy job. When the cable had to be pulled out, it was inhuman and very few survived it. I knew someone, he was from Nagykanizsa, who survived the cable commando. Everyone admired him. And I knew that I could endure this difficult work only for a couple of weeks, and that they would select me for gassing.

Then three of my schoolmates from Nagykanizsa grabbed me, they simply sat on me and started to explain to me that I shouldn't be stupid, that I would endure and they would, too. Not everyone worked among such conditions as I did. And that I shouldn't fool about but keep quiet. They sat on me during a half night. They saved my life but, unfortunately, none of them are alive anymore.

The next day they made new commandos and they assigned me to the warehouse commando. This meant that I had to work in a warehouse. The warehouses were half roofed, barn-like buildings, open on the side. And it happened that they found out that I could write and read German. They assigned me to the gas-cylinder warehouse, to the hydrogen, oxygen, acetylene gas, and all kinds of huge cylinders, and I gave them out, and I kept a record of the number of cylinders each commando took. My physical labor was loading—I thought I would shit in my pants, because a cylinder weighed 80 kilograms, and I might have been around 50. And, finally, one of the workers there realized that it was stupid to lift them, I only had to tilt them a little bit and roll them. They taught me how to roll a cylinder and how to keep the record, and everything.

Once, when there was line-up for the march back from work, the submachine-gun of one of the mad SS discharged, probably not on purpose. Three bullets went into my right leg. I sat down and said, "Oh my God," and, when we marched in, I limped and went straight to the hospital. They treated my leg nicely, smeared it with one of those four ointments, and bandaged it with a bandage like crepe paper. They put gauze and cotton on it, bandaged it in all three places, and sent me back to the bar-

rack, saying that I couldn't stay in the hospital. I said I didn't even want to stay there, because I knew what was what already.

I went to work with my injured leg, I limped a little bit, but I still went, and because I didn't really strain myself, because I only had to roll about 25 cylinders there and back each day, and I mostly sat and wrote, it didn't really affect me. But the wound became infected and swollen. Then they told me that I had to stay in the hospital. Otherwise, I would have died in four days if they had left it so. People died of blood poisoning. They operated on it and I was admitted into the hospital.

From the first time when they robbed me of my identity, so to speak, I didn't try to be in Hungarian company. I mostly made friends with Polish Jews, or Greek, French and German Jews. And I had a lot of friends among the old ones. I knew one of the *Stubendienst* at the hospital. We talked a lot. I could say that he was a pal. He might have been twice as old as I was, maybe about 25 or 30; he was a very decent German Jew. I told him that this wouldn't heal in two weeks. He told me that we would solve it.

And in two weeks there was selection. To my biggest surprise, I passed, nobody made me step aside. I asked the *Stubendienst* how this was possible, and he told me to go and ask the clerk. The clerk was a Belgian Jewish boy, about 18 to 19 years old. And he showed me that I had a brand new record. On the 13th day they threw my record out, and on paper they admitted me to the hospital again. They did this several times, I got injured sometime in the middle of November, and in January I was still at the hospital. But, unfortunately, I wasn't doing very well, because even though I could walk already I still had running sores.

While I was at the hospital, they selected my Uncle Eisinger, unfortunately; they gassed him. There wasn't anyone to go through the selection instead of him. I only found it out later. It was terrible, but I had to accept it. I accepted the German mentality: poor Eisinger, he was nothing but skin and bone. He would have suffered for a certain time, but in the end this would have happened to him, anyway. I felt sorry for him. I was sad but, at the same time, I understood the situation, that this had to happen. I will never forgive myself for this, that I accepted this. This is an awful thing. At the age of 15!

In the hospital they changed my bandage every other day, they smeared my leg with ointment, and the swelling went down, only the running sores were still there. When I could already walk, the *Stubendienst* put me to work, to help him. I had to carry bed-slippers and help the new patients use them. At that time, they brought in a lot of non-Jews, and became suspicious about those who were French, though I don't know why; they put them into the Lager and got a red triangle. They became political prisoners.

One day, the *Stubendienst* asked me if I wanted to get half a liter of soup more daily. Of course I did. One was always hungry, especially because we didn't get the *Zulage* bread. He told me, "Here's a wire brush and some grease, and out there is the chimney for disinfecting." It was a huge iron chimney, about 10-12 meters high, which was tied with cables on a concrete ring put into the ground. They screwed it up, and the bolts were rusty. He gave me a wrench so that I would move the bolts, clean them, grease them, and twist them repeatedly. This meant that I had to twist six bolts a day, and for this I got half a liter of soup. I was very happy about it. It was a very good job and, though I only had a shirt and a pair of trousers at the hospital, they lent me a striped jacket, so I wouldn't freeze outside while I did this work. I did it diligently until 18 January.

I only found out recently, in 1998, at the first reunion of the former *Lager* inmates, why I had to do this. I had to do it because the barrack commander substitute and some others planned that they wouldn't let everyone be killed. They thought that if the Russians came then the Germans would encircle us with machine guns, and since there were many of us in a small place they would have killed us all. And these few people planned that since the 10-12 meter high disinfectant chimney stood six meters from the electric fence, they would blow it down on the fence to short-circuit and tear it down, which would make it possible for us to run away. They made me do this job so that the bolts would be easy to screw off.

On 18 January, they evacuated the camp and they took those who could walk. But, at the time, we had heard the Russian cannons for days. I also wanted to leave and I asked for my clothes and shoes. There was a box in the hospital in which there were clothes recorded by number, and I went there and it was empty. They had taken my clothes and my shoes. I stood there in a shirt and pants, and I said that I wanted to leave. They said, "No, not with this foot, Franz, you wouldn't get far. On the one hand, they would shoot you when you fell and, on the other hand, it would get swollen again, and then you couldn't get help at any hospital and you would die." I was very desperate, because I was sure that they would kill those who remained in the hospital. The Germans didn't let those who couldn't work live.

But the Germans left on 18 January, and they put a fist-sized lock on a thick chain on the gate of the *Lager*. The gates were locked, and there were no guards around. The current was still in the fence, but the watchtowers were empty. On the fence there was a lamp on every other pole, and the wire fence was lighted up from the inside and outside. Those who were in the hospital were left there. 740 people, that's three barracks, and the men of a medical barrack and two surgical barracks remained there.

Everyone was scared to death. I was, too. What would happen to us? They would surely kill us. They would set the barrack on fire. Or shoot us. This happened in the

smaller camps. Auschwitz had about 40 ancillary camps, where there were only a couple hundred people, and they set the hospital barrack on fire, and they shot those who wanted to leave. So everyone died there. We didn't know about this but we knew the "local customs," so to speak. The front line was getting closer; they kept shooting. And one day the *Kraftwerk*, the electric plant in the factory stopped, and the lights went off and the heating stopped.

We were there for ten days and nights, and we were quite hungry. We weren't thirsty, because there was enough snow. In the meantime, the Russians kept bombing the *Lager*. We were lucky, because even though they set many barracks on fire, they didn't set any of the hospital barracks on fire. And we went to eat on the garbage-heap, which was next to the kitchen, and we ate the garbage that had been thrown out from the awful evening soup, which they couldn't use for anything in the kitchen. Beet stalks with mud, potato peels, things like these. We appreciated these very much and ate them quickly, raw, as we found them.

Later, when there was no power anymore, we cut up the wire fence at the back because there were some who knew that the potato pits were there, that they had brought the potatoes to the camp kitchen from there. On the whole, we could go out one by one and bring potatoes. There were some who fell, and froze to the ground. Whenever we went through for potatoes we always had to step over the one who had died there. From then on, we could eat potatoes, raw, of course, because there wasn't any fire, oven or stove.

The Russians arrived on 27 January 1945. First they only went into the factory. I saw the strange uniform, and they kept shooting wild. And, by that evening, the combatant German formations left the surroundings and the Russians liberated Birkenau and Auschwitz, and the prisoners who survived in the hospital. Then we simply cut up the wire fence and I, who could walk, and some others helped some of our comrades who spoke Russian go out.

LILLY LOVENBERG

Budapest, Hungary

Interviewer: Ildiko Makra

Date of interview: May 2004

On 30 April 1944, they took us away, and on 2 May we arrived in Birkenau [today Poland]. They told us they were taking us to work, and the old people would go to special treatment. They didn't say where, just that it was in Germany. They didn't tell us anything, just treated us like animals. In the boxcars, everybody went together but when we arrived, and got off the train in Auschwitz, they separated the women from the men. The trip took two or three days. The train stopped along the way, but we couldn't get out. We just stayed in the boxcars the whole time, the little window was barb-wired, and we peeked out of there. Some died along the way. They threw them out. My parents, Moric [her brother], Erzebet [her sister] and I were together. At Kassa [the city was on the Hungarian-Slovak border], when the Hungarian constables gave us to the Germans, my brother was laying there fresh out of his operation in the train car [her brother Moric had had a hernia operation before being forced into the ghetto]; we were crowded together. He said, "Whatever happens, Lilly is going to survive." We had to leave our belongings there. "Everyone move calmly, everyone will get their belongings," they said in German. Everything was in German. We understood; my parents spoke German fluently. And for those who didn't understand, someone translated for them.



Lilly Rosenberg's elder sister, Erzebet Rosenberg in Beregszasz, Ukraine, in 1936.

In the ghetto, they had already told us that whoever had valuables, gold or jewelry, had to take it off. We took everything out. I left a watch. When we arrived in Auschwitz, the people in striped clothes, who had already been there for a long time, from Slovakia and Germany, waved at us not to bring anything in. So I took my watch and threw it to them. They yelled in German, "Men together, and women

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together." When we had been separated, they yelled for the women over 60 to step aside, a German SS [man] pointed in which direction! My mother was 70 years old and weighed 85 kilograms. She had been 100 kilograms a long time ago but, when these troubles arose, she lost weight. That's when we got separated from each other. We thought we would be able to visit each other. The Jickovics girls, three sisters, also from Heteny, were there with us the whole time. Their mother went together with ours. But we decided that Erzebet would go with the older women to take care of them. Then they took us into the bath where we had to take off our clothes; we were still in our own clothes when we went to bathe. The older residents [the prisoners] started staring at them, and came for them. I said, "Don't touch them, they are mine!" They had a good laugh, and then took them.

They shaved us bald; we got a full-length gray dress, big clothes, knickers, stockings and a pair of socks. We had seen a group, all bald. "How they look!" we said. We thought they were crazy. They told us, "Just wait—soon you'll be crazy, too." And then it was our turn. When we came out, we didn't recognize each other. We looked around to see who was where; everyone had totally different faces. As we moved, I heard somebody yelling, "Lilly, Lilly!" My sister came with a loaf of bread in her hand, the baked kind from home. "What did you do? How could you leave Mother?" I asked her. "I didn't want to, but the Germans wouldn't let me go, they beat me back with a rubber club." "And why did you take the bread from Mother?" I asked, and she said, "He took it from her and gave it to me." I said that not all Germans are the same. Erzebet survived all the horrors. She died on the way home, but I'll get to that later.

Moric was chosen for work and, when he went into the bath, a German saw his thirty centimeter fresh scar and took him away to the crematorium. The first day, when we had to stand for the *Zellappell* [German: roll call] at 4am, the fun had already started. *Zellappell* means the counting. That's when they counted us. I got two socks, and one was a really warm stocking, which came up to my thigh, the other was a short sock. And bald, in the cold of dawn, I tied a turban on my bald head, so I wouldn't freeze. When the SS came to me, he slapped me so hard I thought my head had fallen off. "What are you thinking? You have a turban on!" He took it off my head. I had no idea it wasn't allowed. Such a hard slap on the first day for me!

Our barrack commander, Alizka had been there for four years, and was a Slovak Jew. The barrack commanders were Jewish, also, but there weren't just Jews, there were also Ukrainians. There were those who had been convicted of something. There were Communists, and German prostitutes. They convicted them, and they worked in the camp as overseers. There were robbers and killers, too; their sign was a green triangle pointing down. Every three months, they put the people who worked at the crematorium into the crematorium so there wouldn't be anybody to talk about what happened there. They made the Jews do all the internments.

Erzsebet's condition was weaker than mine. They often took her to the hospital, where she got a little better but soon broke down again, and they took her in again. Once, they whispered behind me that yesterday there was a big selection at the hospital, and my sister was one of the selected. That night I escaped to the hospital, and found my sister: she was alive.

They put us in the group called Kanada. The Kanada group meant we sorted the clothes taken from the transports of Jews. [The Kanada command was a group of hundreds of inmates in Birkenau whose job was to meet the arriving trains, unpack them, and sort the different valuables and belongings found on each train. The warehouse where the belongings of the dead were sorted was called Kanada.] The better things had to be packed separately. The underwear and everything had to be separated. It wasn't hard work, and we got the very nice clothes, the striped ones: grey and blue stripes and a blue silk belt. We had a red scarf on our heads, and everything was brand new. We got black boots that we had to shine every day. We had to march nicely because the international express train passed by there. We went to work next to where the train went by, so foreigners saw what great things the prisoners were doing. That lasted six weeks because then the transport from Hungary was over. And our jobs were done; Kanada was shut down.

They put us to work cleaning up ruins. We had to dig out the rocks with a pickaxe from the dilapidated and bombed houses. It was horribly heavy work. We had to load the big rocks into a coal tub. When the tub was full, eighteen to twenty of us pulled it by the thick ropes attached to the side. We had to transport that for I don't know how many meters. I was in the eighteenth group. After we'd dumped it, we had to put the stones in nice piles. After we made the piles, we pulled the coal tub back and started the work again. That went on for a while. Then they put us in potato loading: loading train cars full of potatoes for soldiers. I was scared by then, because my arms were really heavy.

When we arrived, they gave us bread, and I thought it was homemade soap, that's how it looked. That's what we had, plus two dekagrams of margarine. Plus, they gave us a half liter of soup which was concentrated. It looked like the slop they used to give to the pigs at the neighbor's house in Hetyen. There were potatoes in it. Every day we got the same thing, no variations.

For dinner, we got a cup of black coffee: something brown with saccharin. You had to save your bread. I don't know how many dekagrams it was, but it wasn't a half kilogram. I always went out to the trash heap, and collected the vegetables off the top, which the kitchen had thrown away. We washed them well, and in a tin can on two bricks, we cooked what we had found, inside the barrack. There was a place in the middle of the barrack for that.

In the area of the *Lager* [German: camp], where we were, those who were chosen for work could do things like that, because they didn't inspect us. After work and before *Zellappell*, we had an hour to travel freely between the barracks. Those in *Lager C* didn't go to work, they didn't get food. They were exterminated.

In the beginning, we didn't even know. We found out, about three weeks later, that our parents were no longer alive. The barrack commander, Alizka, yelled for silence because there would be big trouble. There were 800 of us in one barrack, and so there was a lot of noise, and she was always scared, and in revenge she told us to remember where we were, and that our parents had been cremated the day we arrived. We had always seen the big fires. They don't bury people here, they burn them. We didn't think we would end up there.

They only took Jews and *Gypsies* [Roma] to the crematorium. The *Gypsies* worked in the neighboring barrack, and one day no *Gypsies* came out, not even one. They said that they had cremated 3,500 *Gypsies* that night. It was horrific. When we found out they had cremated the *Gypsies*, and we didn't know who would be next in line, we panicked.

Then we were storing potatoes. That was our work after Kanada, and since I was the daughter of a landowner, I knew how to store potatoes. We took 50 kilogram crates over to the railway, to the warehouse. Once, somebody hid four potatoes. One of the SS [women] carried a mace with a ball on the top like the swineherds used to have. I wasn't there, because my sister was in the hospital then. I had just gotten back, when everybody was standing there with their skirts up, and she'd beaten their bottoms. Everybody got clubbed eight times. She told me to stand in line! I got them, too, but with full force. Those who got it first, she hit with her full anger. Our behinds were blackened. Then we looked at each other to see how badly our bottoms had been beaten, and the Germans were peeking in. One of them said to the clubber, "How could you beat them like that? They're women." And when our shift was over, the



Lilly Rosenberg, during her engagement, in Beregszasz, Ukraine, in 1942.

more sensitive one came over to us and said, "Everybody can take four potatoes, but hide them so they don't see them at the entrance." That's how they compensated us.

It happened one night that I first heard Hungarian from someone other than my colleagues. I went out to the trash pile to look for something. In the dark, I heard a guard cursing in Hungarian, "God damn it, what do I do? Shoot her?" He was talking to himself. When I heard him I thought, "Thank you, God, there are Hungarians here!" So I went away. He didn't shoot me; I got lucky that night. [Many Hungarian ethnic Germans, so-called 'Schwabian' SS, served in the camps. There were also Transylvanians, ethnic German 'Saxons,' who knew Hungarian very well. For example, one of the selector physicians, Victor Capesius was often sent out to the Hungarian transports, because it was very calming for the deportees that someone spoke their mother tongue.]

Once, we got near a cabbage field around noon near where we worked. There the girls ran in, one, then another, and got out a cabbage, and ran back. I was so scared, I didn't dare. I saw the guard there; he was aiming at me. I called out to him in German to let me take a cabbage. Not possible. But what did he do? He turned around, turned his back to me. I understood that he didn't want to see anything. I pulled one out, and my friend pulled out two. I barely stood up when I heard an SS on a horse galloping towards us, and poor Nelli started to run with two cabbages. She shouldn't have run away. I didn't run away. I stood petrified, and let the cabbage drop from my hand, and waited. When he got there, he jumped off the horse, put the reins in my hand and jumped on Nelli. Well, Nelli in her wood clogs, and pipe-cleaner legs, got it. He hit her with the highest degree of sadism, kicked her, cut her, crushed her and humiliated her, "*Die Schweine-Jüdin!* A German officer says stop, and you dare run away!" He left her there; Nelli had pissed and shat herself. Everything came out of her. The German took down our numbers and said that we were going to court, because it was forbidden to steal cabbage. What hurt me was that the others who had also taken cabbages had fled.

My sister had sent word from the hospital to bring her some kind of vitamins, a little cabbage leaf. That's why I took the cabbage. Well, then we went to court. Three days later, they called us over. The woman judge addressed me to tell her what happened. I told her that my sister was in the hospital, and I wanted to bring her some vitamins, a little cabbage leaf. That's why I pulled out the cabbage. "And the guard?" she asked. I said, "I didn't see him, he was standing with his back to us. And that's why I dared to pick the cabbage." The woman judge liked the fact that I didn't get the guard involved in trouble. That's why she didn't punish me by having me shaved bald again. The punishment was to shave the hair that had grown back on our heads.

I was put in the punishment barrack, and my sister Erzebet stayed in the other barrack. There was food in the punishment barracks. They had milk there, and boiled potatoes.

I took some milk to my sister because they gave us the best of what they cooked. The workers just got the scraps. Those who were punished were long-time prisoners already. There were Jews, Ukrainians, and also high-ranking ones there. They had their connections with the kitchen. We were in Birkenau [Polish: Brzezinka] for six months.

Suddenly we heard that they were taking the transport to Germany. The order came that nobody could leave the barracks after dark. Trucks were coming, and we had to get on. This was what they told the punishment barrack. There was lots of screaming, and rumbling. When the barrack was half empty, the barrack commander came over holding a little girl by the hand, maybe sixteen years old. She told me, "You and Nelli come with me." She took us to the empty part in the back. She said, "Hide in here, in one of the beds farthest in the back, on top, in the hollow of the bed. The sound of a fly is not loud, but don't even make that much noise. I'll come back for you!" We got in and waited in silence. Suddenly, the barrack emptied out. There was a horribly great silence: you can't imagine what that terrifying silence was like. We stayed there, covered up. I heard an SS officer asking the commander woman, "All 800 are gone?" She said, "Yes," in German. The officer left, and the woman came over to us with tears streaming down her face, "So now you can come out. Come out, that's all I can do." I didn't understand what she meant by that. We followed her. "And where do we go?" we asked. "Wherever you want," and she left.

Only later did I find out that we were the only three who survived that night, out of 800. The others were all killed that night.

After that, I went looking for my sister in the barrack I'd been banished from. It was completely empty. I started to ask around and they said, "They're over there, crammed together, two barracks in one, like herrings. A train is taking them in the morning." And so I went over there, and good Lord! The guard, who was a prisoner too, didn't want to let me into the barrack where my sister was. I showed him my number, and told him to look for my sister. I told him that she was in there, and that I had been left behind. He let me in. I screamed out her name and found her. She was squashed. I almost passed out from the horrible smell in there. Then, in the morning, they started for the trains. They gave us two slices of bread for the trip. And we had a backpack, which I saved. It's in the Yad Vashem Museum in Israel.

We thought they were taking us to Germany. We didn't know what day it was. We had to walk to the trains for nearly two days straight. Then we had to stop because there weren't any more trains, they had to give them to the army; they needed transport. They put us in a giant tent, a thousand of us slept on the bare ground. They brought us soup, but it was so salty that we couldn't eat it. It was nettle soup.

Then, two or three days later, a train came and took us to Ravensbruck.

GIZELA FUDEM

Wroclaw, Poland

Interviewer: Jakub Rajchman

Date of interview: December 2004

That's how I managed until August 1944, when they moved us to Auschwitz. A few months earlier, a transport of Hungarian women who had already been to Auschwitz came, and from Auschwitz they brought them to Plaszow. They were shaved and wore gray dresses and looked otherworldly. Later, along with that transport, they took some people from Plaszow to Auschwitz and they called us "a Hungarian transport" because a lot of them were from Hungary; there were more of them than us.

In Auschwitz, they shaved our heads, took away our clothing and put us in barracks where there were maybe one hundred people. To be precise, it was in Birkenau. For some time, I got lucky and worked as a cleaner for the camp officers. I would take things to wash, clean up, sweep floors, things like that. But later we worked physically, and then I was barely alive. They made us dig a new river bed for the Vistula River, and that was the worst time.



Gizela Fudem with her sister, Tauba Grunberg, in 1928.

In Birkenau, we stuck together, my sister and I, with three more friends we knew from Plaszow, up until the moment of one transport from Auschwitz, out of which nobody survived, because everyone died in Stutthof. We were all sent to this transport but my sister and I were saved by our uncle. But those friends went. I remember we were standing on the square, ready to leave. But we managed to get in touch with that uncle on the other side of the fence; he was our neighbor through the fence. He was the second husband of my Aunt Bela, Mom's sister, and he had recognized us earlier, as soon as we arrived at Auschwitz. We managed to let him know we were in that transport, and he quickly took our tattoo numbers. And, almost at the last moment, one of those camp officers came, she walked along the row and called out those numbers. We came forward, she checked whether the numbers were right and then said, "Disappear." And she told us which way we should go and we went back to the camp, which was almost empty, and stayed there for a few more months, until the end of December 1944.

On 30 December 1944, my sister and I were taken to Bergen-Belsen in one of the last mass transports.



Gizela Fudem in 1940.

JERZY PIKIELNY

Warsaw, Poland

Interviewer: Kinga Galuszka

Date of interview: February-June 2005

■ We stayed in the ghetto until the very end [August 1944]. Doctors were the last group to be deported. We were transported to Auschwitz in cattle cars, loaded in the morning. We saw Polish railroad workers along the way gesturing at us that we were heading for death. We reached the destination in about twenty-four hours, before dawn.



Jerzy Pikielny in Łódź, Poland, in 1937.

As we reached the ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau we were told to leave everything in the cars. Men and women were separated. Afterwards, both groups went through a selection, conducted by three or four SS men. They judged by people's appearance if they were fit to work. Both my father and I passed the selection. It later turned out Mom did, too. My father found that out when he started carting trash in Auschwitz, because people with a university degree were given that job. I was assigned to a different block.

They soon started to 'buy,' as it used to be called at the time, metalworkers [they were needed to work in the German workshops] in that block. They carried out a selection among those claiming to be metalworkers. The ones looking fit were picked out and sent to a different labor camp. You had to take off all your clothes.

I met a friend then, Bialer, who worked with me in the ghetto and was a member of the organization I spoke of [Leftist

Organization in the Łódź Ghetto: Anti-Fascist Organization—Lewica Związkowa (Union Left)]. We started to hang out together and we were both 'bought,' to go to the AL Friedland camp [a subcamp of Gross-Rosen], where 500 people were transported.



Jerzy Pikielny's father Lazar Pikielny in Łódź in the 1920s.

IRENA WOJDYSLAWSKA

*Łódź, Poland**Interviewer: Marek Czekalski**Date of interview: November–December 2004*

I don't remember anything concerning the departure for Auschwitz, just that I found myself in a cattle wagon. [It was mid August 1944, the action took 20 days. The last transport of Jews left for Auschwitz on the 29th of August.] I'm sure I wasn't working that day. I must have been walking from home, because I was with Mother. Rozka, Mother's sister, was also in that transport.

I remember that we entered a wagon packed with people. There were no windows, just two air grates at the top. People relieved themselves in this wagon. We knew where we were going, because the railway workers told us. But when I saw the sign, "Katowice," and that we were going in the direction of Auschwitz, I was a hundred percent sure of what was waiting for me. I didn't have much hope of surviving.

I do remember how the train was unloaded. These dogs that jumped on us, and these Germans, shouting, hurrying us. I remember I entered a bathhouse, this common washroom. I was sure they'd release gas. I didn't want to bathe myself, turn the faucet on. But I remember there was some shouting, I was made to do it. I was in the same ward as Mother, bed to bed. I never met any other relatives who were brought there. I was in Auschwitz for three or four months [from late August 1944 to November 1944].

I did, however, meet Abram Habanski, my friend from the ghetto. He was in a group that worked in the women's ward. They cleaned, or something similar. We greeted each other warmly, but what else could we say? After all, the situation was hopeless. I stood naked during roll call every day. Every day they chose more people from the wards to be gassed, so what was there to be planned? I think he died, but I don't know that for sure. I know that if he hadn't died, he would have searched for me.

One night or evening, in any case it was dark, our entire ward was summoned for roll call. And that's when Mother was taken to be gassed. I stayed on the other side, among women who were not designated to be gassed that day. I was stunned, confused. I can say this honestly—I didn't have enough courage to walk over to her side and be gassed with Mother. I was only conscious of the fact that I didn't want to live at all anymore.



Irena Wojdyslawska (right) with her mother (middle) and sister (left) The photo was taken in 1929 or 1930, in Łódź, Poland

I had a high fever. Until this day, I don't remember how the other women and I were transported to the reloading station. I know that I was lying in the corner somewhere in that station. Only the next day did the Germans take me from that corner and load me into a car. Those were Pullman cars, because they were passing through Germany. They were completely different from those [cattle wagons] in which people were transported to Auschwitz. They had windows and normal seats.

We were taken to a new camp in Birnbäumel [a branch of the Gross Rosen camp near Swidnica, currently Rogoznica]. It was a women's camp.

JOZEF SEWERYN

Warsaw, Poland

Interviewer: Zuzanna Solakiewicz

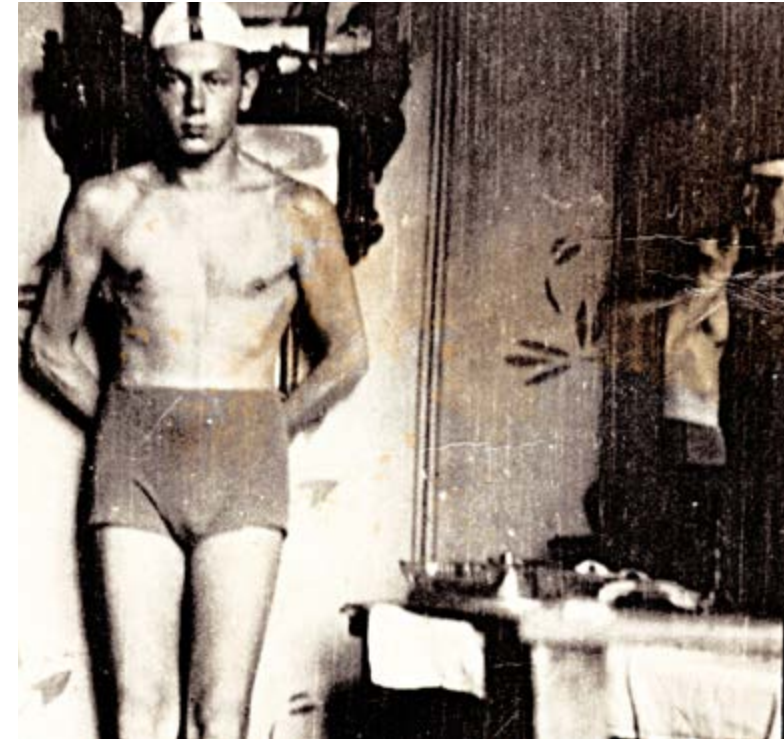
Date of interview: May–October 2004

I reached the camp in Auschwitz on 16 December 1942. I was there for more than two years. I was issued a number: 83782. Some experiments were conducted on me. They [the experiments] were carried out by a German physician, an SS soldier—Horst Schumann. These experiments were connected with fertility.

At the very beginning I met a friend from the 3rd Podhale Riflemen's Regiment; we had served in the army together. When the war broke out in 1939, he would guide people through the mountains to Slovakia. He was a Pole, a mountaineer from Zakopane [town at the feet of the Tatra Mountains]. He arrived in Auschwitz in 1940, in the second transport. He recognized me immediately, as soon as I arrived; he was an old stager there, so he knew what to do and how to behave in the camp. He helped me a lot, he taught me everything. Others helped, as well.

I survived because the SS men needed me—I fixed their fountain pens. After several months of my stay in Auschwitz, the Germans wanted to find someone who could repair fountain pens and typewriters. I volunteered and was accepted. I worked for SS *Unterscharführer* Artur Breitwieser [1910–1978], he came from Lvov; before he became an SS man he had served in the 3rd Podhale Riflemen's Regiment in Biala, at the same time as I did. Perhaps that's why he chose me. I became his *Füllfederhaltermechaniker*, that is his fountain-pen-fixer. The Germans had a lot of good fountain pens—Pelikans, Watermanns, Parkers—that they had gotten by looting the possessions of the Jews, but the ink they used was poor. Their pens needed to be rinsed and fixed every two months. And I knew how to repair pens because I'd had that section in my wife's bookstore. I worked for Breitwieser and for the other SS men, commandants, German physicians. They thought I was useful, so they even gave me a watch, so I wouldn't be late when I came to see them. Besides, I didn't just fix their pens; I would also shave them and give them haircuts. They addressed me with *Sie* [formal German word for "you"] and the others they called "*Du verfluchter Hund*"—"You damned dog." And they killed them. I got the tools I needed for cutting hair and shaving—they used to belong to Jews. I had more luck than sense.

I used to write letters to my wife; writing to your wife was permitted. She'd answer them. But my letters and her answers were so official. You couldn't do it otherwise, and you had to write in German. And you couldn't say anything more than, "I'm here—I am waiting—good bye." I couldn't even write that I was hungry because they controlled all the letters.



Jozef Seweryn in a swimming-suit in Kraków in the 1930s.

One time at the camp, some time in 1943, an SS man came to see me. He had a higher rank than Breitwieser, and he told me, "Make me a barber's wig and a beard—red." I said I would, and that it would be ready in several days. When he came to pick it up he told me to get on his motorcycle and he took me to the commando, so I'd put the wig and the beard on him there. And then he told me to drive him to the theater, which was nearby, but it was on the other side of the fence. We got there and he said, "Now go to the camp." I answered, "I can't go, there's no one to guard me, if anyone sees me on this side of the fence, I'll get shot." But he made me go, so I did. I was in prison clothes; wearing those stripes. I had a huge argument at the fence; the guard took out his gun and shouted. I was so scared I almost shat in my pants, but he finally let me go. There were such stories.

In 1944, I was moved to Sachsenhausen, from there to Oranienburg [today Germany] and Ravensbruck, and finally to a camp in Barth [today Germany]. There was an aircraft factory there, where we all worked. We produced two-engine bombers. Most of the inmates were moved out of that camp on 30 April 1945. We were being led towards some town, when the Russians cut us off. The Germans surrounded us when they saw them approaching and started shooting at us. I survived.

LEON GLAZER

Kraków, Poland

Interviewer: Jolanta Jaworska

Date of interview: December 2004

In July 1944, when the Russians had come as far as, I think, Baranow, fierce battles were fought there between the Germans and the Russians because there it was Polish territory, so they packed us off in a transport and off we went. Transport, but no idea where to. Packing up? We weren't packing up—we didn't have anything to pack. Wagons were put on, those cattle ones, naturally, from Pustkow itself, because there was a siding there. We were loaded in without any air. Locked up like cattle. We didn't know anything of what was going on. We didn't know where we were going, even.

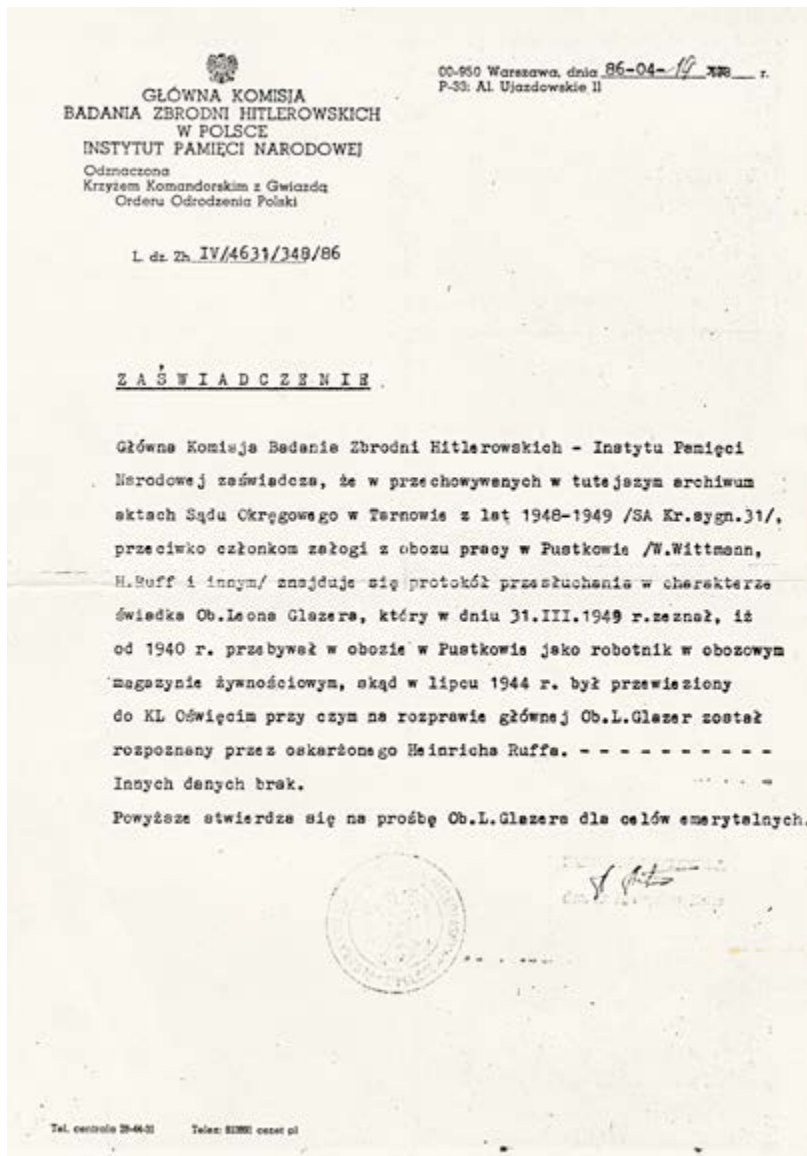
It took a whole day and a night, I think. They open the wagons: "Raus!" [German: "Get out!"]. We look: "Arbeit macht frei" [German: "Work makes (you) free," the infamous inscription above the Auschwitz gate]. "What's going to happen to us?" I thought then. I didn't know anything about Auschwitz. I knew about our camp in Pustkow, but about others, that they existed at all, I didn't. They left us a very long time on that ramp. And that SS-man, Ruff, said that he had had a *Befehl* [German: command] and he had to put us in the camp, not in any crematorium. No, because he had been given an order and he wasn't leaving the place until they took us to the camp. It wasn't that he asked for it—he demanded it. On that ramp, Ruff behaved very decently. I didn't see him during the convoy, I only saw him on the ramp.

I didn't know that Auschwitz was a death camp. None of us knew that. We were told that we were going to the camp and we went to the camp. But later I found out that it was usually like this: a transport arrived and everyone went to the bathhouse. There that poisonous gas was piped in at once, then the floor fell in, the corpses went down, and that was it. In Birkenau, there were crematoria. Those people were sent to their deaths, and others were sent to the sheds. And so, somehow, we simply survived because, in the end, we were sent to the camp. And so that's why I've got this number, A-18077. I was tattooed on the first day, 27 July 1944. Prisoners did it, but I don't know whether they were Poles or Jews.

After that I got my stripes, of course [camp uniform, made from material with blue vertical stripes, comprising a jacket and trousers]. But in Pustkow we hadn't had stripes. You went around in whatever you had. First, we were sent to this big bathhouse. I knew that I was in quarantine, that this was how it had to be, that they would come and take us somewhere to work. I don't know what the point of that quarantine was. Two weeks we sat in these sheds and didn't do anything, on the bunks, without anything, just like that. There weren't even straw mattresses, and all those people.



Leon Glazer as a Senior Corporal in the Polish People's Army, in Luban Slaski, Poland, 1946.



A certificate issued to Leon Glazer in 1986 by the Central Committee for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland, regarding the trial of SS Man Heinrich Ruff, at which Glazer was a witness.

There I saw the women's camp in Birkenau. Women, all shaven, I saw at once, on the first day. I saw the *Gypsy* [Roma] camp, too. Yes. I could see that they were *Gypsies*; their camp was separate. I saw other people, too, different nationalities, Greeks, Hungarians. I even remember this one episode. I didn't even know what it meant. "*Korfu lekhem*"—one of the prisoners said that to us. *Korfu* meant that they were from the island of Corfu, and *lekhem* is simply bread in Hebrew, apparently. I still

WITNESS TO AUSCHWITZ

remember those two words, as if it were yesterday: "*Korfu lekhem, Korfu lekhem*," just meaning that they were from the island of Corfu and they wanted bread.

And after that quarantine, after all that, what they called "merchants" came to the camp. Yes, SS-men. They ordered us all to get out of the shed. The whole group, the one from Pustkow, because we'd somehow stuck together. They asked about our trades. What trade, what trade? They just wanted to see who could do what, because it was to be real work. Obviously, I wasn't a properly trained tailor, but I said I was a tailor. Perhaps I saved myself as a tailor, because they took me to work and didn't leave me in the camp. Some of them that stayed, older people, they finished them off in the camp. Then they split us into groups and some went to the Siemianowice Foundry [proper name: the Laura Foundry], others to... I can't remember, and I ended up in Gliwice. In July 1944.

I was still a prisoner of the Auschwitz camp, just off the Gliwice branch. There they were building a factory to make gun carriages and large water mines—munitions, in any case. We organized it all, in the sense that first we did the groundwork, and then we put the machines in, set them up, leveled them, even lathes, milling machines and other machines. As non-experts, we did what we could.

Some of the workers presumably had to move from Kraków to that factory. But they used to go home almost every Sunday. They weren't slaves like we were, but presumably got money for their work. We walked to work every day, perhaps ten minutes, because our sheds weren't far from the factory that was being built. But there the conditions were awful. Indescribable. In the winter, washing right out in the open air, naked. The washbasins were outside. We had to wash, because we were covered in lice. I couldn't stand it any more. Everything was outside. These camp sheds, so many people in one space, as many as possible. The nights terrible, the days terrible. And I was there until about January 1945. The worst I experienced was there. The worst. And then, after that, there was that [death] march, as well. I didn't expect it to end like that.

In January, we were evacuated and we left our base in Gliwice. We were taken one evening, it was already dark, I don't know what time it could have been. Perhaps 5 pm. Then we walked all night and all day. On the way, we met a whole huge column from Auschwitz-Birkenau. That was that death march. I don't know exactly where we joined up with them. We walked in columns. The Auschwitz camp, as such, was liquidated some time around 18 January [evacuation of the prisoners went on from 17-21 January 1945]. I don't know how many people were on the march then. An innumerable number [at least 14,000 prisoners were marched along that route]. I remember that I got diarrhea on the way, too. But anyone who broke ranks—a bullet in the head. Terrible, that was. I don't know how I survived it.

TEOFILA SILBERRING

Kraków, Poland

Interviewer: Magdalena Bizon

Date of interview: November 2004

In Plaszow, I was in a barrack, and Father and my brother were in a different one, and I lost touch with them and didn't know where they were. You weren't allowed to walk between the huts. I didn't know anything: when they had taken them, where they had taken them. Nothing, nothing at all. I wasn't in Plaszow for long, because I was taken to Schindler's, to the *Emailwarenfabrik* in Zablocie [the Oskar Schindler Enamelware Factory (Deutsche Emailwarenfabrik) in the Kraków district of Zablocie, at 4 Lipowa Street, a branch of the Plaszow camp]. I stayed there until the end, until they liquidated Plaszow [October 1944], and I went to Auschwitz from Schindler's factory.

I had it very good at Schindler's, because he made the effort that we should have food. Apart from that, we were working with Poles and, if you knew anybody, they would pass on letters. And they brought us bread rolls. If anybody had anything to sell they would sell it and bring something else for the money. They helped a lot. There's a Polish woman still alive, Zofia Godlewska, she lives on Smolensk Street, who worked at Schindler's with her mother. And they were really poor, but they helped us the most. Zofia brought us letters—that was risking your life. She was my age. After the war I even met her, on Szewska Street. I said, "So you're alive, so you're alive!" And she says, "Yes. And the Lord God has rewarded me, because I've married a Jew and have a wonderful husband." He was a doctor, Goldstein, he was a neurologist, but, unfortunately, he died. And she was a nurse at the Narutowicz hospital. When her husband died she didn't want to meet up, so I didn't want to force myself on her, and we just lost touch.

From Plaszow they took us, as per that list of Schindler's, to Auschwitz. [On 21 October 1944, 2,000 women, 300 of them workers in Oskar Schindler's factory, were sent to Auschwitz from Plaszow. They houses separately and, three weeks later, sent to Brunnlitz, where Schindler relocated his factory.] At Auschwitz we stood on the railway ramp because Schindler wouldn't let us be put in...to those blocks, because he wanted to have all of us. He was waiting for a transport that was supposed come from Austria. At the time I wasn't aware whether he'd paid for it or hadn't paid for it, whether he'd pulled any strings. And, indeed, our group squatted by the railway tracks and waited for wagons. And so, finally, I don't know after how many days—whether it was three days or five days I can't say because I can't remember—these wagons came in, these goods wagons. And it started. "Everybody from Schindler get up," and there were about 2,000 people. All that camp of his. He said: "Don't worry, you're all going with me."

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Well, and there were these OD-men. That was the so-called Jewish police. An OD-man, that was the *Ordnungsdienst*, the law and order. They were Jews, prisoners, too. Schindler picked three of those OD-men and they were to take us into the wagons, according to the list. And it so happened that one of the OD-men, whom I, in fact, met after the war, had evidently taken some money for me, because he didn't read me out, but took someone else instead of me. Ten of us he didn't read out. We were standing there, and Schindler was by the wagons. I run to him, look, and the wagons are starting to move off, they're locking the wagons. And I tell him that he didn't read me out. And he says, "What do you mean?!"—because he even knew me personally, I mean he knew that I'd worked for him, because he'd known me from the camp. He calls the OD-man, and he says "Hang on, hang on, hang on." How he [the OD-man] pushed me, how he flayed me with that whip! The wagons moved off, and the ten of us stayed behind; that was in Birkenau [Auschwitz was a concentration camp; Auschwitz II—Birkenau was a death camp]. I met him after the war. "You're alive?!"—because we were destined for death. You see, we knew that because we'd come with that transport they would send us to the gas. But they put us in Birkenau into the blocks. There were selections but, somehow, I was lucky; I was sent to the gas, and then sent back. And from there I moved to Auschwitz, because they were taking people there.

Amazingly, I still looked great. Very good. I was never a *musulman* [in concentration camp slang, this meant a prisoner who had lost the will to live]; they took them straight off to the gas. And at that time they were selecting for Auschwitz. And there, beyond that *Arbeit macht frei* [German: work makes you free—this is the infamous inscription written above the main gate into Auschwitz], there were six show blocks, which were the so-called *Musterlager* [German: model camp]. That was where the Red Cross came to see how wonderful we looked, what conditions we lived in. And, because I looked so good, this German *Obserwierka* [Polonization of the German



Teofila Silberring during her stay in the Kraków ghetto.

The picture was taken around 1942.

Aufseherin, meaning female guard, warder] selected us, and they took me there. There the blocks were brick, there was water; we pinched ourselves, wondering if we were in the next world or this. We couldn't believe it was true. The food there wasn't better: once a day that slice of bread. But there was water and toilets; there weren't the latrines. In Birkenau, they let us out to the latrines three times a day, and if you couldn't wait you did it where you stood. And then they shot those who did it where they stood.

And then from there, only when the liquidation came [the liquidation of the *Musterlager*], they took me to the experimental block, also because I looked good. And I was very happy, because in that block they gave you not one slice of bread but two. And all my friends were so jealous that I got into that block... Unaware of what could be there. And all because they gave me that extra slice of bread. And there they injected us with typhus bacteria and made an antidote. They were using us to make vaccines for the Germans for the front. Because those bacteria of mine were useful, I didn't go to the gas, but stayed there all the time. They sent it to the front, you see, to treat soldiers. I don't know exactly what they were doing, because I had a fever of 40 [Celsius] degrees. They were injecting typhus, and I don't know whether I was suffering from it or not... And I was there until the liquidation of Auschwitz.

When the liquidation began, everyone who could possibly get up went. But there were some who couldn't get up, the so-called *musulmans*, these skeletons. They couldn't move, so the Germans shot them, but they didn't have time to shoot them all, and some were liberated. It turned out that the Russians were already in Kraków [18 January 1945]. None of us knew that. The older prisoners heard some rumors, and they stayed behind, pretending to be *musulmans*. But I didn't know anything, even what time of day it was. And when they ordered us to go, I went, because they threatened that if we didn't go it would be the gas for us. But they weren't sending people to the gas any more because they were fleeing themselves.

And that was the worst, that journey; it was called the death march, because we walked...I walked to Leipzig. Walked! In snow like this. It was winter at the time, it was in January, 23 January, as far as I remember [the Auschwitz death marches set off on 17–21 January 1945; in all, 56,000 prisoners]. Snow up to here [shoulders], twenty degrees below zero, and me in one shoe. A Dutch shoe, it was called. These clogs that were typical in Auschwitz. As we walked, that sound that nobody could bear, of those clogs. It was so characteristic... And the snow, red, literally. Because if you stopped, stood for a moment... I'd never have thought that you could sleep while you walk. We learned to, took it in turns with our friends. We walked four in a row, took it in turns, and the people on the outside supported the one who was asleep. I could sleep as I walked. Whoever stopped for a moment...The road was littered with corpses, these red bloodstains on the white snow. Awful. They shot if you just... it



Theofila Solberring in 1945

was enough to stand for a moment. And we helped each other to survive—in fact, all four of us survived. I had one friend, Helenka Groner. We were very close. She died two years ago. She was a lot older than me; she was already married then. She had a son my age; he died in Plaszow. Her husband had died in Plaszow, too, Groner. She was with me from Auschwitz. We lived somewhere near each other, then in that death march we walked together, and we stayed together until the end.